

The Wards of UA

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Character:	Shinsou Hitoshi, Eri (My Hero Academia), Aizawa Shouta Eraserhead, Yamada Hizashi Present Mic, Class 1-A (My Hero Academia), Class 1-B (My Hero Academia), Toogata Mirio, Amajiki Tamaki, Hadou Nejire, Bakugou Katsuki, Todoroki Shouto, Midoriya Izuku, Ashido Mina, Kirishima Eijirou, Yaoyorozu Momo, Katsukame Rikiya, Chisaki Kai Overhaul, Kurono Hari Chronostasis, Nemoto Shin, Monoma Neito, Kouda Kouji
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The Wards of UA

by [FeckedSpectrum](#)

Summary

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Use his quirk on a child. A tiny, frightened child.

He kneels down, trying to get her to look him in the eye, to make some kind of connection. Anything to try and make her answer. "D-do you want to go away? Do you want to go somewhere safe?"

Her eyes open, slowly, and the sobbing slows enough that she isn't shaking with it quite as much. Her hands are lowering from her mouth.

“Uh-huh.”

Her voice, so small and hoarse, is all he needs. He feels the quirk trap around her mind, and her eyes fade from red to white, hands dropping slack by her side.

This work is based off of The Last Resort, written by coldandhotsoba. In this AU, after Shinsou Hitoshi is sold to The Miasma, The Miasma sells him to Overhaul to fill the role of "The Mediator" for Eri. Even after the raid on the 8 Precepts, the wards are haunted by their pasts, but the ghosts in Shinsou's mind are anything but dead.

Updates weekly.

Notes

For those of you who have not read The Last Resort, please do! It is a fantastic read, and I personally have read it 4 times over before sitting down to write this story.

Just as a summary of TLR, Shinsou Hitoshi was sold by his mother to a criminal organization named The Miasma when he was 4 years old, after his quirk developed. The Miasma muzzled, tortured, and trained him, naming him '27' as the members of that organization are called Numbers, with the exception of the higher ranked members who go by Boss, Memory, and Bug. 10 is the dedicated healer of the organization, and someone that Shinsou is close to.

There are other characters and plot lines from TLR that I borrow throughout the story, and I cannot state enough how highly I recommend that you read it.

Also: Trigger Warning for Dissociation, Bugs, Bleach used in torture, and Tattooing. If there's anything else that you would like me to tag, please let me know in the comments.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Inspired by [The Last Resort](#) by [coldandhotsoba](#)

What is Your Name?

“Well, little brother, I hope you make a good impression,” 127 says, stretching his arms over the passenger seat. “Very few get sold, and very few get sold so quick.”

Memory glares at the road as she drives, but doesn't scold 127 for referring to 27 as a person, a 'little brother' as he liked to call him. 127 was the only protection available tonight, and Boss must have been offered a substantial amount of money to showcase the merchandise at the buyer's location. He had never heard of a Number being sold, as it happened so rarely, but 10 had told him that when it did happen, it was usually at an auction at The Miasma's compound, or a secondary location close by.

10 also told him to be sure to impress, just like Bug, Memory, and especially Boss had. He couldn't afford to screw this up.

His nerves were rattling from the backseat, and he wished that Memory had told him anything about the buyer. He didn't know if he was supposed to be protection, distraction, a flashy quirk. Even on the few missions he had been on, he was told something to expect. Some role to fulfill.

The drive is long and quiet, and it's hard to keep awake, but 27 busies himself by counting streetlamps. If he dozes off like 127, Memory may decide to turn around and tell Boss that he's not good enough to showcase.

When Memory finally slows down and parks the car, the nerves rush to his head, and he busies himself with tapping the scars on his arm. A knife wound across his knuckles. 47's claws inside his elbow. Two grooves from his wrist, twisting in some places, ending at the bicep, the shoulder. Touching them reminds him of the sunken scars on his stomach, his gut clenching at the memory it brings up.

Bug's quirk, used on him 3 times. Longer each time. He had two more rounds with her before he would start to show wear and tear. Start to break. Start to be less useful.

Whatever they asked him to do, he would do it. If 50 was alive, he imagines she would tell him the same.

Memory doesn't turn to face him, but he knows she's talking to him. “The buyer is the head of a very powerful mafia organization. It will be useful to show what you've learned from Honzo, to prove you aren't uneducated in how a syndicate operates. He wants your quirk long-term, and will expect a demonstration.” She turns to level an icy glare at him, and he turns his gaze to not quite meet her eyes to avoid it's chill. “Don't get smart when the mask opens. You will *not* like the consequences.”

He nods, quick and decisive, just to get her eyes off of him. He knows the consequences. He knows that Bug could do so much worse than she has. He's been under Cherry and Blossom twice, and he'd do anything to avoid them again.

Memory slides out and opens the door for him, as the closest building's door opens to reveal a man in a hooded cloak and long-beaked mask. No one speaks as they enter and follow him down a long dark hallway, even 127 following behind 27 is silent.

The hooded man opens the door at the end, and he sees this room is lit, but mostly empty. Dark wood paneling, old couches and the heavy smell of cigarette smoke and beer makes 27 think this is

the backroom of a gambling parlor. Perhaps the mafia that wants to buy him are part of the gambling side, like Honzo.

When Memory steps to the side to reveal him to the buyer, he certainly isn't what 27 pictured. The man is much younger than Honzo, with short black hair and somewhat feminine eyes. He also wears a pedestrian kind of jacket over a button up shirt and tie, something Honzo would never do, as he always wore every piece of his expensive suits. The man sits on a wooden chair that doesn't seem to belong with the older, stained furniture in the room, his posture lazy to denote that he's too powerful to care about appearances, something a lot of his clients do, but this man seems to actually mean it. Instead of looking at 27, he's glaring at something between his gloved fingers.

"This place is filthy," the man grumbles behind the beaked mask, brushing his thumb against his fingers to get rid of whatever piece of dirt had offended him. "So is the product," and 27 finds that glare directed at him, eerily golden eyes dissecting him bit by bit.

He hadn't even done anything and he's screwed up.

"My apologies," Memory says coolly, bowing. She doesn't correct him by saying that 27 had indeed been showered before being loaded into the car, and even been issued a clean outfit for the first time in years.

"I require it, unfortunately," the buyer says, his glare tapering off as he glances away. "A filthy, but useful quirk. I need it to control a very important asset."

An asset. A person like him.

27 ignores the sinking feeling in his stomach. This would be a very easy job if that were the case. With his quirk, he was the best fit out of any number in The Miasma, and with all his training, he could probably control a single person almost continuously. Being bought would save him from Bug, would save him from the risk of outliving his usefulness. It would probably mean he would be treated better too, at least allowed to bathe more than once a week if he was reading the buyer right.

He was the only Number used to wearing a mask all the time too. Perhaps that could sway the buyer even further into making the purchase.

"A demonstration, then?" Memory asks, pulling out the remote. The buyer snaps his fingers, and she releases the mechanism that had been holding his jaw shut. 27 fought the urge to open his jaw too visibly, fighting the habit of loosening his clenched muscles. He needed to seem like a professional, like a tool completely unphased by what conditions it was under, and what it was meant to do.

But he couldn't stop himself from clenching his jaw tight when he saw who the asset was.

She was tiny. He couldn't remember the last time he saw a person so small, made even smaller by the second cloaked and masked person she was hiding behind. She had long white hair, a tiny horn on her forehead, and bandages wound around her arms, poorly done by how they unraveled and trailed on the floor.

Her wide red eyes matched the blood flowering under those bandages.

The buyer stood and walked over to her, placing a hand on her head in a way that couldn't be mistaken for anything other than oppressive. He had to lean over her to do it, casting a shadow over her tiny figure, and when the shadow fell over her already frightened face, tears began to well up in

her eyes.

“This asset is extremely precious to me. But she is at a difficult age, and acts out irresponsibly,” the buyer says, speaking to them, but his face was directed at her. “I require someone to make her behave.”

27’s throat tightens, as if any words he could have thought to say are trapped there. If it weren’t for Memory’s nails digging into his wrist, he would probably have stood there all night, trying to understand what they wanted him to do.

Use his quirk on a child. A tiny, frightened child.

He’s done a lot of things he’s not proud of, and some that he knows he shouldn’t be. He was sure that he would do anything if it meant he could be bought, if he could leave The Miasma. But he wasn’t expecting anything like this, anything like *her*.

He forces himself to walk forward in slow, measured steps. He’s as quiet as he can be, trying not to spook her, but when the buyer shoves her forward roughly, she stares at him with her fear-stricken eyes, and begins to cry.

He hates it. He hates the sight of her hands clenched tight against her mouth, and the sound of her sobbing, because even though she’s shaking with the effort, she barely makes a sound.

It’s how he used to cry.

But he swallows the sorrow, the hatred, all the confusing ugly feelings deeper into himself. He’s a professional. He can’t afford to screw this up.

He kneels down, trying to get her to look him in the eye, to make some kind of connection. Anything to try and make her answer. “W-what is y-your name?”

She opens her eyes just for a moment through her tears, but doesn’t answer. He can feel Memory’s glare on his back, can almost feel Bug’s quirk working its way under his skin. He can’t do this, can’t make this child listen to him, can’t make her go blank in the face, can’t face the terror that would work its way back into his mind.

He clenches his teeth and swallows it back again. He needs this.

He can convince himself that she needs it too.

“D-do you want to go away? Do you want to go somewhere safe?”

Her eyes open, slowly, and the sobbing slows enough that she isn’t shaking with it quite as much. Her hands are lowering from her mouth.

The buyer’s hand tightens in her hair, and he growls, “What are you-”

“Uh-huh.”

Her voice, so small and hoarse, is all he needs. He feels the quirk trap around her mind, and her eyes fade from red to white, hands dropping slack by her side.

He doesn’t dare look away though. Doesn’t want to see the anger on the buyer’s face, doesn’t want to risk seeing Memory’s either. He makes himself look at what he did, the way he stole the last bit of life from that girl’s eyes, and tries to convince himself it was the right thing to do.

“27, explain yourself to the buyer,” Memory demands, her tone crisp but promising punishment if he messes up even more.

“I-I needed her to ans-swer,” 27 says, fingers digging deeper into his fists with each stutter. Clients never liked that, buyers probably less so. “S-she seemed scared, and pr-probably wanted to get away from that feeling. I thought i-it would make her t-talk.”

The buyer hums, neither angry nor amused, and it’s better than he hoped for. “Make her walk to the other side of the room.”

“W-walk to the blue sofa,” 27 orders, pointing to the furniture just to make sure the command wouldn’t get confused. “And don’t bump into the table.”

She started carefully walking as he commanded, bandages trailing on the floor behind her.

“Why mention the table?” the buyer asks, and 27 wants to look at his face, but can’t bring himself to do it, too afraid of insulting him.

“If the person under 27’s control gets injured, they are released from it,” Memory answers. “But bear in mind that this is only a limitation that 27 has now. 27 is 12 years old, having been trained for 7 with us, and its quirk capabilities are likely to grow.”

It takes a great deal of effort not to react to Memory’s words, as he knows she’s lying. Bug herself said that he would be able to control more people, maybe even reduce what he needed to activate his quirk, but exercising his control after an interrupter like pain was a hard limit.

The buyer hummed again, walking back to his original seat. “Not exactly what I was hoping for, but we still have restraints. If it can be trained, all the better.” He snaps his fingers again, this time at 27. “You answer this time. You can make her walk around. You can manipulate her without any hand holding from me. You can kneel on the ground like a dog, and be loyal only to me, right?”

27 looks over his shoulder at Memory, but her impassive face betrays nothing, no hint of which way he should answer. He tries to look at the buyer, but can’t bring himself to look any farther than his feet, knowing that the pause he’s already given is asking for too much leniency. “Yes,” he answers, and hopes he answers correctly.

“Bark.”

It’s a power play, and a good one, but if 27 had anything left to lose to humiliation, he had lost it long ago. “Arf.”

The buyer hums, and this time he’s clearly pleased. “I like him. I’ll even pay that ridiculous price, plus 20% if I can have him in three days.”

“It will be done,” Memory says primly over the stuccato of her heels, and though her words seem pleased, the nails that dig into the back of his neck as she guides him to stand tell him she’s not pleased with him. “Miasma is pleased to do business with you.”

“Miasma deals with information,” the buyer says, and 27 can see from the shoes he’s still staring at that he crosses his legs as he speaks. “I’ll trust that nothing in this room goes on the market, but when we meet, I’ll make sure Miasma has the proper incentive to keep it that way.”

“I’ll inform the Boss myself,” Memory answers, even happier with the promise of more money.

27 waits until they cross the first doorway to release his hold on the little girl, still standing in the

corner, because as selfish as he's become, he dares to avoid the sound of her silent crying just once, before it becomes his job.

*

"Cherry and Blossom are going to miss you, you know," Bug sing-songs, finishing up the restraints on his ankles. "But you're giving them a real treat to remember you by. *Disloyal* little Numbers are the tastiest ones to them."

It was a mistake to answer to the buyer, he knew that when he did it, but the deal was done. He had one last session with Bug. He could get through it easier than ever.

"You're going to remember not to do that ever again, won't you, 27? And you won't be stupid enough to tell this Chisaki anything about Miasma. You won't tell *anyone anything* about Miasma, right?"

Bug knows he can't do more than nod, but he does so as vigorously as he can. Maybe she will go a little easier on him if he can convince her he's contrite enough.

"You won't, because you'll remember spending 12 hours with Cherry and Blossom anytime you *think* about barking about it to your new owner."

She doesn't give him time to sit with that number, already letting her first maggot chew into his wrist. The longest he had gone was 8 hours, and that was the trails that went to his shoulders. They could go to his neck if he wasn't lucky, could even go into his head.

He grits his teeth in front of the scream, but knows he will only make it through a few hours like that. Maybe he could pass out, 88 said he did that once and it helped.

He hopes he passes out.

He hopes he doesn't die.

He hopes that girl's red eyes don't remind him of Cherry and Blossom the next time he sees her.

*

The 8 Precepts of Death are much bolder than Miasma is, being based in a mansion out in the open, but that fit his new owner - Chisaki Kai - perfectly. 27 had no idea what his quirk was, but he knew it had to be powerful, as the mafia boss radiated power from his very core.

The negotiations must have gone very well for Boss, who smiled and clapped a hand on his shoulder as the 8 Precepts members formed a 4 man barrier around him to guide him out of The Miasma. He had no idea how much Boss had gotten out of this deal, but knew if he breathed a word about the 112 thousand yen he was really worth to his new owner, it wouldn't end well.

The car ride to the mansion and the walk inside had been deathly silent, almost purposefully. 27 knew nothing about the men who were surrounding him, but knew they were cowed by just the threat of Chisaki's name, too much so to be too high up in the chain of command. Still much higher than him, as a new member and not even a volunteer.

He was led through several hallways and down two flights of stairs, and he committed each step to memory. He wasn't four years old anymore, and wouldn't let himself get lost in a complex as he

did in The Miasma, even if he intended to do well here. He couldn't waste the opportunity to know where he was.

Chisaki was waiting for him in a spartan Japanese style bedroom, tatami mats and all. A door to his right was open to reveal a bathroom, and the steam seemed to promise a bathtub unseen, with a luxury he hadn't had in years. Hot water.

“Kneel.” His first command as Chisaki’s property. He collapsed into a proper sitting position, legs tucked painfully underneath him.

He bows his head down to show respect, but also to hide his eyes as he glances around the room. Three elaborate tapestries are hung on the wall to the left, with a low table set with dried fish and salt. Just as he suspected, he would take Sakazuki to complete the transfer of ownership from The Miasma to the The 8 Precepts of Death.

Two underlings place another low table in front of him, this one set with two scrolls on each end, in kanji so stylized it's nearly unreadable, written in what looks to be blood. The sake set looks old, the rough ceramic denoting an artist's hand from a time before manufacturing became common place. Maybe they're not gamblers, but peddlers, with a history impossibly distant.

He becomes aware of a person standing behind him the split second before he grabs the outstretched wrist above him. He had been thrown around during training enough times that protecting the straps at the back of his head were pure muscle memory. Panic floods him as he looks beyond the hand to the face staring back at him from a beaked mask. This person doesn't have to wear goggles or a hood, just like Chisaki doesn't. They must be a higher ranked member.

“Protective of your muzzle, aren’t you?” Chisaki states, just the slightest bit amused. “Hari is going to take it off. Put your hand down.”

He obeys, turning back around and trying to keep his posture perfect, despite the blood rushing in his ears. He feels the person - Hari - pulling at the lock, and the click as a key opens it. One strap falls past his face before the entire thing is pulled away.

“Hm, we didn’t ask for a tracking device, did we, Chisaki?” Hari drawls with a light and airy voice.

“I expected little else from those low-lives who call themselves peddlers,” Chisaki answered. “It was a pain to get a signal jammer, lose the detail, and take their insurance poli- *What are you doing*?”

The sharp tone draws his hands back to his lap and he nearly tips over as he bows with his head pressed against the mats. “I-I’m s-sorry. I-I-I’m s-s-s-”

He couldn't help himself from touching his face, to feel the weeping scabs where the metal was digging in. He hadn't touched that skin in 7 years.

Chisaki grunts, annoyed that 27 can't force the apology out of his mouth, still stuck on one consonant. "Your hands are filthy. If you get sick, you're useless. Stop whimpering."

He bites his lips together, rising slowly. His eyes remain on the low table.

“Hari, proceed.”

The man walks to the side of the table and begins pouring the sake, Chisaki's cup first, a rough black ceramic piece with a single white, broken circle left of the design, but more of it had probably faded with age and use. It is filled to the very brim, and 27 imagines it would be difficult

to move nevertheless drink it. 27's portion is placed in a cup that doesn't belong to the set, smooth and completely black but for the white kanji at the bottom that says 'dog.' His portion only covers the kanji, not that he will protest. He doesn't want to choke like Honzo's initiate had.

"This sake is my blood, this initiation the birthplace of your new family. I will take you under my wing, and guide you stray, and reward you when you obey. In return, you will be my unshaking hand and the bearer of my will," Chisaki recites, and drinks without spilling a single drop.

"Please take this lowly kobun into your esteem, and do with me what you will," 27 answers, noticing that Hari's mouth opened and shut quickly in surprise. "My body, heart, and spirit is yours, to do with as you wish."

He picks up the cup with both hands, bowing his head three times, then drinks, trying to hide the wince that even the few drops he was given brings as it burns on his tongue.

Before he can place the cup back on the table, Chisaki raises a hand. "I'm not drinking after a dog," he says with disgust. "Even a well-bred one who knows the way of the Yakuza."

Hari snickers, hand raised to his mouth as he tries to stifle it. "I wonder if the mutt will drink the bathwater to get the taste out of his mouth. His face was so amusing."

Chisaki waves a hand in answer as he rises, and the underlings that were stood against the wall move to take the sake set away. One grabs 27's cup and hands it to Hari instead of him. "Make sure he is clean and call for Nemoto to get rid of the tags on his arm."

Hari hums thoughtfully, watching Chisaki walk away. "Should I ask what design he's getting?"

"No," Chisaki answers as he opens the door and shuts it behind him.

Despite the playful air he had with his owner, Hari levels a glare at 27 before ordering him to stand up and follow him to the bathroom. His clothes are stripped away with unnecessary aid from the longer haired man, and 27 hurries through the process just to keep his hands away from him. The steam in the bathtub looks inviting, but a sweet yet unpleasant smell suffocates the room and makes his previous excitement as bitter as the alcohol still on his tongue.

He waits until he's told to sit on the showering stool, then Hari rinses him down with a more familiar cold spray for a few minutes, before ordering him into the tub. The cold rinse only made the water more biting, he thinks, until he lowers his hands in and pulls back with a hiss. The scabs left where Bug had placed Cherry and Blossom burn as though they were lit on fire, and he stares as the skin around them gets puffy and reddens.

"Oh, the dog has some bug bites, doesn't he?" Hari jests, but the wicked tone to it fills him with dread. "The bleach will definitely sting, then."

He barely has time to close his eyes before Hari pulls him under the water by his hair. His face *burns*, he doesn't need a mirror to know exactly where his wounds from the mask are because he can feel each one from where the pain is fiercest. They hurt more than the wounds from Bug by far.

He's allowed to pull up for air, gasping desperate lungfuls, but the air on his wounds hurts even more before he's pushed back down again.

He loses track of how many times it happens, pain under the water, fire above it.

Loses himself in trying to breathe.

When he's pulled out of the tub, his limbs are shaking, the agony set in so deep that he can barely keep his arms from collapsing and spilling himself fully on the cold tile. Hari makes the pain worse as he drags a towel over him roughly, chuckling all the while about what a silly dog he is, but how nice and clean he is now. He notices that some of his purple hair is matted to the towel when it's tossed against the door.

He's grateful that Hari pulls him back to the bedroom by his arm, not able to trust himself to carry his own weight across those few steps, before placing him in front of a very tall man wearing a bowler hat and a mask that covers his eyes. "You took too long, Hari. Lashing out at the new member because he's so close to our most precious asset?"

"Shut up, Nemoto," Hari hisses, walking to the folded up futon in the corner where a woven basket sits on top. "This is why no one likes mental quirks, you can't help yourselves from using it."

Nemoto chuckles, turning to 27. "I can't exactly make conversation with him now, can I? You made such a mess of his mind that I can barely see the shadows from the storm."

Sometimes, 27 slips out of himself.

He falls asleep while standing up, but finds that his body was doing things while he wasn't there. It happens during training, sometimes. He thinks it happens when he's in the Red Room, but there's no way of telling without a clock, or a way to move his body.

Sometimes he can feel it begin, a numbness setting in that can sometimes terrify him right out of it. Other times, it's like a thunderclap, 98 grabbing for his head one moment and 58 dodging his kick the next.

Nemoto was right about the storm, because this time it's a long, thunderous night.

He looks down and sees that Nemoto is working a row of needles attached to a long wooden stick in and out of his arm around his number. He blinks and the black splotch is bigger. Blinks again and Hari is saying something, his tone light and airy again, but the words turn to noises that he can't begin to process before he slips out again.

Nemoto wiping an oil over his arm, a huge black band with 'Dog' written where the ink isn't with his pale skin, turned further to his side than the '27' was.

His cheek tacky with blood when he tries to raise his head off the tatami mat, a burning on his back tells him he's getting a tattoo there too, at the base of his neck.

Cold water being thrown in his face, a sour taste in his mouth and the smell of vomit in the air. Hari muttering that the dog is already sick, and Nemoto says "The pain threshold is high, but still there. It's been 20..."

Hari pulling him down a long hallway, and he looks down and realizes he's been dressed in a black tank top and loose pants. The pants feel soft, softer than anything he's ever worn, and he manages to stay a little longer, stumbling in his steps, thinking about how soft they are.

He's laying on a bed, and this too is softer than the one he had at Miasma. The smell of bleach sticks in his nose, and he tries to stay, tries to lift his head to look around the room. Even the feeling of a blanket being dragged over his shoulders should keep him there, someone so close to him that he can hear them breathing should alarm him enough to stay.

He tilts his head to the right and sees the little girl as she leans down to meet his eyes. Her face is blank in a different way, in a calm and curious way, and he knows it's his job to be awake now. To

keep an eye on her, to control her.

He wants to ask her what her name is.

He manages to raise a hand to his mask, even though it's shaking. He can feel that this is a new mask, plastic cover where there was metal, but he doesn't have the strength to run his fingers across it, to find out what it looks like. He moves the mask around to see if he can, to see if it's looser than the other, and what he finds stills his hand.

It's soft against his face. Thin foam padding where there was harsh metal before.

Chisaki is kind, he tells himself, numbness settling in slowly.

It's a good thing he was bought.

A Day in The Life

Chapter Summary

49 days after 27 had been purchased by The 8 Precepts of Death, he's beginning to get used to the routine. He's begun to make new ones to keep himself sane.

He's beginning to get dangerously attached to the asset he's supposed to control.

The foam padding lasted 17 days before it wore out, and the metal sank back in.

He's been at the 8 Precepts of Death compound for 49 days.

Every morning he wakes up to the click of the automated mechanism in his mask opening up. It's placed right next to his ear, even closer than his old mask, and is meant to serve as his alarm clock.

Most mornings, Eri has wet the bed. Some of those mornings, he can manage to shift her sleeping body onto an unsoiled blanket so she can sleep a little longer while he bleaches the soiled futon in the tub, keeping the evidence away from Chisaki if he decides to visit. Others, she rubs at her face and follows him, silent as a ghost.

She gets a bath afterwards, and he always makes sure that the bleach is fully rinsed away before settling her in. The water doesn't do much by itself, but bleach is all they have. Even the sink has a bottle of it instead of hand soap.

He dries her off and dresses her in one of the 37 white dresses she has in her closet, and changes out the bandages on her arms and legs. The constant pressure of the cloth has left spiralling impressions long ago, and scars ripple around the ever-present scabs like the rings on a tree trunk. By the time he finishes, someone has delivered breakfast to the room. If it's an underling, he knows he can change her into a set of pajamas, and she always brightens at that. Even if she doesn't speak much, she'll babble more often, and even try to dance as she rocks from one foot to the other.

If it's Hari, or Chisaki, the dress stays on. It means she has to go to The Chair that night.

Breakfast is better on those days, though. Instead of oatmeal, they get cereal or a side of soup, some kind of meat mixed into rice, and a serving of jello as desert. She throws a fit none-the-less, and he's learned to bite down on his bitterness as he coaxes her to eat bite by bite, spoon feeding her as she cries. She may never have lived through hundreds upon hundreds of gruel servings every day, but he didn't have to go through hundreds upon hundreds of injections either.

Today, she didn't wet the bed, and he's glad he took the time to take her to the bathroom three times the night before. He makes quick work of the bath and bandages, even gets to start combing through her hair before his owner comes in with two plates of omurice and green jello.

She leans back, trying to get closer to him as if he could offer any protection at all. The hand he rests on her shoulder and the polite "Thank you, Boss" he gives his owner is the best he can do. Even those simple words have to run through his mind a hundred times before he can manage to say them without stuttering, but he's learned that if they're both quiet, Chisaki will make

conversation, and stay longer, making her fits worse when he leaves.

“Her marrow wasn’t fully recovered last time. Make sure she eats every bite today, or I won’t have enough minerals to restore her afterwards,” Chisaki states, placing the tray on the floor as he carefully avoids touching the germ riddled ground. “Did you forget how to force feed her, Dog?”

“No, I will do it, Boss,” he answers. Eri dares to fidget, pulling her knees in closer in a bid to avoid shaking, but it’s too much motion nonetheless. His owner looks at her, and though Dog has never been able to read that look on his face, it never fails to make her tremble and cry.

They’re lucky this morning that Chisaki just turns away and leaves. As soon as the door closes, Eri starts crying, and he bites back a sigh.

It probably wouldn’t have taken 2 hours to get her to finish her food if he force fed her, alternating between pinching her nose shut and covering her mouth to get her to swallow. His food might have still been warm if he did that, or if he put her under the quirk, but he never does.

He never quirks her unless it’s to walk her to The Chair.

He doesn’t let himself wonder why.

After he’s done eating, he gathers up the dishes and places them outside the door to be picked up by an underling. The door is always unlocked, but they don’t venture outside unless summoned. He’s never even managed to attempt it.

She’s lying on the bed, face down, too exhausted to cry but unable to distract herself from the anxiety of waiting. He picks up one of her favorite books, out of the ten that they have, and lays down next to her to read it aloud.

When he makes a silly, high pitched voice for the children arguing over the kitten that thinks its name is Snot Stew, she rolls herself over and sighs heavily. He reads the book twice over before she’s finally settled down fully, curled up against his side with her head against his arm.

“Can you count for me, Eri?” He waits for her to answer, and only receives a wide eyed stare. “1, 2...”

“3,” she says, hoarse from the crying.

They count up to 20 together twice, then it’s her turn. 3’s and 8’s are hard to remember, but she makes it up to 12. It took her three weeks to get to 5 on her own.

He sets her up with her crayons and picks a page from her coloring book for her to work on. There’s 19 pages left, and he doesn’t know if his owner will get her another one when it’s finished.

He makes sure she’s fully engrossed in scribbling the cartoon pony pink before he dares go to the bathroom to wash himself up, knowing he can’t take too long. If it wasn’t a Chair day, he could probably take a bath, but knowing the mood she’s in, he grabs a wash cloth to do the job instead. His armpits stink, despite the fact that he didn’t even train last night, and he thinks it has something to do with the hair that’s begun to grow there, like purple fungus. He has to use a little bleach, diluted in the sink, to cover up the smell. He’s learning how much bleach is too much, which leaves little white patches of dead skin that are too hard to scratch off.

He tries to run a comb through his hair, but the big fist-shaped matt at the back of his head stops his progress after a few inches. Hari still drags him away for a bleach bath on occasion, and he hates how unpredictable it is more than the pain. His purple hair is definitely getting lighter, and it

feels like straw when he touches it. He avoids doing so now, avoids reminding himself that his soft hair used to be one of the few comforts he had at Miasma, especially when he was younger and still being trained to know his name.

His name here still doesn't fit right in his mind, but he always makes sure to answer to it. He feels like he'll always be 27 to himself.

He's pleased to see Eri humming to herself, not only unaware he had left but in higher spirits than he hoped for. He pulls out a pair of black pants and the one long-sleeved shirt he's allowed to have, and dresses himself quickly in the bathroom. Eri likes to poke at his scars from time to time, and much to his chagrin, the ones from Bug were her favorites.

She didn't know any better, and he couldn't bring himself to blame her, tiny fingertips tracing the curves and grooves, even humming a little from time to time. At least he's never slipped out of himself when she does that. Electric nerves still scream inside his head, but the rare sound of her quiet happiness keeps him there.

He sits next to her, and only has to coax her a few times to color the entire page, asking her to draw him more pretty pictures. He can't afford to give her a second sheet, because he doesn't know whether they are going to get more paper, and if they don't then their schedule will be disrupted. He doesn't know who that would upset more, Eri or himself.

After that, it's time for another story, and after he reads it once through, he tries to get her to read it to him. He's pretty sure most of the words she 'reads' are what she's memorized, as she says Spot digs under a fence when the picture clearly shows him going to bed hungry for being a naughty little puppy.

He's grateful that 10 gave him these kinds of lessons when he was at Miasma, though he didn't have the luxury of reading aloud back then, and the books he read from were medical textbooks and a beaten yellow-paged thesaurus. Without the structure of these little lessons, they both might lose their minds in this concrete room.

It's rinse and repeat after lunch, fish on a bed of rice with vegetables that have an odd, bitter taste to them before he swallows. He's been trying to get Eri to eat by herself on her good days, but today he wants to dote on her. He just cuts the fish up into tiny pieces and places each bite in her mouth, smiling to himself as she babbles. He can pick out a few words that she's learned, like 'pokey puppy' and 'supper,' and mentally moves the book up from her 4th favorite to her 3rd.

He reads another book. They count. He reads another book. They count.

Sometimes she gets distracted by one of her 'games.' She'll look at him for a while, working up the courage as she squirms, then tries to order him to do something. She's still learning to speak, so the games can be challenging sometimes.

"Ag oh baff ge bed."

"Go to the bathroom and get the bed?" he asks, and gets a happy hum as he checks if the futon is dried yet from where it was hung over the side of the tub.

It's silly, being ordered around by a 3 year old, but it's the only control she has in her life. He wants her to have it.

His quirk rises to the surface of his mind every time she answers with a 'yes' or 'uh-huh,' a string pulled taut that he only has to tug on to pull her under. He lets it slack every time.

Then, the door opens. Dog sees Eri stop dancing and shrink in on herself, even if she's turned away from Chisaki. Dog walks over to her and kneels down, just like the first time they met. "Are you ready to leave, Eri?"

"Uh-huh."

He's learned this is the best question to ask. His owner doesn't like 'go away' or 'go somewhere safe.' Eri's eyes well up with tears if he asks if she's ready, especially if he asks if she's ready to go to The Chair.

She always answers, though.

Dog has been around her long enough to know she knows she could stay quiet, and it wouldn't work. It would be bad if she didn't, mostly for Dog, and he doesn't want to think about why she still answers.

It's a long walk, but it's made even longer by using his quirk. Not because it's hard to control her, he's never gotten the slightest headache from it. It's the emotional reverb he gets, and every trip to The Chair, it seems to get stronger.

He feels her inside his mind like the small flame of a candle, but the fear drenches him to the bone. He's found his hands shaking sometimes, while hers were limp at her sides. He knows he's not going to get hurt when they reach that door, when he tells her to sit in The Chair, but sometimes he gets flashes of pain when she thinks about it. He feels needles burrowing through skin and flesh down to the bone, so clearly he can almost hear the bone crack with the pressure.

He can't escape it. He can't get out of it unless he gets out of his own Brainwash.

It's bad today, she keeps thinking about the bone cracking, and awful feeling of marrow being sucked out. He almost believes it's happening to him, doesn't trust his legs not to give out because surely, they've been broken by that awful machine.

He can't even bear to look at it when he orders her to sit in The Chair. Can't look when Hari starts unwinding the bandages, or when he starts putting on the restraints.

"Rikiya, walk my Dog," Chisaki tells the monster of a man leaning on the doorframe. "He should be all worn out in 3 hours."

Dog takes his time walking the few steps to Rikiya, counting the click of metal buckles behind him. After the 8th one, he looks over his shoulder to Eri and drops his control.

She shakes, bound up so tight that she couldn't thrash if she wanted to. Her eyes are wide, begging him to free her, but this is all he can do. He can take her pain for the time it takes to walk to The Chair and back. He can make sure he looks her in the eye when he drops his quirk. He can try his best to care for her in the quiet spaces in between trips to The Chair and visits from Chisaki, but they both know Dog is just selfish and manipulative.

There's no safe place that he could take her to.

Just this place.

The Dojo room is back down the hall, to the right, and has four sliding doors but Rikiya likes to use the second one. Dog begins stretching once he enters the room, counting the number of underlings that are talking amongst themselves, relaxing outside one of the marked off sparring courts. Five underlings, two more than last time. The new ones aren't wearing their full-face masks, and he knows that's a problem. They might not be powerful enough to be one of the 8, but they seem to think Chisaki would hesitate to kill them for spoiling the air with their germs.

Powerful or stupid, he needs to keep an eye on them.

He's pretty sure the other three are the usual opponents. Obvious Strength Quirk has incredibly swollen hands, The Whistler has an unnaturally high pitched voice when she talks, and Tentacle Fingers has a sticker of a cartoon ball with white sauce, green specks, and some kind of thin stick impaling it stuck on the front of his beaked mask.

"Takoyaki, are you telling me this is the little shit that had you pissing your bed?" Unmasked Goon 1 asks Tentacle Fingers. "He looks half fucking dead!"

"He threw me into Rikiya-san! I wasn't scared of him, I just didn't want to embarrass myself by passing out at one of the 8's feet!"

Dog weighs his options. Unmasked Goon 1 has an unnatural crease in his forehead in the shape of a V, with two reddish flecks on the sides of his nose that could be markings or divots that expose his sinuses. Probably poison breath or something, with how snake-like his appearance is.

Unmasked Goon 2 doesn't have any visible quirk, in fact he looks like the blandest man Dog has seen since 58.

That's exactly why Dog wants to take him out first.

He walks over to the weapons rack and picks up his daggers. He's not in the mood to try something new, as he won't receive any formal instruction like he did at Miasma. He twirls them around, frowning to himself about the weight disparity. They aren't part of a matching set, one is smaller and lighter, meant for throwing, while the other is heavy with a serrated edge near the hilt and a wickedly curved tip. He holds the throwing one in his left hand, intentionally handicapping himself a bit to use it primarily as deflection when the blade is too small for the job, but he's not going to risk actually throwing it. Seriously injuring the underlings during these training exercises was not a good idea.

Dog turns back around and sighs heavily, cocking his head to the side as he sizes up Blandy. "You want to go first?"

His target smirks, jumping up to his feet a little too enthusiastically. "Fine, what do you got, kid?"

That . Dog spun the throwing knife idly, looking at the man now under his control. The usual trio were watching, but Unmasked Goon 1 hadn't seemed to notice what had happened, just as he hoped. "Show me what your quirk is."

Blandy raised his arm and made a fist, and his forearm split in half, but the skin remained intact where a V-shaped canyon now separated the new limbs.

Dog was a bit disappointed. Sure, dodging one or two extra fists would be difficult if he activated that quirk when all five were in the ring, but Blandy hadn't gained any muscle mass or hardened his skin.

He should have gone for Unmasked Goon 1, but Blandy activating his quirk on command was clearly out of character, as the snake faced underling had shock written all over his face.

Couldn't hurt to try. "Hey, Hissy Fit, is your quirk venom related or is your face just ugly?"

Shock, flash of confusion, rage. Hissy Fit had a bad temper and a low IQ, his favorite type of opponent. "The fuck ar-"

And two .

The two consciousnesses settled easily under his control. He had been working with three at Miasma, but there was no way he could trick the usual crowd. He was a one trick pony, and he knew it.

"You dumbasses let him get to three on three," Rikiya grumbled, arms crossed over his chest.

"Since Dog is acting all feisty, just go ahead and give him a brawl."

"You fight the tentacle quirk. You fight the strength enhancement quirk. Avoid injuries," Dog told Blandy and Hot Head, setting his sights on Whistler. She always had a baton hidden somewhere in her cloak, as the only one to bring a weapon to these matches. Her quirk could also interrupt his control from a distance, and judging from her deepening breaths, that was exactly what she was going to do first. He'd have to take her out first, and take her out himself.

"If you can't keep him out of my hair for at least 2 hours, I'll kill you," Rikiya promised, hand already twitching towards his phone so he could play whatever game he was addicted to. "Start!"

Whistler was not on her game tonight, too busy trying to use her quirk that she couldn't fully dodge his knee to her solar plexus. Before she even started coughing, he wrapped a hand around the back of her head and pulled her face into his knee, hitting the middle of her forehead rather than the padded mask or the sharp goggles that could have injured him. She might have been concussed at that point, but he pulled his fist high and ensured it with a blow to the temple.

Rikiya swore as Whistler slumped to the ground and didn't get up. Another point for Dog. 8 more points and he would have earned 100, and would get to request an item from Chisaki. His reward for 50 knock outs had been any take-out food he wanted, and Hari had laughed and called him a moron for being unable to name a single restaurant. Luckily, Chisaki had been pleased by the results of The Chair session that night, and the following night, he was taken to a dining room and given fried chicken.

The underlings around had told him it was a special treat, and it did taste good. His favorite part about that reward was the loud hum of pleasant surprise Eri gave him when she bit into the drumstick he had hidden in his pocket. She asked for 'shicken' the next two days when he tried to get her to fall asleep, and knowing how much she liked it almost made up for disappointing her. He could get more rewards for her.

He could ask for a coloring book, or maybe a stack of them. Maybe the underlings could get him enough points to get the reward tonight. Maybe his owner would be in a good mood tonight.

The sound of a body hitting the floor and a scream of "Little shit!" warned Dog that Snake Face had woken up from his control. Obvious Strength had probably picked him up and dropped him, which was his favorite thing to do.

He had enough time to spin low and tackle as he heard Snake Face take a deep breath, a weird series of clicks sounding deep from within his throat. Before Snake Face's back hit the mat, Dog

smelled and heard the plume of fire that came from his opponents mouth.

Dragon face, then.

Dog stood up with a quick kick in the head to the out of breath Zippo Lighter, who luckily went limp. A quick pat to his bleach-burnt hair verified that it hadn't been singed either. He was pretty sure if a single spark had landed on his head, the whole thing would have gone up in flames. Probably purple or green ones, too, with all the chemicals soaked in it.

The fight goes on for a while. Dog tosses the knives away, seeing as they're more trouble to keep in hand when he doesn't have an opportunity to use them. The underlings are just *bad* tonight. If he goes low, they guard it next time and leave themselves unsteady or their head vulnerable. When he inevitably goes high, they leave their middle open.

That isn't to say he's unscathed. Obvious Strength is hard to take down just because his limbs are too swollen to properly grapple, and Whistler and Zippo are both trying to get vengeance.

By the time Rikiya calls it, Dog feels the pleasant burn in his limbs and a few blisters on his hands. "So, the pup's got 99 down and just one more to go, huh."

Dog twists his head from side to side, trying to distract himself from giving away his plan. Picking at his sleeves would have been an obvious tell.

"Whatcha gonna ask for, huh? Beer, clippers, pocket pussy?" Rikiya's head, completely covered by his mask, cocks to the side as he puts his hands on his hips. "After that, you've got to hit 200 to hit up a conbini with one of us."

He's never been in one, but he's heard they have a lot of snacks. He could get some for Eri, maybe something sweet.

"Then 500 and you get to go out all on your own."

He doubted he really would be on his own, but if he was, he could buy soap and shampoo. Be able to properly wash her.

"1000 and you get your own room."

Didn't need it. He didn't want to be separated from Eri. Couldn't leave her alone at night.

"But to get out of that mask, you've got to beat all 8 Expendables *and* Chisaki."

"Don't want to," Dog said. He didn't want to know if he was lying.

"Seriously?! These things are fucking stifling," Rikiya groused, picking at the seam of his mask with a finger so he could fan air inside. "This some kind of kink for you or are you just fucked up?"

"I've been wearing one since I was 5," Dog answered with a shrug. "Pretty sure I'm fucked up."

Rikiya laughs at that, and settles into a loose stance. The conversation worked, and he's in a good mood. More likely to hesitate. Even sloppier than usual. Dog was the only one who really took these exercises seriously anyway, but with the reward in sight, he really wanted to take him down.

Right now, these sessions were a far cry from training with Bug, but he could keep from losing his edge too much. Keep sharp enough that when more of the 8 entered the ring, he wouldn't get too injured.

Rikiya swings an arm forward, and Dog dances back. The next swing, he dodges to the side. He's closing the distance more cautiously than he has to, but Rikiya isn't worried. The huge man had taken his shirt off, and if Dog missteps and gets caught in a bear-hug, he'd be passed out in seconds with all the skin-on-skin contact.

Or he would, if he didn't wear his long-sleeved shirt.

Dog tugs the sleeves over his hands and waits until Rikiya overextends himself, then ducks under his arm and throws himself on the man's back, arms locked around his huge, meaty neck in a sleeper hold he can barely form.

Rikiya grabs Dog's leg and tries to pull him off, but it's so painfully telegraphed that his other leg has hooked into the man's side before he makes contact. He tries to get at any kind of skin contact, but his arms are covered and he wound bandages around his legs up to the knee. Rikiya slaps at him futilely, growing weaker, before he throws a huge hand over Dog's face, blocking his vision.

He can't pull Dog off by his head with the way Dog's arms are locked around his neck. Instead, he shakes his head violently, making him dizzy and nauseous while the weakness grows stronger, his vitality slipping away. It's all he can do to keep the pressure on Rikiya's neck, shaking from the effort.

He's lucky that Rikiya's raised arm isn't doing the huge man any favors, and finally, his knees buckle and he falls to the ground.

Dog gets up shakily, hardly able to walk a step or two away before he too crumples to the floor. He rolls onto his back, breathing hard as he looks at the closed doors and empty dojo.

Out those doors, straight to the staircase. Up two flights. Through a door. Straight, left at the 3rd intersection. Up two more flights. He could either go right then straight through the main hall, or left and pass the dining room towards the backdoor that leads to the garden.

He closes his eyes and tries to recover his strength, and hopes that when Rikiya comes to, he won't have any plans for vengeance.

Luckily, he doesn't. Dog feigns sleep so well that the mobster just shakes his head and pulls out his phone, only tucking it away when Chisaki enters. "Dog cleaned the house tonight, Boss, even cleared the reward. He passed out doing it, but protected himself from my quirk well enough to get one over on me."

"Stop going easy on him, then," his owner grouched, and Dog flinched at the tone. He regretted it as he felt Chisaki's presence get closer, before the man crouched over his head.

Dog opened his eyes, looking at the key dangling between Chisaki's fingers. He was meant to look at it, the mafioso holding it just a foot away from his face.

The key to his mask. The reward after beating Chisaki's entire organization at least once, then the man himself.

What Chisaki wanted him to want.

It was Chisaki's game. He wanted Dog to keep from wasting away physically, cooped up in the same room day after day, and to keep him from wasting away mentally. Dog needed a purpose, a goal. Eri's care was just a task, but he needed something to work towards. Something for himself, with tangible results.

A meal. A gift. A taste of freedom. Another taste.

True freedom.

It was all worthless to Dog, but he played along. Just like with Eri's game, he just needed to figure out what he was supposed to do, sorting through the misdirection and hidden meaning, and act his part. Walk to the corner and stand on one leg. Sweep a man's leg so his fire breathing quirk lights another underling's cloak on fire.

There really wasn't an end to either game, it was just supposed to seem like there was.

Chisaki eventually pockets the key, having surmised whatever he wanted to find in Dog's transfixed stare. He's ordered to stand up and get a move on. He does so on shaky legs, and the entire walk he stares at the ground and thinks about falling forward and falling asleep.

The needles are still dug into Eri's limbs when they arrive. Her head is slumped over, as much as it can be against the restraints, and her long white hair obscures her face. He doesn't know if it's going to be a Crying night, where she'll scream herself hoarse when she finally works up to it, or a Blank night, where she'll be as docile as she is under his quirk. Not even tears will come, she'll just curl up in her bed and stare at the wall until she falls asleep.

He would do anything to avoid seeing a Blank night again.

Hari flips the switch to pull the needles out, and Chisaki walks forward, pulling off one of his gloves. His hand rests on her head for a few minutes, then he quickly puts the glove back on. "She ate it all. Don't let her slip up again."

"Yes, Boss."

Eri's bones and tissue have been restored, but the skin is left open. His owner must consider it too much effort. Or good practice to test the terrifying limits of his control.

Chisaki steps away, and Dog moves forward, kneeling down. He can't tell for sure, but Eri's face promises a Blank night, her big red eyes too wide, focused on absolutely nothing. She doesn't react at all at his approach. "Eri, are you ready to go back?"

"Uh...hun." She answers weakly. He pulls the string tight. If he missed it and had to ask again, she might not even have the strength to answer.

It's become his job to undo the restraints, as Hari and Chisaki get together to discuss the results. He undoes the buckles, pulls the leather straps away gently. Catches her arm as she starts to fall over.

Shit. She's too exhausted to hold herself upright. Her thoughts are just blank in his mind as well. She won't be able to walk the entire way back to the room, and if his owner saw him carrying her...

He looks over at Chisaki, his gloved finger tapping his beak thoughtfully as he looks at the tablet in his other hand.

He has to get him to notice that they're waiting to go to the room, but keep him engrossed in the data he's pouring over. Get permission to leave while Chisaki stays. Has to figure out how to ask without asking, because if he ever became stupid enough to ask Chisaki a question, Dog would become nothing but a deconstructed puddle before he could even say 'sorry.'

Can we - no.

The room - no, too curt. Could be seen as rude.

Eri is tired - 'Don't impose your judgements on other people's things,' he can already hear Chisaki say.

Eri leans even further, and at this point, he's worried she'll break out of his hold by falling asleep on him. His eyes are begging Chisaki to notice now, but the minutes drag on like hours with the mafioso focused completely elsewhere.

Hari sighs loudly, running a hand through his hair. "Do you really need an invitation, you stupid mutt? Take her to the room already!"

He can't even hide his relief, too exhausted himself, as he stands her up and gently orders her to follow him. He just needs to walk her past the door. Once they're out in the hall, he can pick her up and carry her.

"Where are you going, Dog?" His owner asks, his tone chilling. Dog stops too quickly, and feels Eri bump into his leg, breaking his quirk's hold. His hand goes for her shoulder, and he's lucky he catches it, as her legs give out immediately. His grip on her is the only thing to keep the illusion that she's still standing.

"My apologies, Boss. Hari-san dism... told me to take her." He doesn't have to look to know that Hari's murderous glare cooled a bit when he changed his wording. Even Hari couldn't get away with dismissing him now that Chisaki had noticed.

The boss grunted, irritated. "Fine."

He waited a minute, but there was no further instruction, the silence simply stretching on.

A power play. A good one, as always, and as always, he'll lose.

Eri gulps, threatening to start crying right there in the doorway, and he starts walking her into the hallway.

Every hair stands on end, and he drags her a few steps further than he wanted to because he's *sure* Chisaki is right behind him, waiting to catch him not only leaving without dismissal, but carrying Eri to her room. Unnecessary contact. Sick behavior.

When he finally pulls her up into his arms, she buries her face in his shoulder. She just squirms as the tears run down her face, too exhausted to work herself into a full sob. He nearly runs back to the room, nerves still singing even after he closes the door.

If Chisaki knew what he'd done, he'd be *furious* .

He tries to settle Eri on the bed so he could grab her pajamas and get her taken care of before he collapses himself, but she refuses to let him. Her tiny fists have just enough strength to hold his shirt tight, and she shakes her head back and forth. "Eri, please," he begs, quietly.

"*No*, " she says, anger even in her trembling voice. Her entire body is shaking now, and he's seen plenty of her melt downs, but this one is going to be the worst. "*No, no, no, NO!* "

She kicks at him, and she's weak as a kitten but it *hurts* .

She never tells him no.

The sobs have started up, but she's too tired to properly do it, just hiccupping and whining. He tries to soothe her, to rub circles on her back, but she just jerks away from him, splayed out on the bed. She manages another kick at him, and he sees the motion has opened up one of the scabs on her leg, blood weeping slowly.

"No!" She yells, and through the tears, he sees hate in her eyes, before it gives way to pain and terror.

It *hurts* .

His shoulders are shaking with it before the tears finally fall, and he weakly tries to turn away, to pull his knees to his chest.

It hurts and he's tired. He's so tired. He's tried so hard to keep her happy, to keep her well, and he's just a fucking idiot for believing he made a single bit of difference.

He's so *tired* and everything hurts and he just wishes, *just wishes* that 50 was here. For one minute. Just one fucking minute where the world could just stop, that he could stop scheming and worrying and *counting* and just feel 50's hand on his head. To feel her arms around him, pulling him into her lap. To feel small, yes, and scared, of course, but also *safe* .

He misses her, he misses everything about her. He misses feeling *safe* .

He feels a small tapping on his shoulder, and he looks over, surprised that Eri was able to even sit up at this point. Her lips are wobbling, tears still running down her cheeks, but she's still reaching for something. He leans closer, meaning to wipe her tears away, but her fingers touch the bit of his cheek that isn't covered by the mask.

She tries to wipe *his* tears away.

Even though she's small, and weak, and tired. Even though she's bleeding, and hurt, and angry. And scared that she's angry.

She wants to comfort *him*. The person who drags her to The Chair every time. The person who can't do a damn thing to protect her from Chisaki.

The one person who *could try* to get her away from this place, who knows the route to take, but is too damn scared of getting caught . Scared to die trying. Scared to fail.

He wipes his own tears away, picking her up and settling her gently in his lap. He rocks back and forth, muttering over and over that it's okay, keeps muttering long after she passes out in his arms and until the mechanism clicks his jaw shut for the night.

It's okay, you're safe - no, she's not.

It's okay, I'm here - it's not a comfort, Chisaki means his presence as a threat.

It's okay, we're going to get out of here . It's a pipe dream. He can't promise that. Not when Chisaki needs her so bad he would burn down the whole damn country to get her back.

He's a scared kid with a weak emitter quirk and a habit of falling out of his own head.

But he's not saying he *won't* try.

He just knows he can't make any promises.

The Raid

Chapter Summary

After more than 3 years at The 8 Precepts, 27 knows his time is running out. But his luck hasn't quite yet.

Trigger Warning: Dissociation and Panic Attacks

He's sitting on the floor of the bathroom, bleach bottle in one hand and cap in the other, when he comes back. He knows he left because Eri is dressed in her white gown, not her pajamas, curled into a ball with her head resting on his thigh. She's shaking, and even as he mentally stumbles through the fog, he sees his hand drop the cap and trace the edge of her shoulder.

Shit , she's shaking. Something happened.

Her eyes meet his, terror-wide, but she's not crying. Her small hands move quickly in their secret language, *'Away. He came.'*

He fights the fog, swallows the guilt. "What happened?"

She sits up, pressing herself into his open side. He curls his arm around her, *she's still so small* . "He took me outside. Said it was a special treat. It was scary," Eri says, pulling on his shirt. He hadn't even changed out of his night clothes. "There were heroes."

The fog is gone, and his hand tightens on her shoulder. "Did he see them? Did you talk to them?" *Let them be alive, let them know about her, let them see.*

"They were gonna take me, but he came. He let them go 'cause I left with him," Eri said, and he could hear her frown deepen, her chest hiccuping as a warning before the sob. "I'm sorry-"

"No, Eri, you did good. You did so good," 27 says, hope rising in his chest. *They saw, they saw! They know now, they could do something.*

"Was gonna leave you, Twenny," she cries, fingers twisting in her guilt. He pulls her closer, pulls her in and runs his hand down her back, up and down.

"You did what you were supposed to, Eri. I'm bigger, remember? If a hero finds you, you go with them and tell them everything. Everything that he does that's bad. How he's a Yakuza, and he hurts you. The heroes will come and find me, and then we'll both be safe." He lies, and the words taste like bleach on his tongue. But he lies so easily to her, and she believes him because he's the only thing she believes in.

He doesn't know what his owner thought when he came into the room while 27 was out of his head. He must have been out for hours, sitting with the bottle of bleach in his hand, staring at nothing. Showing how broken he was.

His owner knew he was breaking. He'd noticed the cough that hasn't left, despite the months that have gone by since he got sick. Noticed that he gets unsteady on his feet when the dizziness hits, that he tires out during training matches more easily, gasps for breath far before it's over.

It's a good thing Eri made contact with the heroes. 27 was on borrowed time.

"Did they look big, like Rikiya? Or did they have horns or big eyes?"

Eri shakes her head, sniffing. "The smiley guy was big, but not that big. He had a littler guy, kind of like you. The littler guy had bunny ears, but they looked like a hat, kinda."

One is a mystery. The other is a speed quirk, maybe. Pretty pedestrian, but heroes had agencies to back them up. To investigate. There was no telling what kind of heroes would descend on the 8 Precepts in time.

"The little guy didn't want to let me go. He was like you, but his mask was see-through." Eri reaches up, pressing her fingers against his mask. "Their mouths move a lot. They make shapes like in the books, but I don't always know what they mean."

It was hard to teach her about facial expressions with only books and pictures. She was equal parts confused and enthralled during those lessons, having forgotten everything that happened before 27 had been bought. Lived so long in the 8 Precepts compound that she forgot what people who didn't wear masks look like.

"What does your mouth look like, Twenny?"

"Scary," he answers. Hari had a habit of kicking him in the mask, knowing that the skin would burst and hurt far longer than any other target. His scars probably rippled like hers did, so huge he didn't have much unscarred skin left.

His Precepts mask had a screen where it opened, the slot so small that he could hardly stick a finger in the gap. It made eating a slower process, and brushing his teeth difficult, but looking in the mirror easier. The Miasma mask would have shown his lips, and probably the edges of a few scars.

Would have made it easier to show her what smiles looked like. "Eri, did lunch come while I was..." he raises his fingertips to his temple, then flutters it like a bird falling out of the sky. 'Away.'

"Mm-hmm. He watched me eat. Had to eat faster, and my tummy hurt."

No food for 27 again, and he hadn't even been able to decide that for himself. He skipped meals from time to time, knowing it was stupid. Knowing The Miasma's 27 would kick him in the throat if he knew. He didn't even understand why he did himself, as his present self. Sometimes Dog, sometimes 27.

He was Twenny with Eri though, always. And Twenny should get her started on her lessons, distract her from thoughts of The Chair and the heroes for a few hours.

"Let's practice our hand-letters, Eri. Then we can go over some math."

Her math workbook had 12 more pages left unfinished. Maybe Chisaki would let him go out in a couple days to get another.

*

Chisaki ignores him. It makes it hard to get permission, which was already a near-impossible puzzle. He has to telegraph boredom for days sometimes, let himself stare off and freeze during training matches, as if distracted. Slump his shoulders and furrow his eyebrows a little, like he's a pouting child. When the mood strikes, his owner would tell him when he could go out, and Dog would let his mood lift, gratitude and unworthiness pouring off of him in waves.

Hari puts up with it for ten days before he snaps, asking Chisaki to let the mutt run around before he drives him up a wall. Chisaki just shrugs, until they reach the end of the training match.

Dog is worn out, his lungs ache and burn like he's been held underwater for too long, but he's forced each Expendable out of the ring in turn. No quirks, just hand to hand, and he knows they're going even easier on him thanks to the dour mood he plays up. Even Hari scuffles for only a minute before letting Dog shove him past the boundary.

He feels the cough in his throat, keeps swallowing it down. If he coughs in his owner's presence, *in a match with him*, he'll pay dearly.

His owner pulls on his gloves again, making sure he's protected against Dog's filth, and swings a fist forward.

Dog adjusts so it will hit the side of his head, not the mask, which could injure his owner. He feints weakly with a knee he knows won't make contact.

Chisaki grabs his mask and throws him to the ground instead, groaning his frustration. Perhaps it was a bit too much.

His owner looms over him with a deep furrow in his brow. "9 o'clock. You'll have an hour, but it will cost both meals."

Dog closes his eyes, and though Chisaki can't see it, he forces a wide smile on his face, knowing it will come through his voice. "I am unworthy of your kindness, Boss. Thank you so-"

He's interrupted by a kick in the face, and Chisaki storms off out of the ring.

"Thank you so much," he says, and means it. The tantrum allows him to get away without trying to lick the mafioso's shoes.

*

He can't believe his luck holds the next day. Eri is usually inconsolable on the days he secures a trip outside, as she fears being without him more than the dark, perhaps more than Chisaki. But he signs another false promise, '*heroes*' and she lifts her chin and promises to behave.

Then, his non-escort is Rikiya, who pretty much guarantees this is actually an unescorted trip.

He had won his reward to go out unaccompanied over a year ago, but as he suspected, that just meant he was escorted at a distance. He could still tell who would tail him, as they would be

collecting their spending money from a servant when he was allowed to exit through the front door. Rikiya was the best case scenario, as he would visit his girlfriend as soon as he made sure Dog went to his usual haunt.

It was a second-hand bookstore, squeezed between a clothing shop and a combini. Both stores on either side were twice as big as the bookstore, which might explain why there were stacks of paperbacks and magazines stacked on the floor to the ceiling when the shelves overflowed.

The shop was claustrophobic, barely space to walk between some of the aisles, with the smell of mildew pervading from the old stained carpet when the owner didn't light her usual incense.

She had today, so much of it that the shop was smokey as though part of it was on fire, and even though it triggered an awful coughing fit, he just held the scarf looped around his mask and smiled. He liked scent she chose today.

He made his way to the far right corner, the Hero section, ignoring the mountain of comic books and memoirs to get to the giant phone book still balanced on top of a side table, its two missing legs replaced by All Might biographies. This book listed every hero and agency active in Japan, along with hero rankings and any publicly available information. Some heroes were listed only by numbers, not even wanting their hero names to be published. Others had excerpts of their biographies, other jobs they had and where people could find them when they were off duty.

It was a wonder no one had ever taken out Present Mic during his radio broadcast.

Most had their hero name, agency affiliation, quirk and headshot on their entries. 27 poured through the book quickly, stopping at every speed quirk he found. Most speed quirks did have headshots, but out of the three with rabbit ears he saw, two were real ears and the other didn't have a mask.

It was a long shot, as the book was due for its yearly update soon, but 27 still had 20 minutes before he had to leave to be back at the compound before his hour was up.

He picked out the next math workbook in the series, along with a few more cat-themed kids books. They still had plenty of lessons in the JSL handbook, and the English workbook. The science handbooks were pretty much untouched, as Eri got too frustrated being unable to understand them. How could 27 explain what a caterpillar was to someone who had never seen one? What grass was? Or rain?

A quick scan of the child development books made him frown. He had gotten lucky when he found one marked down to clearance, as the prices for these made the thought of stealing them unbearable.

It was the same in the literature section. He had a few giant tomes full of English plays and pages so old they broke instead of bending, but The Goat's Egg, a best seller with a colorful cover page, was ten times as expensive as anything he would allow for himself.

Next to the counter, the owner had a few baskets full of soap bars she had made herself, and again his luck held out. The white and tawny bar that Eri liked was marked down to half price, and again, he had to smile. She liked its warm, sweet smell, and would go to the bathroom just to smell it sometimes when she felt a fit coming on. He had taught her to do that on the instruction of one of his child development books. Maybe with this bar, he could let her have a tiny piece to carry around with her, to help her soothe herself even quicker.

He placed his items on the counter and waited for the owner to appear, as she was probably doing

something in another section, hidden in the shadow of a corner he didn't have time to explore.

The man in the suit, who had been wandering the shop before 27 entered, walked over to the soap basket to smell a few items. A huge stack of All Might books were tucked under his arm. Other customers were unusual, especially ones so clean cut, but he must have been an extreme All Might enthusiast, on the hunt for older volumes.

The owner made her way from the Hero section, a few comic books with crumpled and ripped pages in her hand. She smiled at him, the wrinkles on her face deepening, signing 'Hello' and a long string of other words. When he didn't respond, she pointed at the baskets, speaking with her usual slurred and stilted tone. "Yu can takeh anotha soahp. I'm hahving ah sahle."

He nodded, picking through the basket farthest from the man in the suit. When he first started coming to this shop, the owner tried to make him leave with a big white bar that had creamy pink swirls. She said it would be really good for his hair, which he knew looked terrible. Huge white matts full of dead strands tangled up at the base of his neck, and sometimes his hair looked and felt wet for days on end. When she had reached up to touch it, he flinched away, barely able to keep himself from slipping out of his mind, and ran back to the compound.

She must really want him to get that soap, he thinks, fingers turning it over and over in his hands. The price was outrageous, but she wanted him to have it. He wasn't worth that much, but she wanted...

"Excuse me," All Might Enthusiast said, his big boney hand resting too close to his neck, right on top of 27's scarf. Panic rose sharp in 27, every muscle tensed as if he could just hold onto himself that way, keep him from falling away. "Do you know what this scent is? I can't quite place it."

He was holding Eri's favorite soap, and as soon as 27's eyes locked on it, he waved it closer to his own face. 27's gaze fell naturally to the man's eyes, and the world seemed to freeze when he saw the black sclera with a mechanical purple iris.

Sir Nighteye.

When Honzo's old group had made the front pages a few months ago, busted up by Sir Nighteye's agency, he had dreamed of this moment. He read Sir Nighteyes comments over and over again, 'I used my quirk on a criminal who was running errands for that group. With that single encounter, I knew the location of every warehouse and office they were operating from.'

Now it had happened. Sir Nighteye knew everything, where the compound was. Where Eri was.

What he did to Eri.

He swallows the guilt as soon as it comes. He knew he was a criminal. Best case scenario, Eri would be taken away and he could serve his penance in prison. Every trip to The Chair paid back in days and years.

Sir Nighteye pulls his hand away, hand on the soap lowering. His expression is unreadable, but after decades of dealing with criminals, he must know how to guard his anger and righteous fury.

"He knows you're coming," 27 whispers, as quietly as he can. "He can run. Please save her."

The hero reaches out for his arm, and the next thing 27 knows he's in the back of a car, and Rikiya is waving his hands up and down, talking with an unnaturally calm tone.

Shit, shit, shit, shit.

He wonders if he can stay in this panic, but he becomes aware that words are falling out of his mouth, and he doesn't know what they are. He tries to breath, tries to focus on how Rikiya is breathing, deep and full breaths.

An awful coughing fit barrels out of his chest after he finally figures out what he was saying, 'Don't touch me,' over and over so fast that the words jumble over themselves at times.

He can work with that, he thinks, his face turning red as he lets the coughing fit continue. He sits up when he's ready, thankful that Rikiya never shows his face.

"Okay. The hell happened out there, Dog? You were running around in circles on the sidewalk like a crazy person."

"Sorry. Can't go to the bookstore, sorry I'm sorry-"

"Breathe kid, for the love of god," Rikiya grumbles, a hand running over his long beaked mask. "Just tell me what happened."

"S-she wanted me to buy soap," Dog said, hiding his relief with panic as he rocked back and forth. "Not supposed to, tried to touch my-my-my-" he let himself reach up towards his hair, letting his hand shake. He noticed the bar of soap was still in his grip, and he didn't need to play up the panic as he let it fall out of his hand. "I'msorryI'msorryI'm-"

"Fuckin' Christ, calm down," Rikiya groaned, picking up the bar of soap. "Everyone fucking knows you steal soap, kid. It's kind of hard to notice when a kid smells like vanilla instead of ammonia piss. It's fucking fine."

Dog ducks his head, biting his lip. He should have dotted her dress with the cleaner to cover that up, that was stupid on his part.

"You finally got one for yourself? Fucking finally, man. Can't fucking stand getting that in my nose when you go in for a chokehold," Rikiya says, picking up the white and pink swirled bar from on top of the stack of books he didn't mean to steal.

Shit, he really stole them. Didn't cover his tracks this time. "Didn't quirk her. Can't go back."

"Fine. We're probably leaving soon anyway. Boss thinks it's getting too hot," Rikiya says, sniffing the soap in his hand. "Nice, that's, like, pure shea butter. Hey, if we get to go to America, I'm gonna take you to this real nice shop. It's got bath bombs and natural ingredients and shit. Makes you feel like an oiled up porn star, but it's fucking delightful."

He doesn't know why, probably drunk on luck and relief, probably because he trusts Rikiya far more than he should, but honesty falls out of him. "I'm probably not, though." Rikiya picks at one of the workbooks. "Boss knows I'm sick. Eri behaves better-"

"Kid," Rikiya sighs, his hand flaps towards his shoulder but it doesn't land. "Just... Don't think about that shit, alright."

Well, now he knows.

And he does what Rikiya tells him to, he doesn't think about it.

Not until Eri is fast asleep, curled up on his arm. The room is dark, his jaw is wired shut. He runs a hand through her hair and only lets the tears fall, breathing deep to keep himself from shaking with it.

He just wants to save her first. That has to be enough.

*

Hizashi can't help but keep glancing over at Shouta, his head resting on his arms, ostensibly watching Hizashi cook dinner. But he knows that quiet too well to trust it, and it's a bit much for the usual pre-mission nerves. "Worried about how the kids will do?"

Shouta doesn't look up, but he lifts his head to rest his chin on his hand. That's a 'no' if he ever saw one.

He makes it easier for his husband, setting the soup to simmer lower and walks over, close enough for Shouta to press his head into his side, like a cat begging for attention. He threads his fingers through his hair, wanting to wrap him up in his arms but he knows Shouta won't tell him what's going on if he doesn't let him say it.

"After Kamino ward, I moved a few cases off of my docket," Shouta says, and Hizashi encourages him with a hum. Shouta had worried over the decision for days, but between being there for his traumatized students and a few low-level investigations that could turn out to be duds, there really wasn't a choice. "Rough looking kid was stealing from a bookstore with his quirk. Voice activated emitter. The owner was completely deaf, so it didn't work. She reported it because she was worried he was being abused or neglected."

Shouta pulls away from him, and Hizashi lets his hands fall to his husband's shoulders. Shouta can't look him in the eye, staring at his stomach.

"Sir Nighteye looked into it, for the case. Cracked it wide open, in fact. The kid is the girl's caretaker, and the 8 Precepts use his quirk to control her."

"He's not a member?" Hizashi asks.

Shouta sucks a breath, his head leans forward but he stops himself from seeking comfort. *Blames himself.* "Sir Nighteye used Foresight on him. Not all of it was in the report." *Had to punish himself.* "It was too gruesome to let the students know. They will torture him, and Sir Nighteye said he didn't react as if that was new. Then Chisaki uses his quirk..."

"After the rescue..." he asks, because he has to know. He has to make Shouta show him where it hurts the most.

"...He doesn't make it."

Hizashi doesn't care that Shouta flinches away, he pulls him close and wraps his arms around him.

"If I just-"

"No," Hizashi stops him. "What if you did and Bakugo had a breakdown? You know it was touch and go for a while, and any little thing could have made the difference. What if you did, but the 8 Precepts caught him? Shou, you know there's only one man with a quirk that can see the future, and even he doesn't trust it."

Shouta doesn't answer, and Hizashi doesn't expect him to. He'll carry the weight until the mission

is over, and Hizashi hopes upon hope that Sir Nighteye is right, in that he can be wrong.

"Worrying about what a fortune teller says when the fortune teller himself says it might not be true isn't very *logical*, Shou. Now, I'm going to finish up this soup, and you're going to eat it. Looking after the problem child is hard enough, but the kid is so fired up about it, he'll probably run into a wall and break all of his bones right out the gate!"

Shouta groans, collapsing fully into Hizashi's embrace as he imagines it. Hizashi laughs and ruffles his husband's hair.

He hopes all the kids come back safe. Every last one of them.

But he adds another to that list.

*

The heroes descend before Chisaki expects them to. It's both good and bad.

Eri clutches the collar of his shirt for dear life, and she doesn't understand. Doesn't understand why Chisaki is letting Dog carry her, why they are running away from the heroes. He didn't have time to explain it to her, but whenever it looks like she'll ask him, he signs to her '*danger*', and she stops. Just like he taught her to.

The anxiety of waiting had been too much for Hari. Dog had been dragged out of bed last night for another unpredictable training session, but to start it off, he'd been given a bleach bath. He'd been able to avoid them for almost a year, but apparently, Hari needed it last night. Needed to douse and burn him, holding him under for almost too long.

The training afterwards was a joke. Rikiya went a few rounds, but by that point, Dog was shaking too hard to do much more than deflect, and the 8 refused to continue, saying the fumes were too much.

Chisaki wasn't happy with that.

Dog doesn't remember a lot of the night after that, but he woke up with the familiar ache in his bones that told him he was used as quirk training.

Unmade and Remade.

He doesn't let himself think about it, not when Chisaki is right in front of him, guiding him through a convoluted escape route. Can't let himself think about anything, but he does.

Where are the heroes? Will they find us? Will they make it in time?

"Excuse me."

He doesn't recognize that voice, but Eri moving to peer over his shoulder soothes the agony in his limbs for just a moment.

"I'd like to talk to you a bit more, after all," the blonde man says, red cape billowing behind him. 27 is transfixed by the sight, because he's seen only seen a few heroes, but this one isn't just a quirk user with a fancy name. Just looking at him makes 27 think *Hero*.

"You," Chisaki growls. This one is definitely one of the heroes Eri met. The ones that set the mob boss on edge. "You shouldn't have been able to get here so quickly."

27 slips up, glances to the side before he catches himself, but luckily Chisaki isn't looking. He knew Deidoro and Nemoto were going to be the vanguard after they were the ones to collect them from the room to bring them to Chisaki. After Chisaki told them to stay close, 27 made sure they didn't, wrapped under his control thanks to a couple of nervous questions concerning what was going on.

Chisaki does notice, though, when he gives the signal for the two to attack and nothing happens. Nothing but the hero changing his stance, charging forward, then slipping into the concrete floor.

Flashy quirk. It works entirely too well for 27.

"Boss!" 27 yells, playing up his fright. He curls an arm around Eri's shoulders, trying to make sure she doesn't get caught in it.

The hero reappears behind Chisaki, throwing an elbow that should have hit his face, but Chisaki bends backwards to dodge.

"Boss, I need to get Eri out of here!"

The hero keeps Chisaki on the run, throwing blow after blow before he slips back into the floor. He feels the anticipation ramp up, but he's not even in the fight, so he knows that this is the moment to risk it.

"Boss, what should I do?!"

It's a mistake.

The hero jumps back out, but he's far from his target. Chisaki's sights are locked on 27, eyes blazing. Hand outstretched.

27 throws Eri, hopefully towards the hero. He hopes, he *hopes*.

He closes his eyes.

There's a familiar nothingness.

*

"Eri, are you going to leave me here?"

It's his voice but not his words. It's the only thing left in this nothingness.

"Or do you want him to be killed? How many times do I have to say it?"

Stop saying it stop using it it's my quirk they're not my words

"I'm always telling you, aren't I?"

Stop saying it, stop using my

"What a tragic life, huh, Lemillion?"

Stop using

"Is that it?"

Stop

" You do recognize this, right?"

It hurts please stop please please

"IS THAT WHAT YOU WANTED, ERI?!"

Please leave, Eri, please leave get out of here get somewhere saf

The Adoption Process

Chapter Summary

A month and a half after the raid, 27 is reunited with Eri. A lot has changed during that time, for both of them, but while Eri is adjusting well to her new life, 27 has just been waiting for the inevitable.

Trigger Warnings for: Blood, Self-harm by scratching, and Dissociation.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to randomnessquid for pointing it out, but I wasn't able to find a place to really explain why Sir Nighteye was wrong about Shinsou dying during the raid. Basically, Sir Nighteye saw Chisaki do that *CRONCH* thing when he absorbed Shinsou into his body, and assumptions were made at that point.

And for fans of TLR, Naomasa can do a lot in a month and a half's time, if he's given the resources that he has in this AU. Poor boy has had it rough here, but he's certainly not the only one.

Also, I absolutely STRUGGLED to not write the words 'DJsona' into this fic, and I hope you guys appreciate that.

"And he was like 'fwoosh!' And I was like 'waaah!' It was really amazing, Mr. Detective! And then I ate candy apples, and they're really tasty!"

Aizawa tries not to grin as Eri recounts the highlights of the Cultural Festival for what could honestly be the hundredth time. It happened over a week ago, but from her enthusiasm, it might as well have happened five minutes ago.

Naomasa just smiles, the weariness that had been on his face softened as Eri's audience. "Wow! I'm jealous, Eri! It sounds like you had a lot of fun!"

Eri nods, but Aizawa can predict the change in mood as she begins to pick at the hem of her dress. She shrinks in on herself, rocking back and forth on her feet. "Mr. Detective, where's Twenny?"

And there it was.

He was surprised she was able to ask. She didn't like asking questions from people she didn't know were safe, and the only people she considered safe were the heroes that rescued her. Even Present

Mic wasn't on that list yet.

But everyone wanted to know where Twenny was. Hizashi asked, Mirio asked. Eri asked at least 10 times a day, and usually had a crying fit no matter what he answered her with.

Aizawa wanted to know too, and from the look Naomasa gave him, he was going to find out today.

"He's safe now, Eri, and we're all hoping you can see him soon! In fact, I was hoping you could sit down with my friend Hanajima and talk to her about Twenny again! Is that okay?"

Eri nods, sharp and determined. It wavers when she sees the dark haired psychologist approach, but after a cheerful greeting, she follows, only glancing back at Aizawa twice before they go into the kid friendly interrogation room.

"Let's go to my office," Naomasa says, as though it's a normal occurrence. The detective preferred to talk in the bullpen or outside of an interrogation room unless it was about a case with a highly classified rating. That shouldn't be the case for who Aizawa suspects is a good kid who fell in with the worst crowd, but it would explain why any information about him went dark over a month ago, before the kid even regained consciousness.

Aizawa frowns when he's not just led into Naomasa's office, but through a second door with two locks and a fingerprint scanner. To the All For One office.

He's been here twice before, to give his report about USJ and the attack during the summer training exercise. He doesn't like the implications here, nor the way half of a wall has been cleared up with strings leading from the pictures of the Nomu production facility to a group of photographs depicting number tattoos. The discolored green skin surrounding 388 suggests it's a picture of a Nomu, but the others are clearly human.

Dead humans. 44, 50, 61, 102, all in black ink with a tell-tale blue tinge at the edges.

But 27 was different, a bright neon purple hue cast over the picture, turned darker in a rectangle surrounding the number. The person who had that tattoo was alive.

"To start from the top, Twenny's name is Shinsou Hitoshi," Naomasa says, pushing forward a missing child's report on his desk. The grinning child with a missing front tooth has darker purple hair, but it's definitely the same kid he last saw comatose on a hospital bed. "His mother reported him missing 11 years ago, after he didn't return home from school. There were no leads, and his file went cold 6 years ago. The father had passed a year before he was kidnapped, and the mother moved to France afterwards. When the local police made contact with her two weeks ago, she didn't react well. They lost her trail shortly after."

Aizawa frowns, looking at the kid's picture again. The rings under his eyes are deep, eyes that he thought were wide with excitement could have a tinge of fear in them, now that he looks for it. He doesn't like what he begins to suspect, but a mother that runs from her long lost child and succeeds in evading the police doesn't paint the best picture.

"The 8 Precepts didn't kidnap him. They kept meticulous records of their finances, even if most of the transactions are encrypted, but their purchase of '27' wasn't well hidden. The receipt states they paid 28 million yen for '27,' 12 years old according to the notes, 3 years and 8 months ago."

A receipt. For a child. Aizawa wishes that was a new one for him.

"It was the only human trafficking transaction we've found so far from the 8 Precepts. Since the timeline seemed to add up with Shinsou's age, and 'Twenny' could be a nickname for '27,' I

invited a tattoo expert to look for a trafficking brand that might have been covered up, to find out who had him beforehand, and we found that number under the black band on his arm. The ink in the number has a unique composition, and matches the other cases you can see on the wall.”

“Including the Nomu?” Aizawa asks, even if he truly doesn’t want to know. He’s suspected that human trafficking rings were supplying the ‘parts’ for Nomus for a while now, but to know that a kid that had been so important to Eri had nearly been turned into one unsettles him.

“Including *most* of the Nomus we’ve encountered,” Naomasa answers, confirming that Shinsou Hitoshi’s missing child report certainly belonged in this room. “We haven’t been able to gather much about this Nomu Organization. We know that they must have two sides to their business, as the humans we recovered have the same ink that the Nomus do, but every Nomu has a number that begins with ‘3.’ Eri told us that Shinsou belonged to ‘a bad place’ before he was bought by the 8 Precepts, but she couldn’t give us much more than that. She might have been told not to talk about it.”

"What makes you say that?" Aizawa asks. Eri being uncomfortable talking about certain topics was, quite understandably, nothing new. Especially about Twenny, who by all accounts seemed to be the only positive influence in her life. Her only anchor, now missing, and she didn’t like to remember the void he left.

Naomasa shifts his feet, unsettled. "There have been two attempts on Shinsou's life since he was rescued."

Aizawa was rarely shocked, but to hear that Naomasa's team had failed to protect a witness under their protection twice? It was almost impossible to believe.

"An hour after I filed my findings about the tattoo, a security guard caught a nurse trying to inject air into his IV. She escaped, but records show she wasn't an employee. We still haven’t been able to identify her, despite her having unique quirk features. We had to take him to a juvenile facility at that point, where we could keep eyes on him at all times. That's where we found out how deep this runs."

Naomasa taps on a screen mounted on the wall, security footage of Shinsou and a female police officer in an isolation cell, frame frozen, before Naomasa hits play.

" *Well, this is your room, Mr. 27! Just hit this little button if you need anything!* " The dark haired officer says with a cheery tone, as she fiddles with the box over the panic button mounted on the wall. The kid jolts, staring at the officer as she exits.

"She locked it," Aizawa mutters to himself. He knows that shade of blue hair. He's never worked with her or exchanged more than a polite greeting, but he's seen her around the station since he became a hero. She had been at the station for years before that.

It runs deep .

Frames of the kid move quickly, showing him pacing the cell, running a hand over his arm over the gray prison jumpsuit, before he finally sits on the bench, staring at the door as the hours tick by on the top of the screen.

Then, the door opens to a crowd of prisoners barrelling through. Strength quirks, projectile quirks, all of them flooding in.

The kid reacts like he would, rushing forward to maintain the advantage of the bottleneck from the

doorway. He uses the number of opponents to secure human shields, grapples and throws around attackers twice his size.

Completely unarmed and without an offensive quirk, the kid holds out longer than he thought he would. Then, while the kid tries to joint lock a fire breather's arm, he drops, clutching the side that had been vulnerable while his arm was outstretched. Blood pools on the floor quickly, quickly enough for Aizawa to recognize what it was.

That wasn't a lucky hit. Stabbing a major artery around the kidney was the move of a master assassin, and it happened during a prison riot no less. Aizawa looks for the two projectile users he spotted, but they were being dragged out by the rioters who were retreating far too calmly.

" Shh, shh, it's okay little bro."

Shinsou was the only person in the cell.

" Man, the Precepts did a number on ya. Look at what they did to your hair," the voice continues, as the matted nest of hair lifts up by an invisible hand

" No...no," Shinsou whimpers, fingers pressed desperately to his side.

The other voice sighs, his voice turning oddly despondent. *" I didn't want to be the one to do it, you know. But Bug fucked up, and the police are catching on. And trust me, you don't want to go home, we're mixed up in some awful stuff now. Just..."* The fabric of the uniform moves, like a hand is smoothing out the sleeve. *" It's gonna be alright. It's all over, all the messed up shit you went through is done. You're just gonna close your eyes... and fall asleep."*

The kid went limp, as if on cue. Anger rattled hot through Aizawa's chest.

" Shit, why did I tell you... so unprofessional," the voice sniffs, then changes his tone. *" Well, it's clean up time!"*

Naomasa pauses the video. "If the guard that found him didn't have a minor healing quirk, Shinsou would have died. Officer Nagoa wasn't so lucky."

Aizawa won't be crying over that anytime soon. "Where is he now?"

"Here, at the station. We put him in an interrogation room close to the barracks and only the people I trust are allowed near it. We have eyes on him at all times, while we try to sort out a wardship designation." Naomasa runs a hand over his hair, and Aizawa realizes how dark the circles under his eyes are, suspects that he hasn't left the station in days. "The Commission is willing to approve just about anyone with the right quirk, considering-"

"Considering his tattoo matches the ones on the majority of the Nomus we've come across," Aizawa growls. "Since this mystery organization was able to place two hits on a witness in police custody, they're extremely well connected. It's possible they are a branch of All for One's empire that thrived where others didn't. That makes getting information on them from Shinsou critical."

Naomasa's frown deepens, but he doesn't refute it. The Commission didn't deal in compassion cases. They wanted intel, and Shinsou's best interests just happened to coincide.

"Midnight does well with her wardship cases, and I know she's available. Why hasn't she been contacted?"

"General anaesthesia doesn't always work on Shinsou, so we can't know if her quirk is 100%

effective, if it would be necessary," the detective answers, then sighs. "Ms. Joke has a vocal emitter quirk, so he would be able to avoid it. I've been through the shortlist and the long list, and the best fit is a long shot."

"All Might?" Aizawa asks. Even if he doesn't think Naomasa is completely blinded in the choice, as the staff dorm at UA seems to be the only safe place left for Shinsou, he still doubts it. He's not sure if Toshinori is even certified for wardship cases.

"Present Mic," Naomasa answers. "Of course, that would just be on paper. Principal Nezu agreed to change the records to show Present Mic's address as the dorm room he was assigned, but I don't expect him to actually move in to it. Since Present Mic is deaf, it's possible that Shinsou's quirk wouldn't be able to affect him. But we both know that the arrangement is just to give The Commission enough plausible deniability to ignore two wards living together."

His eyebrows raise. "That policy is in place for a good reason. Eri needs constant supervision due to her quirk, not to mention what living with a reminder of her time at the 8 Precepts could do to her mental state. There has to be someone else."

"No one I can trust," Naomasa admits, gesturing around the room. "Very few heroes know what you know, Eraserhead. You're one of the most insightful heroes I know, which will help tremendously with the investigation. Your quirk is the perfect counter for his, and on top of all of that, I know you care."

Of course he did. Any hero should, but more than he was willing to admit, more than he should considering his responsibility to Eri, he *did* want to be the one to take Shinsou in. Despite what Hizashi said, the case he pushed off of his docket stayed stuck in his mind.

"Hanajima is evaluating Eri right now to address the concerns we both have about the two of them living together. If she gives us the clear, both of you can meet with him today. Seeing them interact is the best indicator we can have, and if Present Mic is available, that's even better." Naomasa glances at his phone after it pings, nodding at the message. "She cleared it. If you refuse, I understand. You know Eri better than anyone. But if you agree to meet him, to see the situation with your own eyes-

"I'll see it, then," Aizawa agrees warily. "Let me call Mic."

"Before you do, though...."

*

Aizawa watches Eri through the observation window as she combs through a doll's hair, still oblivious to the fact that her former caretaker was only a few doors down the hall. He wonders what her reaction will be when she sees him, whether Hanajima had been convinced to look away from a warning sign due to the urgency of the case. If Eri will freeze up at the memories they've tried to shield her from, or if she will truly be relieved after all of her desperate pleading to see Twenny.

He doesn't know if this is a good idea, but to decide that, he needs more information. There are other concerns he has apart from Eri's wellbeing.

"*Shou, I thought we were going to bring home a cat next, not a teenager*," Hizashi laughs through the phone. "*It's kind of a leap, but you know I'm on board! What kind of hero would I be if I*

refused? "

"It's going to be a lot tougher than Eri," Aizawa warns. "He's been in that world a lot longer, without a single anchor as far as we know."

" Except for Eri ," Hizashi says. " These things have a habit of going both ways. It could be good for both of them. "

Eri smooths the doll's dress, looking around the room for her next target to play with. Aizawa forces himself to ask, for this Shinsou's sake. He doesn't want to, but Hizashi knows about it far better than anyone else he could look to. "Zashi, during that time in middle school... What helped?"

Hizashi is quiet for a long time. He doesn't like talking about that. *" ...He has a voice activated quirk... It's no wonder, but... you know how bad that is for him, right, Shou? "*

He knows. Hizashi has told him enough to know. "I know. We're supposed to meet with him soon. To see how Eri will react. I'm still not convinced it's a good idea, but I don't want to put him through more stress than is necessary either."

Hizashi breathes in, and Aizawa can picture his determined nodding. *" Just, don't try to make him talk. Give him some other way to answer if you really need to ask him a question. Maybe try to reign in Eri if she tries... The expectation of talking is just the worst, you know? "*

"I'll talk to her," Aizawa says, releasing a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "There's more, a lot more. I haven't even read the whole file. We need to properly talk about it before we make any decisions."

" I know, Shou. If Nemuri didn't make me be the dorm mother today, I'd be there with you. So since I can't, get Eri to give you a big ol' hug from me! "

Aizawa smiles, refusing to let the offer tempt him. "I'll let you know how it goes."

" You better! Love you! "

"...Love you."

*

27 digs his fingernail into his wrist, eyes focused on the door. Wouldn't make that mistake again, wouldn't start to doze off, blink and miss it.

Lazy. Complacent. Tried to keep his edge but look how that turned out.

Tried to forget about The Miasma. The Miasma hadn't forgotten about him.

The police kept giving him food and water. Didn't trust it. Couldn't trust it, he knew what Memory liked....

27 shakes his head, digs the nail in again. He was getting lazy. Complacent. Dozing off in an unsafe place.

He had let them take his mask. Take his cough. Take the patches of bleach-burnt skin. Take the wound that should have killed him. They took what they wanted when he wasn't looking. Despite all of his efforts to stay alert, stay alive, he kept falling out of his head. Falling asleep sometimes,

and he would wake up to even the familiar ache and heaviness in his limbs stolen away.

8 plates of food had been placed in front of him. When he doesn't touch the next one, they'll wheedle him for a while, what feels like hours. They'd promise that the food is safe, and that he should eat, eat before they had to do something they didn't want to. Lies. They were getting tired of the process, though, and it showed on their faces. Quicker to give in and begin. They'll use the sedative, restrain his bad hand and inject it. It won't knock him out, it's not supposed to, it just makes him weaker.

Strapped down. Pinprick of another IV. Plastic ring in his mouth, to keep him from refusing the tube down his throat. They mutter assurances, more lies, until he gets too foggy, forgets how to decipher the words from the sounds.

He'll feel full afterwards. It will last a day before he doesn't anymore.

He wonders when they'll force him to sleep, too. He knows he hasn't lost more than a few hours each time it happens. He must have forgotten how to really sleep. Falling out of his head is the only thing he remembers how to do.

'Away.' 'Away.'

They said Eri was going to visit him. That was a new one. A new lie, and they're getting better at their tactics. This one hurts more than anything else they've done. He thinks this will be the thing that kills him. They've tried pretty much everything else.

27 watches the door. He hears the latch click.

He stops breathing when he sees her.

He forgets how to.

She's safe .

He almost doesn't recognize her, because he never really let himself imagine what she would look like when she was rescued. She stands at the doorway, eyes wide and searching. As soon as she sees him, she runs to him, red dress and white tresses bouncing with the movement. "TWENNY!"

She's warm, she's so warm. Warm and alive and clean and safe, pressed against his side so tight he thinks she might fuse into it. He almost wants her to, selfishly. He watches his arm curl around her, feels the warmth there and tightens his hold.

It isn't until she looks up, a furrow working into her brow, that he realizes he's crying. Warmth spilling over his cheeks, his chest tight and aching with a breath he hasn't taken since he saw her.

"Sorry-sorry Eri," he says, his throat is raw with the effort, voice rough and broken, but the pain is nothing compared to the worry he's caused her. "Happy to see you. You-you look so pretty."

She is pretty. The smile in her eyes when she saw him is the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

She pulls herself into his lap, and presses a hand to his naked cheek. He flinches despite himself, despite it being Eri, and wants to pull his collar up to hide his scars, but he can't risk startling her. He just lets the shame boil in him. "Scary, right? W-without the mask?"

She shakes her head, kicking her feet in offense. She breathes in and bares her teeth with her eyes shut tight, grimacing in an effort to do something, something she really wants to do, before her face

drops, and she tucks her head under his chin and snuffles.

"Eri, what's wrong?" He asks, running a hand down her back. He doesn't want to make her cry. He doesn't know what he did, but he'd give anything to undo it.

"...smile. I c-can't smile." Her hands fist in his shirt, and she's going to start sobbing soon, frustration boiling over. "Wanna smile at you b-but I ca-an't!"

"I always know when you smile, Eri," he soothes, managing to pull her back enough to wipe away her tears. She blinks at him owlishly and leans into his hand. His throat stings, but he bears it. "When you smile, your eyes get really big, and your eyebrows get up to right here," he says, tapping at her brow. "You have a little happy dance, too. You know, when I first met you, you couldn't talk yet, but I knew what you wanted to say by how you hummed. And you still do your happy hum, sometimes, when you're really happy."

She hums, still sniffing, and it's nowhere close to the happy hum, but he smiles at her all the same. "You smiled too, back when we were in that room," she says, her voice small and worn out. "You got a crinkle here." She nearly pokes his eye as she points to his tell, but her words soothe him.

She always knew. Even behind the mask.

Her head darts to the side, hands fisting in his shirt possessively. "Zawa, can Twenny come home with us? Please?"

27 startles when he realizes there's someone else in the room, a tall lanky man with dark hair, scruff on his chin, and a crescent scar under his left eye. He would be very intimidating if he didn't also seem startled by Eri's question, or if he wasn't holding a sparkly pink backpack with a cat face pocket.

"We'll talk about that, Eri," the man says, more softly than 27 thought his voice would sound, as he sits in the chair opposite to 27's. 27's arms tighten around Eri reflexively, but the man doesn't seem to notice. "My name is Aizawa Shouta. I'm a hero who was a part of the raid on the 8 Precepts compound. I am also Eri's guardian."

You're taking care of her? The words stick to the roof of his mouth as he opens his mouth and closes it.

It was still happening.

He had begun to think parts of himself had been mixed up or lost from when he was fused into Chisaki, but he was surprised the words fell out so easily with Eri. Under this hero's stare, they withered away again.

The hero takes a pen and a pad of paper from the table, setting them in front of 27. "If you would rather write than talk, you can use this. I can also read upside down," he says, pulling away.

27's hand shakes just thinking about taking up the pen. The one that had been Unmade the first time, and wasn't Remade right. He wasn't sure what the hero's game was yet, didn't know what angle to play, but showing his damaged pieces, the parts where he was a little less useful... That was dangerous.

He's distracted as he feels Eri's tiny fingertips press against his throat, worry widening her eyes. "Twenny, are you sick?"

He shakes his head, and the words shake out again. "No, my voice..." he winces at how painful his

throat is now, his voice breaking into a hoarse whisper. "Just thirsty."

Eri takes the ever-present glass from the table, offering it to him as he shakes his head.

"That's okay, Eri, but thank you," he says, signing to her with tiny movements. ' *Bad. Danger.* '

Her eyes get wide with panic, but she doesn't question it. Just like she was taught. She just curls her arms around his neck and tucks herself close to his chest.

Guilt settles right beside her.

She was happier before she saw him. On the other side of that door, she has a place where she's safe and cherished. Where she knows what smiles mean because people smile at her.

In here, he just makes her cry. Makes her frustrated and confused. She worries about things she shouldn't, worries about him.

He shouldn't have made her come here.

"Eri, would you like to share some snacks with Shinsou?" The hero asks. Eri's head pops up, watching the man open up and dig through the backpack, placing a multitude of plastic packets and a red apple on the table.

"With Twenny?" Eri asks, and the hero nods, pulling a part of one of the packets out then inserting the tiny white thing in another spot. He hands it to Eri, who angles the little tube to his lips.

If it's a ploy, it's a good one. With her eyes so bright and determined, he couldn't refuse her. He sips at it, sweetness shocking his tongue. The pain in his throat flares then soothes, and he risks another sip.

It should be embarrassing, to be fed by a child, but Eri looks so proud of herself with every gummy and sip he takes, humming happily. If it allows him to hide his shaking hand, all the better.

He refuses the apple by saying he's full, eyeing the white sleeves of her dress that would surely get stained by juice. This reminds her to tell him about the candy apples she got to eat, and how she wants to give him one too. How she went to a festival with a lot of people and heroes there, and how she was scared but big brother Mirio was there, and Izuku too, and even though she was scared she knew she was safe because her heroes were with her.

He doesn't let it hurt.

He tells himself it's enough.

"Big Brother Mirio wants to meet you too! He said you were really brave when they rescued me, and he couldn't have gotten to me without your help! And he hopes you're okay now," Eri starts shrinking, kicking nervously. "'Cause after you threw me, he... he ate you... and you were talking inside him..."

"I'm sorry, Eri," 27 says, holding her closer, pressing her against his chest as the guilt rushes through him. "I'm sorry I scared you. It wasn't my words..."

Not my words but it's my voice.

It's my voice it's quirk it's my voice it's my quirk stop using my

"Twenny?"

'Away.' His hand shakes but his nerves don't ring as sharply to him. He fights the fog, concentrates on her warmth in his arms. He doesn't risk looking at her face, not yet. "Sorry, Eri. I'm really glad you saved me." He plays with the ends of her hair, even if his hand doesn't feel quite real yet. "I could feel you reaching for me, and it woke me up, like I was coming out of a bad dream.... You're my hero, you know. You saved me."

She smiles.

He has to fight not to cry, because she smiles at him. It's small, and wavering, and she's a little bit embarrassed when she notices, but it warms him all the way through.

He hadn't even realized how cold he felt before.

She saved him.

And that was enough.

*

Shouta is the most reserved man Yamada has ever known. He's not cold or callous, despite what some expelled students might swear, but just incredibly hard to read.

It's made living with an adorable child like Eri a real treat. Especially during moments like this, where Shouta walks through the door to find Mirio clipping a towel around her shoulders as she holds up a length of toilet paper wrapped around her neck to protect it from being torn.

Because if Mirio insists on dressing her up as a hero, then she needs her own capture scarf, of course.

Shouta honest to god *blushes* and has to turn his head away from the sight to regain his composure, and Yamada doesn't blame him. He knows one day he'll find Eri with a comb and tub of hair gel, trying to get her hair into a perfect 'swoosh', and he'll probably die right there on the spot.

"Sensei, doesn't Eri look like the cutest hero you've ever seen?!" Mirio gushes, lifting her up effortlessly. "It's Super Eri! Savior of Twenny's and kitties all around the world!"

Eri grimaces in determination, a pretty adorable imitation of All Might, raising her tiny fist high. Yamada doesn't know how Shouta is still standing in the onslaught of this cuteness.

He manages to ruffle her hair affectionately, ducking his head ever so slightly to hide his soft expression. "She's my favorite hero, obviously."

Eri doesn't quite smile, but Shinsou was right, it's always been hiding in her eyes. Yamada tries to save his husband before he passes out at the sight, dramatically pouting. "I'm not your favorite hero?!"

Mirio turns her around, and he's nearly blinded by the full-force of her blushing embarrassment. "Sensei, this *is* Super Eri we're talking about!"

"Ahhh, you're right! Super Eri is my favorite hero too!" Yamada gushes, watching Shouta make his retreat to the kitchen, to Yamada's side. Mirio catches the look on Shouta's face, and tells Eri that they should practice her flying abilities as part of her hero training. With an excited nod of agreement, he heaves her up over his head, running through the hallway with exaggerated

‘whoosh’s and ‘fwoosh’s for effect.

“Nezu gave me a few blueprints to look over, for us to decide how we want the remodel to look. He said he can have it finished before the school day ends, so Eri won’t have to be moved,” Shouta says, placing a folder on the counter.

“It feels a little weird to pick how it will look when this place isn’t really ours,” Yamada says, flipping through a few layouts. “Kinda scary, especially from our boss. Maybe it’s one of his psychological tests.... Did he say anything else about it?”

“He thinks it’s a good idea for Eri,” Shouta answers, but the corner of his mouth pulls down, unconvinced. “Specifically, he said that traumatic bonds are like a knife wound. You can’t just yank it out without anything to treat what’s left behind.”

Yamada doesn’t quite like with the wording, but the sentiment seems accurate.

“He also said the timing is right for Eri, as she will probably have more difficulties now that the shock is wearing off. She’s...” Shouta stops, folding his arms. “Really different with Shinsou. More open than I’ve ever seen her before.”

“Well, there’s a lot of trust between them,” Yamada says, taking a sip of tea. “They were kept in the same room for days on end, surrounded by violent gangsters on the outside. He was pretty much her parent, picking up books on child development, teaching her how to read and write and speak. She’s advanced for her age in those areas thanks to him. She kept him sane, and he protected her as much as he could.”

“He used his quirk on her,” Shouta says, neither positively nor negatively. Just logically. “I don’t think he ever wanted to, but that’s something that he did, time and time again. Traumatized children crave control, and with his quirk- ”

“That’s why it has to be you, Shou,” Yamada answers with a shrug. “You’re the only one who can redirect him if it gets to that, but I don’t think that will happen anytime soon. When vocal quirks become mute...”

He pauses, and takes another sip before he continues. He knows Shouta catches it, but he doesn’t exactly hide things from him. He just knows there are some things he doesn’t have to say.

“We’re rejecting our quirk. Out of anyone, he probably has the most reason to.”

Mirio ‘fwoosh’s into the living room, spinning around as Eri gives a quiet little “waaah.” After he realizes the atmosphere is still tense, they ‘woosh’ back away as quick as they arrived.

“I think we should do this, Shouta. *I* want to do it.” Yamada says.

If he thinks of a blonde haired middle schooler who kept crumpling up his UA application, torn between the hero he wanted to become and the villain he thought he was to have deafened his own parents, he doesn’t say it. He knows he doesn’t have to.

Shouta leans against him and sighs, relieved though he would never admit it. “You should probably rescue Eri before Mirio tires her out, if you still want to take her with you.”

“Of course I do! I want to see my cute little bean hang out with her favorite friend, Twenny!” Yamada says, a bit louder than he needed to, but two sets of running feet answer him from down the hall. “Maybe we could go on a shopping spree afterwards, if we’re feeling up to it.”

Shouta smiles, small and fleeting, and it almost makes him want to take him too, forgetting why he's insistent on doing the shopping instead of his husband.

Because he learned his lesson, and Shinsou does not deserve to have to walk out of the police station covered head to toe in pastels and cats.

*

Shouta told him what to expect, but words really couldn't do it justice.

The kid huddled in on himself in the interrogation room looks rough, but that word doesn't really begin to describe it. His skin is too pale, stretched too taut for someone so young. The scars on his cheeks and jaw are hardly the only ones he has, but the police academy sweatshirt hides the worst of them. One of those long grooved scars peeks out over his collarbone and ends right before his neck, reminding Yamada that the report couldn't quite determine what caused them. His damaged hair starts as a light purple near his scalp, but fades off in shades, with matted bunches at the back of his head not just white with dead hair, but clumps that have fused together and stick to the mess.

His eyes are the most haunting part. There's nothing in them.

As a hero, he's seen dead people walking. It's something he got used to after his first year, because if you really look, you can always find *something*. Sometimes it's shock, a veil that falls away in shades over time, and he's seen plenty of that. Other times, it's pain, it's fear, it's anger. There's always a speck of something, even if it's hidden and fleeting.

There's nothing there, until Yamada opens the door and Shinsou sees Eri.

Shinsou breathes in, and his eyes light up. Hope, relief, happiness, all in equal measure. Even the mask of his blank expression cracks open, a smile tugging at his lips as he opens his arms to give Eri a hug, and lets her climb all over him to nestle herself against his chest.

That falls away when he sees Yamada. He doesn't have the time to go completely blank, not after Eri cracked him open, but the kid is good at hiding his fear. It's still set in the wideness of his eyes, now hard with suspicion, and the firm line of his lips.

Yamada gives him a cheerful wave. He can prove he can be trusted. "Hello listener! I'm Yamada Hizashi, it's nice to finally meet you! Eri's been an excellent hype man for you, though!"

"That means I tell people how great you are," Eri says, curled up under Shinsou's chin. "I told Mirio and Izuku and everyone so when you get to come home, they know that you're really nice, and they treat you really nice too."

Yamada doesn't think Eri's ever spoken this much in his presence, except to tell him stories about her day or about the festival.

Shouta was right, she really was different. Open.

Shinsou is not. He's extremely wary, the line of his shoulders tensed. He's studying Yamada while avoiding his gaze, trying to assess his threat level. He hopes the casual gray turtleneck, his 'hipster' glasses and braided hair comes across exactly as he wanted - completely non-threatening.

"I-it might be a while before I do that, Eri," the kid croaks, his voice completely hoarse. It reminds Yamada to dig into Eri's backpack, packed with twice as many snacks as usual with a couple of Shouta's protein jellies thrown in. "S-so you need to make sure to behave for the heroes."

Shinsou really didn't believe it was happening, then, despite Naomasa telling him before they entered. Instead of evaluating Yamada's threat level, he was probably looking for a reaction to confirm whether Eri was telling the truth, but Yamada missed it. He plasters on a smile, preparing a juice box since Eri still had trouble with the straws. "Oh, it won't be long at all! In fact, we were thinking of buying a few things today so we can have everything ready when we pick you up tomorrow evening!"

Eri takes the juice box and holds it up for Shinsou, but he doesn't react. He just blinks, the corner of his mouth downturned as he thinks. He accidentally meets Yamada's eyes but glances away quickly, and takes a sip from the juice to distract from his nervous reaction. Maybe Yamada's gaze was making him feel a little scrutinized.

"It would be super helpful if you can write up a few things you'd like, since I'm pretty forgetful. Why, just yesterday I went to the store for one thing - just one thing! - and I came back with apples and hairspray and eggs, but not that the thing I wanted! I had to make another trip and take Eri with me to remind me to get lightbulbs!" Yamada rambles on, keeping his eyes on the jelly packet he's opening, but he notices the way Shinsou is glaring at the pad of paper in front of him.

There's something there that he can't quite put his finger on. Naomasa's file definitely said Shinsou was capable of writing. He had given his full and enthusiastic statement about Chisaki that way. Naomasa noted that his handwriting was pretty bad, but the police wouldn't have brought that up to the kid or shamed him for it. His hesitance didn't make sense.

Eri noticed Shinsou's pause, and pulled the pen and paper into her lap, juice placed a bit too close to the edge of the table for Yamada's newly developed paternal instincts. "Twenny needs books! You really like books, right, Twenny?"

A fond smile picks at the edges of his mouth, so quick he nearly misses it, before it fades back into the worried expression he had before. "I don't *need* books, Eri. Books can be expensive sometimes."

"That's true, books can be expensive," Yamada says, but before Eri's face can fall, he adds, "But I'm a teacher! An educator! I'd be remiss in my duties if I didn't foster education for young people that desire it! We can - no, we *must* buy you some books! For my sake, at least."

His rambling way of talking like a DJ seems to make Shinsou more relaxed, surprisingly. He's still wary, nervously glancing up at Yamada, but he takes the pen from Eri and starts writing on the paper still held in her lap.

"Twenny wants clothes too!" Eri says, reading off the paper as though she knew Yamada couldn't see what Shinsou was writing from that angle. Shinsou jolts when she says it, and Yamada nods aggressively to try and reassure him.

"Of course! Make sure to write down any favorite color or style. Eri will probably want to dress you up in everything that has a cat on it, and while that *is* super cute, it shouldn't crowd out your own style, you know?"

The corner of Shinsou's mouth pulls up again, and this time it stays for a while, a shy half-smile on his face. Yamada reminds himself to get *a lot* of cat themed clothes.

"Long sleeves?" Eri reads, frowning a bit in confusion.

"It's very cold right now, little bean! You wouldn't want to be walking around with snowflakes sticking to your arms! Brrr!" Yamada explains, hoping to distract Eri from making Shinsou

uncomfortable.

He didn't want to remind her that she didn't like wearing short sleeves herself. He made that mistake once, just once, with a cute little mint green romper. She twirled around, happy with her new clothes as she always was, but when she caught sight of the scars on her legs and arms in the mirror, she started crying. It was the fastest her mood had ever changed, and she was inconsolable even as Aizawa muttered assurances to her, walking her up and down the hall as she sobbed in his arms. She only calmed down when she had completely exhausted herself, falling asleep against his shoulder with her fists still knotted in his hair.

"What kind of books does Shinsou like to read?" Yamada asks, as Shinsou continues to write.

Eri perks up, poking her cheek thoughtfully. "He reads a lot of books about cats to me, but I know he can read really big books when I'm studying or coloring or asleep. There was one that had a bunch of words that mean the same thing, like how 'red' and 'crimson' mean the same thing."

"Crimson," Shinsou corrects, smiling softly all the same. "But that's a hard word to say. You did a good job."

"And you had a book that you didn't finish, 'cause it had a lot of different stories in it. Some of them were in English, so you had to read another big book to know what it said," Eri says, kicking her feet excitedly as she looks at Shinsou proudly.

"Really? I teach English at my school! ' *It is very difficult to learn!* ' " Yamada says, lapsing into the language. He tries to use the smallest, most commonly known words to see if Shinsou recognizes them, and the way his eyes catch his for a moment tells him he did.

Then, Shinsou's mouth opens and shuts, and his gaze turns downwards with a glare. Yamada nearly swears at himself. Shinsou seemed like a smart kid, and of course he would want to answer to prove that he could. Despite everything he told Aizawa, he ended up as the one to pressure Shinsou into talking.

"You know, if you want to keep translating that story you were working on, you can write down the title of it! I'm sure I'll be able to find a copy!"

He gets a nod as a response, and though Shinsou doesn't look up from his writing, that's quite a bit more than he was expecting. Aizawa said he wasn't acknowledged at all except for Shinsou's wary gaze, but he ended up winning a nod!

"Oh, I'm also fluent in sign language, if you've ever wanted to learn that! It's pretty useful, and a lot of fun!" Yamada says, signing the entire time.

Eri's eyes brighten, but before she can answer for him, he sees Shinsou sign-whisper ' *danger* ' in small and practiced movements.

Shouta was right. They did know JSL, Shinsou probably more fluently than Eri, but that was meant to be kept a secret. A way of communicating when someone else was in the room. A way to keep Eri from doing something that could get her hurt.

Eri stops immediately, and doesn't even pout. She just looks at the pad of paper with a tiny frown, far more obedient than a 5 year old should be.

Shinsou glances at him, and tries to make it seem casual by looking at the door right after. Yamada

keeps his wide smile, trying not to let him know that he saw.

Shinsou could keep his secrets until Yamada proved himself trustworthy.

“You know, the thing I like about sign language is getting to make up your own names for people,” Yamada says, rambling.

He’s not sure if it’s a good topic, wincing when he remembers that according to Naomasa, Shinsou had been called things like ‘Dog’ and ‘27’ for so long that he hardly responded to his own name. But, he can’t quite backtrack now that the words have flung themselves out of his mouth.

“It would get pretty tiring to spell out every letter of someone’s name, especially something like ‘Toshinori’ or ‘Tamajiki,’ so once you get to know someone, you can take a sign that kind of fits them and twist it around, usually with a few letters from their name thrown in.” Yamada idly signs ‘*lavender*’ with ‘*Sou*’ thrown in the middle, but it doesn’t quite feel right.

Shinsou notices though, eyes locked on his hands, widening a bit when he recognizes the words. He was a bit more advanced than Yamada thought.

"I haven't figured out a name for Eri though. I was thinking something like 'E' and then 'beansprout,' but what if it doesn't fit when she gets older? It's the same with 'kitten,' but something like 'white' or 'cute' isn't unique enough. It isn't *Eri* enough, you know?" The name signs still feel too awkward in his hands as he spells them, frowning to himself.

"What about this?" Eri asks, her fingers in a V-shape above her head, imitating the protagonist of an anime that Izuku had marathoned with her a few days ago.

Yamada feels tears well up in his eyes, not because it's a fragment of so many different signs that the name would be technically meaningless, but because Eri *asked him a question* .

She had *never* done that. She always danced around him nervously, asking Aizawa what Yamada was doing or why Yamada’s hair looked like that or if Yamada could teach her how to braid. He was waiting for the day, and here it was, right in front of him, in this very moment.

"That's perfect, Eri! It's so cute and fitting and just like you!" Yamada says, desperately trying not to squeal. He swears his quirk wants to act up at the worst times, but he manages to keep it under control.

It still might be a bit much, as Eri shrinks closer to Shinsou with a blush rising up to her ears, but Shinsou pets her head, hiding his own smile behind her hair.

Maybe Yamada had proven just a little bit how much he cared for Eri. That was the real key to earning Shinsou's trust. If Eri trusted them, then slowly but surely, Shinsou would as well.

Welcome to UA

Chapter Summary

27 leaves the interrogation room, placed in the care of the heroes that have been taking care of Eri while they were separated.

Trigger Warning for: Dissociation. There's also the vaguest implication of Childhood Sexual Abuse, but I want to be clear that has not/never will be something that occurs in this fic. An explanation is in the Chapter Notes below this.

Chapter Notes

Minor spoilers about this chapter, just in case you need more information about that:

Shinsou mentions others joking about him and Eri sleeping in the same bed, which is something that will come up a few times during the fic. It really wouldn't make sense for some characters to be accepting of a teenage boy and 5 year old girl who aren't related to each other sharing the same bed, and though I argued with myself over including that, I'll always put up a thorough warning beforehand.

There's a game with a teapot that is specifically left vague, and the phrase 'Eri already traded for his sake.' Those two points will be explained later down the line, but as much as I want you guys to wonder, I don't want those musings to lead to something that could be harmful to think about.

Shinsou still doesn't seem to believe it when they arrive the next day, panic swelling in his eyes as Eri pulls out a couple of outfits from the shopping bag they had brought for him to choose from. He doesn't touch a single thing, even as Eri tries to make him feel how soft the lavender turtleneck is, or how nice the sweatshirt with a cat playing in a bowl of ramen smelled.

Smell, it turned out, was a big priority for Eri, as she shyly admitted that she liked how her new clothes didn't smell bad or hurt her nose. Even if Hizashi turned a few heads, pressing his nose against every shirt or scarf before throwing it in the shopping cart, he couldn't be bothered to care. It was important.

Shinsou's eyes kept wandering to an oversized hoodie with a purple and black galaxy design behind a giant cat playing bongos with smaller cats' heads. It had been a slightly risky choice, as Hizashi wasn't sure Shinsou would be comfortable wearing something so 'out there,' but it seemed like the kid had a surprising fashion sense.

Shinsou ends up walking out of the bathroom wearing Eri's favorite, the soft turtleneck, and a pair of cool gray jeans. Shouta shoots him a quick *Take note of that* look, but Hizashi isn't sure if his concern is about deferring to Eri's choice rather than making his own, or the way Shinsou keeps picking at the collar like he wants to pull it over his face.

As soon as the bullpen comes into sight, busy as ever with police officers and heroes coming off of patrol, Shinsou's anxiety becomes palpable. His shoulders rise up to his ears, and his eyes move around at first in panic, then much more focused. His mouth becomes a firm line, scanning the room for danger in a practiced manner, and he moves from beside Eri to slightly behind her, hunching over a bit. Protecting her from the left and the rear.

Yamada digs out a dark brown leather jacket that he knew was a size too big, and offers it to Shinsou. There were bigger and softer 'comfort jackets' at home that he forgot to bring, but this was the best choice for now.

Shinsou puts it on at his insistence, but keeps himself hunched over Eri, his hands shaking more with every second they're stopped.

Luckily, Naomasa keeps his farewell brief, waving cheerfully to Eri when he wishes them a safe trip home.

Shinsou seems to shrink when he jumps into the backseat and closes his car door, but the tension leaving him all at once while he busies himself helping Eri buckle up. The drive home is filled with Eri excitedly telling him all about the remodeled dorm room, how all the rooms got bigger while they were away at school and now they had a room just for Twenny.

Shinsou doesn't speak, not that Eri gives him much opportunity to. Sometimes he'll glance out the window, but he quickly flinches back, as though he's afraid of seeing how big the world is, now that he's free from the cramped spaces he must have been living in for years on end.

Yamada hopes that's not a persistent fear. He knows that UA will feel enormous at first, but over time it should start to feel less intimidating.

They're lucky that the campus seems to be deserted when they arrive, all the students and teachers preparing for the midterm exams that will be closing in on them in a few short weeks. Even Toshinori, who is usually enjoying the cool autumn air on a bench outside, is absent, though Yamada thinks that might be due to the talk Shouta had with him in the staff room earlier that day.

Shinsou looks ready to pass out when they finally make it to the dorm room. His eyes still scan the room, but his eyelids seem to be getting heavier. Eri does her best to distract him by giving him the grand tour as Yamada and Shouta let her take control.

"This is the couch where we sit down and read books. It's really comfy because it's old!" Eri says, patting the worn-down cushions. The small couch makes the newly expanded living room feel barren, and Yamada reminds himself to be on the lookout for furniture sales in the near future. The couch should have been thrown out years ago, and the impending redecoration seems like a great excuse to do so, but Shouta insists that it's the perfect size for him to collapse on after an eventful patrol. "And that's a TV! It can show you pictures that move really fast, like it's happening in real life! Did you know that they can do that, Twenny?"

"Yeah," Shinsou says, finally speaking as he manages a tired smile. "I used to have a TV when I was little."

Shinsou seems too tired to realize it, but that was the first time he had ever talked about his life

before the 8 Precepts, according to Naomasa. It certainly wouldn't crack the case against the human traffickers who had taken him away, but it was surprising nonetheless. Promising.

Yamada brushes his hand across Shouta's shoulders, tapping him in as the supervisor while he headed to the kitchen to start making dinner. Hopefully Shinsou would be conscious enough to eat something hardier than gummy snacks and protein jellies, which was the only thing he'd eaten in four days.

He was making the first real meal Shinsou would eat after a month of being force fed.

Yamada knows he can't hold it against Naomasa. They couldn't exactly let him starve to death in police custody, but the anger shakes him deeply nonetheless. The kid should have been safe after the raid. He shouldn't have had to go through that.

The Grand Dorm Tour only stops by the kitchen for a second before Eri grabs Shinsou's hand and leads him down the hallway, her voice announcing the bathroom - *Zawa and Yama's bathroom*, Eri is much too proud saying. *Zawa and Yama's* office is announced and the door is quickly shut, since it's so boring and stuffy. Their bedroom and the laundry room is similarly introduced and promptly dismissed, because they're coming closer to the best parts.

They turn the corner of the hallway, crossing the boundary where the dorm had once split in two, and Eri is very proud to show off *her* room. Yamada really wishes he was there, to see Shinsou's reaction. He wanted to know if he approved, if he thought the nest of blankets on her bed kept her warm enough, if the *gigantic mountain* of stuffed animals that Mirio kept shamelessly adding to were cute enough. Shouta would surely tell him, but he wanted to see it so badly.

"And this is our bathroom! There are *so many* soaps for us! This one even smells like the one you got for me, and it's my favorite!"

It had taken *literally two hours* for Eri to find a soap she liked the first time they went shopping together, but once she picked up the warm sugar scented body wash, she refused to put it down. He'd even seen her run to the bathroom just to smell it from time to time, something that was a mystery until Shouta got Shinsou's file.

Shouta had stayed up all night reading it, and even snuck out to check the items still held in evidence at the station, thumbing through the ear-marked sections of a book titled Big Quirks and Little People: How to Manage Quirk-Troubled Children. The section suggesting aromatherapy had '*soap*' scribbled in the margin, written in crayon with an unsteady hand.

"And this is your room, Twenny! Zawa said you needed your own space, but it's okay if you want to share mine. I promise it's a lot better than the room we had before!"

Yamada's eyebrows raise as he listens to Eri's manipulative little words. To say she had been unhappy after Shouta told her that Shinsou would be sleeping in his own bed was an understatement. She pouted for *hours* and refused to help put the bedding together or sort away any of the little odds and ends she had so carefully selected, finally exploding into a fit when she collapsed face-down on the floor and kicked her feet in a violent flurry.

But as soon as it started, it ended, and she curled up into a little ball, shaking as she looked around, waiting for someone to be mad at her. For something awful to happen. Shouta muttered soft words of '*it's okay, Eri*' and '*we're not mad*' over and over before she risked getting up, still shaking as she apologized. After a big family hug and a nap, she was back to being his favorite little helper, but Yamada was still a little shaken by how scared she was after her first tantrum with them.

“Twenny, are you okay?”

Yamada puts the knife back down on the cutting board, arguing with himself. He knows he shouldn't go in there and crowd Shinsou if he's having a spell. He knows that Shouta can handle it.

“Twenny, is the cat scarin-”

“Sorry,” Shinsou blurts, and there's a long pause where he knows the kid is trying to hide the panic that had gotten to him. “T-the cat is really cute, Eri. I like it.”

The kid sounds absolutely shaken, but he knows Shouta won't bring it up. They need to wait until Shinsou is adjusted. They need to let him get comfortable, build up any sort of trust they can, and in the meantime, use anything that slips out to start putting together the puzzle.

Shinsou liked cats, or at least wearing things with cats on them, but the fluffy gray stuffie that Eri picked out for him touched on something painful. Did he like pictures of cats but was scared of cats themselves? Was it just gray cats? Did he once have a cat that looked similar to the stuffie?

“Yama got you a lot of books, Twenny,” Eri says, her previous enthusiasm gone, but he can tell from the way her voice is a little muffled that she's curled up against someone's shoulder. He's willing to bet it's Shinsou's. “They have white pages like mine, and they don't smell weird either. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, that's really great, Eri,” Shinsou answers, laughing under his breath. “Your books were really cheap at the store I used to go to... Mine were too, but that was because they were really old. I like having books like these.”

Even with everything he had been going through, Shinsou had made sure to steal *discounted* books. Jean Valjean, eat your heart out.

"Hizashi should be finishing up soon, but I know he'll need help picking out which plates to use," Shouta says, so quietly Yamada's hearing aids can barely make out his words.

"OH NO! There's so many colors and sizes and I don't know which ones to pick!" Yamada cries, opening and closing the cabinet doors for effect. "If only my favorite little helper were here!"

"Twenny, I've got to help Yama make dinner, but I'll be right back!" Eri promises, her footsteps thundering down the hall at a quick step.

Shouta enters after Hizashi lifts Eri onto the countertop so she can start planning who gets to eat off of what. It's a very serious business, especially now that she's picking for Twenny.

The look on Shouta's face tells him the talk with Shinsou went as expected. Shouta had assured the kid that everything in the house was available to him, and if he needed anything, anything at all, he could write a note or let Eri know, as she'd be sure to make sure he's taken care of.

That the campus housed 20 pro heroes in their very building, 160 heroes in training, and one of the most sophisticated security systems in Japan.

That he would be safe here, even if it didn't feel like it at first.

And Shinsou wasn't likely to react much to those words. Probably wouldn't believe them. But Shouta didn't have that guilty heaviness in his shoulders that he would have if Shinsou had been overwhelmed with panic from Shouta's presence and Eri's absence.

It was a good sign.

*

27 didn't know what to think about his new owner.

Eri liked him, that much was clear to see. She wasn't afraid of him at all, tugging on his shirt when she needed his attention or to ask him a question. She could look him in the eye and call him by name. She was almost as comfortable with him as she was with 27.

But 27 couldn't afford to be naive. Even if the man was a hero, all that meant to him was that he was trained in combat. That he had a powerful quirk. 27 didn't know what quirk he had, and that ignorance was dangerous. He needed to find out before it was used on him. Hopefully it would be something he could minimize the effects of, like a combat enhancer he could deflect, or something that required a trigger he could learn to avoid.

The man was hard to read. His tone, his words, even his facial expressions were muted, neutral things that left no trace of his true intentions.

27 didn't like that. He needed to figure out which angles were safe to play, how to lose at the game while he won. How to keep himself and Eri safe.

At least Yamada easier to read. He was full of tells, the way his hands would flutter into signs when he was unsure of something, or how he would wince and hesitate if he said something he didn't want to. Luckily, Yamada was close to his new owner, in the same way Hari was close to Chisaki or Memory and Bug were close to Boss.

But that also meant that 27 couldn't risk getting too comfortable with Yamada. The right hand could hit the hardest. Since he was a teacher, not a hero, his quirk may not be as powerful or useful, but Hari had never needed to use his quirk to dole out a punishment.

He didn't even know what punishments he would be given with them. Training was certain, and he'd long since learned to appreciate the variety that new and unpredictable opponents gave him. Simple beatings weren't too different, though it was more mentally challenging to figure out how to end them without making the person who dealt them angrier. He could get used to the burn of bleach again. He could lick boots and bark on command, bow and simper like it was second-nature now. Wearing a mask would honestly feel like a reward, now that he felt so naked without it.

Hunger was a constant. Sleeplessness a friend.

He could deal with anything less than Bug or being Unmade.

But maybe, if Eri was kept safe and happy, he could even learn to handle those better. He could even learn to handle something worse.

Because she was *so* happy. Her eyes glowed when she handed him the bag full of clothes, picking out the ones she liked, the ones she chose for him. And she was right, they felt nice, and they smelled good. Nicer than anything they had at the 8 Precepts compound.

But what he had at the 8 Precepts compound was better than anything he had at Miasma.

It was a power play, and it wasn't even a good one.

27 didn't need nice clothes. He didn't need books. He didn't need a bigger bed or better food on occasion. He had long since learned to live without those things, and that was one of the few skills he could thank Bug for giving him.

But if giving him those things distracted them from knowing where his real weaknesses were, the fulcrum from where they could push him do anything, that was all the better.

Even when he was proven right, that their living conditions were improved with the new owner, he wasn't prepared to see them.

Despite how massive the building was, one out of many on the giant estate, the rooms they would spend most of their time in made him unsettled. He felt too raw and yet too tired to process all of it, but he tried to keep up with Eri's excited explanations.

A TV. He hadn't seen one since he was Eri's age.

Other than Mocha, his TV had been his best friend. It showed him all kinds of things, like the documentaries that made him seem really smart at school, or hero cartoons that made him wish he had another quirk.

It distracted him from the way he had been driving his mother insane.

Now that he looks back, knowing how easy it was to slip into Eri's mind after doing it over the years, he feels sorry for his mother. He had been a stupid little kid who wouldn't listen, who didn't notice how she had started to look at him coldly, dangerously. How she locked herself in her room for days on end.

He had no idea what would happen back then. He couldn't afford to not know anymore.

He tries to keep up with Eri's tour, tries to scout out the places where his owner might have weapons. Places that could be used to punish him. The places he suspects are the exact ones that Eri dismisses, and he can't even get a glance in before she shuts the door, but something in her tone is building up to a giddiness he's never seen in her before.

She opens the door to her room, and he's glad he's too tired to cry.

It's soft.

Every space is filled with comfort and softness. Things that he could barely scrape together for her at the 8 Precepts, things that they lost every year when Chisaki had the room emptied out of all its possessions so that everything could be burned, purged for accumulating the filthy germs he hated so much. They all pale in comparison to what she has now.

He tried to keep the two scratchy blankets and white futon they had clean, burning white patches into his hands when she had an accident. Now she has a puffy pink comforter, a fluffy gray blanket and three other, smaller blankets piled on top of a western style bed. There are pillows on her bed, at least five of them, when Chisaki didn't allow them to have one. A sheer pink curtain drapes over the bed from the top, lit up by tiny white lights.

They look like stars, and he never even showed her what *stars* look like.

She has pictures hung on the wall, clearly portraits of people she liked. He could never get her plain drawing paper, only coloring books, and he had to hide the pages he kept, folded up in his

books.

She has a little pink desk with a stack of coloring books and one of the super-sized crayon packs that he could never bring himself to steal for her. There's a little tea set sat on top of it, and he knows she doesn't have to use it to play that awful game Chisaki made them do.

He was so proud - *so fucking proud* - when he found a ragged little teddy bear in a rain gutter on one of his trips outside. It was missing an eye, one of its arms was ripped off, and it was filthy and stained, but he was able to clean the worst of it off after several washes. She had watched him scrub it clean, dancing and humming the whole time, and as soon as it dried she held it so tight half the stuffing popped out. He smiled every time she fell asleep with it huddled close to her chest.

Now she has a *mountain* of stuffed animals in the corner of her room, hung in a little white net. Bears, dogs, cats, horses, unicorns - she has things that he never even taught her *existed*. All of them are new, fully intact. None of them smell like bleach or have sharp edges where the fur had become too brittle.

He looks at her, spinning around in this bedroom fit for a princess, and hardly even recognizes her. He only knew that tiny little girl, too skinny and too sad to belong in this kind of room. The kind of girl who hadn't seen sunlight in years, who only knew concrete walls and bleach and pain.

This is the kind of room Eri deserved, one he could never have given her.

Then she shows him his room. He knows he doesn't want it, still doesn't want it. Chisaki tried to give him one, but he turned it down, and bore the odd looks and the disgusting jokes from the underlings every day for it.

But then she opens the door, and the air is knocked out of him.

It's not his room.

It's the room 50 would have given him.

He can't even hear what Eri is saying over the crushing weight of everything that had been swirling inside of him since he stepped foot into this place. Everything he tried not to think about, tried not to name.

50 was supposed to live. She was supposed to work until she paid back her brother's debt, and then she would have bought him.

They would live in a quiet little place where no one bothered them. No one told them what to do. They'd make noise if they wanted, they'd eat whatever they wanted. They could sleep in warm and comfortable beds all day and Bug couldn't grab them, screaming that they were wasting Miasma's time and money.

50 would take off his mask.

She would ask him questions he could actually answer. She'd listen and he'd tell her things.

She never even knew what his voice sounded like .

She'd give him those little pastries shaped like fish every day. And they'd be fresh, and he could eat them as soon as she gave them to him. They'd be hot and crispy, and back then, he couldn't even remember what hot or crispy food *tasted* like.

She had 7 years left when she died.

That was 7 years ago.

And Mocha.

He doesn't even feel his hands shaking when he reaches out for him, he only knows they're shaking because he can see them, wading through the dream.

"You won't have to hide your little friend," 50 promised him, her big hands engulfing the battered stuffie's torso. "In fact, I'll get him a lot of friends. So many little stuffies that you could make a bed out of them!"

He never even told her Mocha's name.

There were so many things he never got to tell her.

"Twenny, is the cat scar-"

"Sorry," he blurts. The words don't feel real. *Nothing* feels real. "T-the cat is really cute, Eri. I like it."

He never told Eri about Mocha, and he told her far more than he should have.

He won't tell her, not even if it's Eri. He can't let *anyone* know. Even if he knows it's irrational, even if he knows he has so much more to worry about than a stuffed animal that had been burned to ash years ago, *been burned by his own hands*.

He won't let them know. He'll keep this. Mocha is the only thing they won't know to take from him. He can't let them take him again.

He puts the stuffed animal back down on the bed, convincing himself that he doesn't care about it. Because if he shows it, if *his owner knows*, they can take it from him. They *will* take it from him.

Eri tugs at his sleeve, and he pulls her up into his arms. He holds her close and lets her head drop on his shoulder, and for a moment, the guilt sinks so heavy into him that he feels like he'll collapse under its weight.

She was so happy to give him this room, but he let his broken mind trample all over that. Let it scare her and disappoint her at the worst time.

"Yamada got you a lot of books, Twenny," Eri mutters from his shoulder, pointing at a black bookcase at the foot of his bed. He hadn't even noticed it, hadn't taken note of anything else in the room before he saw Mocha and nearly dropped out of his own head. "They have white pages like mine, and they don't smell weird either. Is that okay?"

He laughs, and he feels ridiculous for it. His mood shifts so suddenly underneath him, but he can't help it, and just allows himself to drift in the warmth that Eri brings him. "Yeah, that's really great, Eri. Your books were really cheap at the store I used to go to... Mine were too, but that was because they were really old."

He wonders if the hero standing in the doorway behind him knows he stole those books. That he stole so many things, some that he needed, some that he didn't. Eri needed her books, she needed an escape he couldn't give her, needed to learn to read and write so she would have something to strive for, something to be proud of.

He didn't need books. He just felt like he did at the time. He couldn't stand the itching under his skin, the swarming he felt in his head when he realized he had counted how many times he counted their possessions that day.

When he saw the thesaurus, that was one thing. It was only 50 yen. And Japanese Sign Language From Beginner to Advanced served them well. But his plays, his classic literature, the English to Japanese dictionary, those things weren't needed.

But he wanted them. And he wanted to open those books on his shelf, even if just to run his fingers over the pages and see if they stained. Wanted to bend them to see if they cracked. Smell them and see if they smelled like rot and cigarettes. They didn't look like they did. "I like having books like these."

He doesn't mean to say it, but he does. He lets another thing slip out, another thing they will take from him. Or force him to pay back.

He needs to stop. He needs to get control, and keep it. The heaviness in his limbs does him no favors, even if this isn't a fight with fists, this is the most important fight he'll have with them at first.

He can't let them know what to take from him, because they will take it. And it will hurt.

When Eri is called to the kitchen, he lets her go, and schools his face against it. Against the disappointment, the ugly loneliness and the ache in his chest and the cold chill in his arms when she's not there. When he sees her running down the hall, running away from him, and she's happy about it.

When he thinks she might stop running *to* him, he has to stop himself. If he thinks like that, he'll break, and his owner is watching him now.

His owner takes a couple steps further into the room, and for a moment he thinks he'll close the door and do something terrifying, something so terrible he can't even imagine it, but he doesn't. The man just looks at him and stares.

This must be the part where his owner tells him what his job is. 27 makes himself stand up straighter, fights the urge to tuck his bad hand into his pocket because he can't draw attention to it.

It's the perfect time for this, because he knows what the man wants the moment he sees him turn his head towards the door, towards the direction Eri ran to.

His owner wants him to control Eri. And he'll tell him to do it when 27 can't even tell him he'd rather die.

27 had told himself he didn't know what his owner wanted, but *he knew*. The thought of it was just so horrible that he let himself be naive, let himself be stupid. But there was no changing the reality of his situation.

Eri had a powerful quirk. A quirk that people wanted to use. If Chisaki wanted to make bullets that destroyed quirk factors, the heroes must want that too. But until Eri could control her quirk, 27 had a purpose. He had to control her.

He hated it. He *hated* it.

At this point, he'd rather give up. He'd rather stop living, just *stop*, than ever do that again. To ever make her eyes go blank, especially now. There was so much life in her eyes now, she smiled

so much .

He *couldn't* do that again.

"This place is very different from the other places you have lived," his owner begins, and 27 hopes he's not secretly a ranter. If he had to hear about the bubonic plague one more time, he'd snap. "UA is a school for heroes in training. Most of the students are around your age. They live in the other dorms you saw on the way to this one while school is in session. You will see a handful of those students often because, as Eri has implied, they spend a lot of time with her."

Heroes his own age. A handful he'd see often. Those students would probably be the opponents he'd see the most often during training. At first, he thinks having someone so much younger than his usual fare might be too kind, but as heroes, they must have powerful quirks. They would be challenging, but 27 found himself looking forward to it.

"There are also no less than 20 pro heroes on the premises at all times, and they all live in this building. Each one has fought every type of quirk or villain imaginable, and made a name for themselves in their specialties."

20. 20 skilled fighters with strong quirks to back them up. 20 sets of eyes watching him at all times, waiting for him to slip up, to even *look* like he's doing something he shouldn't.

"UA also boasts one of the most advanced security systems in Japan, developed and constantly improved by the Support department and Principal Nezu. If a person who is not registered in the system is detected, the school will go on lock down, and both the hero staff and Nezu's army of robots will be deployed."

27 has never fought robots before. He hopes he's in the system. He's pretty sure robots don't answer questions.

"I understand that this will be difficult to believe, but you will be safe here. The people from your previous organization may be skilled and well connected, but they can't touch you here."

27 knows it's the wrong thing to do, knows it's the stupidest thing he could do right now, but he looks at his owner. He looks him in the eye.

There's something in his expression, something he can't name. There's a hardness there, in the firm line of his mouth and the subtle clench of his jaw, but there's also something in his eyes, something that makes 27 disregard all the clear signs his owner is angry, and makes him think he's something else.

He doesn't know what it means, and that should scare him more than it does.

"Naomasa will be continuing his investigation into the organization pursuing you, and I have no doubt he will find them." 27 knows better than to believe that, better than to think The Miasma would ever fail to find him. "You may see him from time to time, but you won't be transferred into his custody again."

27 doubts that. The police wanted information he couldn't give, and they were determined to get it. If he wasn't so well trained against their tactics, they would probably have it by now.

His owner's lips twitch, possibly a tell. Something he wants to say but thinks better of, keeping it hidden. "If you ever need anything, you can write us a note, or tell Eri. It's plain to see she's eager to make sure you're taken care of."

He couldn't do that. It would be stupid enough to let them know things he wants, things he cares for, but if Eri gets involved, she would get hurt. They could make her trade things just like he had to with Chisaki. A fight for a meal. A meal for a trip.

She already traded for his sake. Let them take something from her, something he wouldn't have allowed her to. When he got sick, she had to-

"Shinsou."

He looks up and his owner has moved closer, his hand falling to his side and half-clenching before it's forced to relax. 27 wonders why the man is so full of tells now, what they all mean.

He feels his own hand fall to his side and swallows his panic. *Away.*

He signed it, purely out of habit. Maybe his owner didn't notice, but Yamada would. Yamada would ask, but he wouldn't have to. Even if it was a unique sign, one not quite like the official one, it was recognizable. Yamada knew unique signs, had told him that he knew.

He had to stop that. Had to stop falling out of his head. They took things when he was away, and he couldn't let them. Couldn't let them take Eri.

"Dinner will be ready soon. You can wait here and get more familiar with the room if you would like, or check on Eri. But it's important that you eat something."

His owner leaves, leaves the door open to see if 27 will follow. A test.

It's one he knows he passes. Even if he wants nothing more than to see Eri's face, to know that she's fine since the scant few minutes he saw her last, he counts his new possessions instead.

A gray bed. A side table. A dresser and closet half full of clothes.

They could take these things.

A desk. Three pencils and two pens. Two blank notebooks. A chair. A lamp. A row of five ceramic cats waving to him with their open paws.

They could take all of these things.

A string of lights on the wall. A bookshelf. 23 books. Their white pages bend.

He wouldn't let them take Eri. Not a single piece of her happiness.

It made the game harder, but he couldn't afford to lose.

Stay At Home Mom

Chapter Summary

27 isn't entirely at ease with his new environment, finding it difficult to know what to expect. Yamada has a project for him, and he doesn't know what to expect of it either.

Trigger Warnings: Dissociation, Body Horror, a vague insinuation of CSA.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He's never eaten food like that before.

There was so much of it. So many flavors and textures and smells. His gut clenched at the sight, and at first, he didn't think he'd be able to eat a single bite, wasn't sure if it was safe to.

But then Eri handed him a ball of rice, molded and decorated to look like a sleepy cat, and told him she made it just for him.

He eats it. He eats everything she puts on his plate, and he finds he can feed himself with his left hand pretty well, even if it takes longer.

By the time he's eaten half of his serving, he feels the exhaustion he felt before double. He can barely keep his eyes open, can't hope to follow the conversations his owner, Yamada, and Eri are having. He starts to worry that he's been drugged before he realizes the only thing that they didn't share that they could have tampered with was the little onigiri Eri had made him.

He couldn't even begin to doubt Eri, doubt anything she gave to him. It was irrational, because he had made it clear she was his weakness already in a way he could never take back, but he just refused to believe it.

Yamada is lying when he says he's tired after such a great meal and long day, but he appreciates it. 27 is able to drag himself to the room he was assigned, even if Eri has to be distracted with promises from his owner to read her favorite stories to keep from crying when she realizes he's not going to her room. He'd have to explain it to her later, tell her how they might have softer beds but they had more eyes watching them. They had to obey, that was the only angle they could play right now.

He doesn't plan on falling asleep, knowing that he needs to take inventory of the situation. Weapons and punishments and any little piece of information he could glean would be ripe for the picking at night, while his owner and Yamada slept, not yet as watchful and disciplined as they would be later.

He doesn't even remember laying down on the bed, knows he didn't mean to sleep because he wakes up in the same clothes he had been wearing when he was taken from the police station, on top of the blankets instead of under them.

Eri is curled up next to him, dressed in soft pink pajamas with Mocha held tight in her embrace. She's so deeply asleep that a little drool drips from the corner of her mouth, onto the leather jacket he was still wearing.

He can't help the smile that pulls at his lips at the sight, even though he knows he'll have to scold her for disobeying the heroes. She squirms, turning over onto her stomach, and the change in pressure brings his attention to the static feeling in his arm, as the limb had fallen asleep.

He lifts his hand to run his fingers through the knots in her hair, wondering if one of the many soaps she boasted about were one of those liquid shampoos that came in bottles that were too hard to hide. He freezes when he realizes there is someone peering in from the open door.

Yamada straightens up immediately, tucking his phone away into his jeans. "Good morning little listeners! Looks like a little cuddle bug invaded your room last night!"

27 jolts up, disturbing Eri, who whines grumpily. He knows what Yamada is implying, knows he was going to take a picture to show his owner. Even if the mere thought of it makes him want to vomit, he knows he's always been too close to Eri for anyone to take it differently.

Eri lifts her head for a moment, but when she sees who is at the door, she sighs in bold frustration. "Yama, it's too early," Eri whines petulantly. "Zawa said Twenny needs to sleep."

"Mhm, and he also said you should sleep in your own bed so he could do that," Yamada answered, kneeling beside the bed to tickle Eri's sides, turning her grumpy pouting into a fit of giggles.

She slaps his hands away, and 27 freezes in panic. She's acting far too bold, he's taught her better. He's never thought he'd have to teach her not to do that, to *attack* one of their keepers.

"Ugh! My little bean is so grumpy today, and I was hoping *someone* could help me with a really important job!" Yamada says, grinning widely even as he pulls back to sit on the floor. He doesn't look like he'll retaliate this time, but 27 puts his hand on Eri's back, ready to pull her out of the way if he does.

Eri pops up, shaking her hair out of her face. "Grading papers?" She asks excitedly.

"Nope! A job for you to help Twenny! If you're up for a little project today, of course," Yamada asks, but the way he says it doesn't sound like a question.

27 nods, quick and professional though he has no idea what this job could be.

He hopes it's not quirking Eri. He knows that's coming, knows that they probably want a demonstration before they trust he can do it, but seeing her so warm and peaceful this morning makes the thought even more unpleasant.

"Great! Why don't I grab a shirt you can change into, and after breakfast- well, lunch, really - but after you eat, we can get started!" Yamada says, pulling himself off the floor with a clap before he leaves. 27 has barely pulled his jacket off, nose wrinkling at the feeling of his sweat soaked sweater, when Yamada runs back in with a gray bundle in his hands, while his pocket screams with an obnoxious ringtone.

"Ah, I've got to take this. Think you can take care of Twenny, little bean?" Yamada asks, and grins

at Eri's serious salute. "Here, it's got a few product stains already, but it's so comfy. Hey Jeanist!"

27 takes the shirt, waiting until Yamada leaves the room to place it on the bed so he can change. He doesn't want to risk offending Yamada by treating his uniform with any kind of disregard.

"No, you can't come over, I'm serious! I know, I know *exactly* what you're feeling, but I just wanted to ask... No, that's not an option right now, seriously, it has to be just toner. Even if it has streaks, it's fine! No- lifting product!"

Yamada blurts out the last two words in frustration, like he wanted to say something else.

"Later, *maybe*. I can't really tell you anything right now.... Yes, it's.... I know! That's why I texted you! Apogee Super Apology, 40 developer, Wella permanent- well, that's why I... Okay, cut it in half.... Really?! I thought that was just good sponsorship! Of course! Thank you Jeanist!"

27 realizes that he hasn't changed yet, and throws the sweater off of him with quick and panicked tugs. He doesn't even look at the uniform he was given, doesn't notice the short sleeves until he feels the cold air hit his arms.

Eri pokes at his Bug scars, tracing them idly with her little finger. Despite not wanting to spook her, he claps his hand over the black band on his arm when Yamada runs in.

He sees the man freeze then wince, but it lasts only a second before he's back to his usual excitement. "Let's get some breakfast, kiddos! I know my brain definitely needs a wake up call!"

The noodles are cold, but they might be meant to be served that way. There are far fewer dishes than last night, but still more variety than he or Eri ever received at the 8 Precepts.

Eri kicks her feet under the table, nibbling happily. She watches him pick at his food so proudly, and he thinks this habit of serving him food might be a good ritual for her. She hasn't pointed out that 27 is eating with his left hand, hopefully she's never noticed which hand is his dominant one. "Yama, why did Zawa go to school today?"

"Because his kiddos would get into too much trouble if he didn't," Yamada answers, staring at a machine as it drips liquid into a cup and gives off a really nice smell. "Luckily, he agreed to glare at them during my classes, so hopefully they'll actually do the worksheets I assigned. If Toshinori covered me..."

The man shivers, and 27 takes note of the name. This Toshinori must be a terrifying individual to earn such a reaction from even an ally. Perhaps he was similar to Nemoto. Incredibly useful, but with a truly awful personality to match.

"But I get to play hooky and spend time with my favorite kiddos for a while!" Yamada says, grinning at them.

27 puts down his chopsticks, his stomach clenched tight with worry.

The job must be something awful if Yamada is so eager to get to it. If only 27 recognized the words he had used on the phone, he'd know what to expect. Some of them sounded benign, like 'Apogee Super Apology,' but then again, maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was a kind of healing cream, something to use if 27 got too injured during this job to do the next one.

Yamada sips from his mug, now filled with whatever the machine had made. 27 knows he glances away when 27 looks, but Yamada had been staring intently at him all morning.

Eri ignores the danger of the situation, humming around a steamed bun.

"Oh, sorry, I should have..." Yamada mumbles, panicked as he scratches behind his ear. "I wanted to give you a haircut today, that's all! The way I said- or, actually, I didn't say anything, wow, that came across way scarier than I wanted it to!"

27 pulls at the strands close to his ear, though they don't come loose. All of his hair was pulled tight into the matted mess at the back of his head, and every inch that grew just made the matts bigger. He had thought of using the knife a few times in training to hack away the worst of it, but he knew that doing so would just inspire Hari to mess it up even more.

A haircut would be really nice.

It must have shown on his face, because Yamada smiles at him differently, in a kind of soft way 27 hadn't seen before.

"I know hair is really important for me, myself," Yamada says, twirling the ends of his loose braid. "I don't really feel right unless it's fixed up right, you know?"

"Yup," Eri agrees, pushing away from the table. "Cause you have a braid when you're Yama, and it's all swoopy when you're Mic! You can't be a swoopy Yama or a braidy Mic."

Yamada laughs. "You're right, little bean! A braidy Mic just wouldn't be loud enough! Shouta says the same thing when I take too long getting ready. I'm sure he's even told you so."

Eri nods, and 27 wonders what 'Mic' means. Wonders if Yamada was given a name that became more than a title. If 'Mic' called up something different inside the man, the way 'Dog' made 27 cower, or 'Twenny' filled him with a comforting warmth.

If 'Mic' was someone he should fear, in the same way Hari called Chisaki 'Overhaul' during quirk training.

"Twenny, can I braid your hair after Yama fixes it?" Eri asks, pulling at a matt so full of dead hair he doesn't feel the tug.

"It feels pretty gross right?" 27 asks, then freezes.

He feels the string pull tight anyway, and the effort to drop it causes a headache to bloom behind his eyes. But Eri doesn't notice, doesn't have time to go still and blank. He breathes a sigh of relief as she tugs at another knot.

Yamada didn't notice either, busy putting away their dishes. "Well, let's get to fixing that! Eri and I will have you feeling like a new person after we're done!"

"Yeah!" Eri cheers, eager to get started.

They crowd into Yamada and his owner's shared bathroom, 27 sitting on the rug while Yamada pulls out his tools and Eri seems to just get in the way, too excited to stand still. 27 reasons that pulling her into his lap is more for Yamada's sake than his own increasing nerves.

He tries to prepare himself when Yamada steps around him, clicking the scissors a few times as he does. He tells himself what Yamada will do. He'll take a piece of his hair and cut it off. The bathtub isn't full. The room doesn't smell like bleach. It will be okay.

But when he feels Yamada's hand brush against one of the matts, the fog sets in.

It's not the usual fog, he never quite slips out into a space where he doesn't really exist. He just feels small and out of place, disconnected from what is happening around him as memories pervade his mind.

Hari pulling his hair. Dunking him under. Burning. His face burning. The smell. The smell burning him from the inside he's not pulling him up he can't breathe he's going to die can't breathe-

Eri's arms are wrapped tight around his neck, her still uncombed hair in his face. *Strawberries* . Her hair smells like strawberries.

He comes back in pieces, with every breath he takes. Yamada is off to the side, clicking his scissors nervously, and *he noticed* . 27 doesn't remember if he signed, but he noticed the slip.

"Shinsou, do you...." Yamada shuffles awkwardly, sitting behind him but as close to 27's field of vision as he can with the counter in the way. "Can you nod for me if you want Eri to cut your hair? And shake if you'd rather stop? Either way is okay, it's completely up to you!"

He knows it's not okay, with how Yamada's fingers keep twitching around the scissors when he glances at 27's hair. It's a test, but it's easy enough to pass with Yamada's tells. He nods.

Eri gets up and leaves him, leaves him colder, but when she grabs a clump of hair and makes the first clumsy cut-

He's fine.

As it goes on, Yamada pointing where to put the scissors and Eri snipping away, his head begins to feel lighter in a different way.

His shoulders relax, her little hand resting on them at times as she moves around behind him. It takes longer, probably far longer than it would with Yamada, but he doesn't care. He doesn't even realize that Yamada is the one holding the clippers until after he finishes buzzing off a long stripe at his nape, before going back to directing Eri to trim up the ends.

It feels oddly nice.

Yamada hands Eri a comb while he begins mixing up the purple color, and even though his hair still scrapes against the plastic teeth loudly, he relaxes even further.

Maybe there's enough of it left for Eri to braid.

"Okay!" Yamada says, shaking a little bottle between his thumb and forefinger. "Now you can take a shower, get all those little stragglers washed away, then use this as shampoo. It should put the color back into the most damaged parts, and hopefully come out evenly. Don't let it get in your eyes, though!"

Yamada tells him which way to twist the knob for hot and cold water, and points out a few bottles of soap he could use, which 27 appreciates. He wouldn't have been able to risk using them otherwise, and he has no idea where they store the bleach. After he starts the water, Yamada picks Eri up, promising to brush out her hair and put it in a pretty braid.

27 tests how hot the water can get, and the answer is *beyond* scalding, then adjusts it to just below that. He strips and washes, trying to ignore how coarse and uncomfortable his hair is at the brittle ends, or how much of it gathers in the drain.

He picks up each of the soaps he was offered, unsure which one he was really supposed to use,

until he found one labeled 'Sugar Beach Surge.' It's incredibly close to the one he would steal for Eri, but with a more muted, somewhat muskier note in it. He lathers it thickly, watches his scars hide away under the foam before he washes it away, wondering what he would look like if the scars washed away as well.

When he steps out of the shower, he has to force himself to towel off before he looks in the mirror. He's all at once eager and afraid of what he'll see, and his hands move quickly when he realizes Yamada must already know he's done showering.

He looks before he puts the shirt back on, and that becomes his undoing.

Not because he looks *human* . When he looks at his hair, he's surprised how much it changed his appearance. He thinks it's how he used to have it when he was at Miasma, maybe even before that. Even if it still doesn't feel right, it *looks* right, with no white clumps or off-color streaks to be found.

Then he looks at his arm, lifted up as he flips his wet hair around, in awe of the solid hue, and his gaze is caught by a flash of color above and behind his elbow.

A blue oni's grinning face stares back at him, with patches of black ink and tiny maple leaves scattered around it.

Nemoto.

That was Nemoto's tattoo.

Not his .

He didn't know what happened in the nothingness, when his voice wasn't his voice and his quirk wasn't his quirk, but there was someone else there, *Nemoto* was in there, and he didn't come out right. He lost some things, walked away with some parts that weren't his.

Nemoto had part of his arm or

Chisaki had part of his arm .

All three of them muddled up, lines between their bodies so messed up and blurred. What parts of him weren't his, what parts were stolen from him.

Not my voice not my words not my quirk stop using my-

"Twenny!" Eri sing-songs, knocking at the door. "I wanna see it!"

"Just a minute," 27 says, numb enough that his words come out even though his core is shaking.

He couldn't let Eri know. She saved him. If he came out muddled in the end, she couldn't know that. He knew he could fix it, already a plan forming in his head. He couldn't trample on her happiness again, not with something so awful, something he could fix himself.

He pulled the shirt on, and looks in the mirror, forcing the wideness from his eyes and the clench of his jaw to relax.

He opens the door, and Eri's mouth drops in shock. "It's so pretty, Twenny! You look pretty!"

He finds himself laughing a little despite himself, rubbing the nape of his neck where it's buzzed short and soft. "Yeah, you made me look really pretty, Eri. Now I don't look like such a mess."

"The color came out great!" Yamada says, eyes wide with surprise. His hand twitches upwards but he jerks it back to his side quickly. "Now all that's left is the hair mask. It'll take a while to set in, so I was thinking we could watch a movie while we wait."

"Movie! Movie! Movie!" Eri cheers, her wispy braid bouncing with every jump she takes, more energized than 27 had ever seen her. "Twenny's never even *seen* a movie, Yama! We have to pick a really good one!"

He sees Yamada open his mouth, probably to correct her, but 27 decides to lie a little. "You're right, I've never seen a movie. They must be fun to watch, though. I'm excited."

Yamada stares at him, and for a moment 27 realizes he made a mistake. He feels how wide he had been smiling, how loose his posture had become. How relaxed he had let himself be.

Before he can correct himself, stiffen into something professional, Yamada turns to Eri, fists curled in front of him as they pump in determination. "Eri, we have to pick THE BEST movie! Come on! This is the most important decision we'll make all day! All week! In our LIVES!"

The pair run off towards the living room, and if Yamada wasn't so tall, it would be hard to know which one was actually a child with how they were acting.

27 follows slowly, frowning to himself as he tries to get the ringing in his ears to go away.

Voice amplification quirk. That was odd.

Present Mic had that quirk too.

*

Aizawa was dead tired by the time he was able to leave work. Covering Hizashi's classes cut deeply into his designated nap times, and several members of class 1-A seemed to be under the impression that Present Mic's absence would excuse them from the class entirely. Kaminari's panic in particular when he hunted them down made the effort almost worthwhile.

Yamada warned him to be quiet when he returned with a picture of Eri tucking a unicorn under Shinsou's arm while he slept, curled up in a corner of the couch with his hair covered in white gel. He saved the picture to the Eri folder without thinking too much about it, then scrolled through the other updates he had been sent throughout the day.

Hizashi sent him a selfie where the man was huddled up in their bed, blonde hair spread messily over the pillow with a caption - 'So nice to sleep in :).' Another selfie after Hizashi had gotten dressed, wearing a soft gray henley with his hair braided to the side, his fingers in a peace sign - 'Stay at home mom look :p .' A blurry picture of Eri opening the door to Shinsou's room, dragging her Hello Kitty blanket behind her - 'She didn't even check on me! Too busy BEING NAUGHTY.' A picture of Shinsou, still wearing the clothes from yesterday, and Eri curled up on the same bed, Eri's head resting on Shinsou's arm. Shinsou's face, relaxed in sleep, makes him look younger, and the scars even more painful to look at. 'Shinsou caught me and got a liiiiittle panicked, but nbd! Eating lunch now! DON'T JUST EAT JELLIES SHOU.'

Another text pops up while he's walking, and he stops to wait for the picture to load.

Shinsou is smiling nervously, his purple hair, now shorter and healthier, fluffed up in every direction. His toothy not-quite-grin matches Eri's heartfelt attempt at one. They both hold up peace signs, with cat ears and whiskers drawn on both of their faces. 'Had a nightmare I think, but Eri wanted to show him the cat filter! He likes it!'

Aizawa stops and smiles before he catches himself, a moment too late. "Ah! Sensei got an Eri picture! I wanna see! I wanna see!"

He looks up to see UA's Big Three walking towards him, Nejire barely restrained by Togata's hand on her shoulder, though he knows Togata will ask to see it too, just more politely. Even Amajiki's eyes are widened with interest, peering over from behind Togata's shoulder.

Aizawa sighs, unsure whether he should swipe to an older picture or tell them about Shinsou now. "You've only gone one day without seeing her. I'm beginning to worry that she's become a distraction for the students of UA." Or an addiction, if their stricken faces are any indication.

"Too long!" Nejire pouts, crossing her arms petulantly.

"We're just worried, Sensei!" Togata says, rubbing the top of Nejire's head in calming circles. "Did she come down with a cold?"

"No," Aizawa answers, then turns to face them. "This information is only known to the staff for now, but as nearly-fledged heroes entrusted with her care, I will trust you to act appropriately with it." He turns his phone to the Big Three, knowing full well the emotional whiplash they will have upon seeing the picture.

Nejire cracks first. "Cute! Who is he? Is he Eri's brother? They look so similar! Why does he have sc-"

Togata places a hand over her mouth, his smile unwavering. "That must be the famous Twenny! I'm glad he's doing better, but I can't help but ask what his situation is now."

Still sharp as ever. "He is under Present Mic's care, in a traditional wardship designation," Aizawa answers.

"Despite the fact that Eri is your ward," Togata states, while Nejire vibrates in his grasp.

"He has information that could be critical in another investigation," Aizawa states, knowing that out of anyone, he could trust Togata to understand. "Due to... a number of factors, he will be living with Eri for the foreseeable future. The arrangement is beneficial for both of them."

"An emotional support toddler," Amajiki mutters, before he notices Aizawa's stare and presses his head against Togata's back. "What I mean to say is-"

"That is the situation," Aizawa interjects, musing to himself how accurate the term was. "Eri acts more confidently in his presence, and Shinsou is reassured by hers."

" 'Shinsou,' huh," Togata wonders aloud.

"Shinsou Hitoshi," Aizawa replies. " 'Twenny' is short for '27.' It was a name he was called before he came to the 8 Precepts."

Togata's smile falters into a grimace, and Aizawa wonders if he said too much. But Togata's chin lifts, as does his mood, as he asks, "Can I meet him tomorrow? I can watch them so Mic-sensei doesn't have to miss another day."

"You have class," Aizawa states, eyes narrowing.

"Quirk training," Togata says with a laugh. "Ecto-sensei already gave me permission, as long as it's alright with you. If I can't improve that area, I should work on others, like providing comfort for

victims of trauma!"

Aizawa knows that's not why Ectoplasm signed off on it, but he sighs and agrees anyway.

"Toshinori will also be there."

"A team up with All Might! How lucky!" Togata exclaims, removing his hand from Nejire's mouth to clap his hands together in excitement.

The other members of the Big Three notice, eyes lowering.

Those were bitter words hidden under all that cheer.

Aizawa trusts them to handle it, departing with a wave as he continued his walk home.

*

"Twenny! That's not the way it goes! You have to do this!" Eri wipes her arm against her brow, miming a sigh of relief.

"Sorry, this part is different than the one I learned," 27 apologizes, fully aware of how ridiculous he looks, dancing to a children's song.

He's also aware that Yamada is filming it on his phone, but if he thinks 27 can be manipulated by blackmail as tame as this, he has greatly underestimated 27.

Eri peers up at him, eyes wide in wonder and 'Baby Shark' forgotten. "Is it the one where you die and go to hell?"

27 startles, shocked to hear those words said in such an innocent voice, while Yamada cackles behind him. "Eri, who taught you that word?"

"Kirish- well, Bakugo taught me that word, but not really, he just says a lot of words I can't," Eri explains, then returns to her previous excitement. "But Kirishima knows the bad version too! Were you friends when you were little?"

"No," 27 answers. "A lot of kids learned that song, probably in every school."

"But what if you were!" Eri exclaims, still mesmerized by the idea. "What if you were friends in school but you don't remember, but he remembers you, like in the movie? And you become friends again?"

"I didn't have friends at school," 27 shrugs, then tugs at the skin below his eyes. "I looked pretty creepy with these bags under my eyes, and... a lot of people didn't like my quirk."

27 thought he had forgotten all of that, but vague memories came back clearly when he watched the movie. He remembered eating his lunch alone, watching other children play games. Being included just to play the bad guy, then abandoned as soon as the game became less fun. When he proved to be too good at it.

"They used to tease me, because it was a 'villain's' quirk. I'm pretty sure there was even a villain in a cartoon who had the same quirk as me. And... I couldn't really control it back then, so that made it worse."

It made a lot of things worse.

It made his entire life worse.

"But," Eri says, curling her toes against the carpet nervously. "I can't control my quirk, and it's a cursed quirk, so it's worse than yours. But I have friends!"

27 smiles at her, putting a hand on her head so his thumb rubs little circles around her horn, the same way he used to when she had trouble falling asleep. "Your quirk isn't cursed, Eri. Chisaki was wrong, and you proved it when you saved me. You have a heroic quirk."

She looks up at him, peering at him cautiously.

"And you're *way* cuter than I was as a kid."

"Am not!" Eri protests, but the quirk of her lips tells him what game this is.

"Are too!"

"Are not!"

"Snot stew," he completes, as she giggles, throwing her arms around his legs.

He jumps when he hears the click of the doorlock, staring as his owner enters. Eri parts from him, running towards the man as she yells, "ZAWA!"

His owner kneels on the ground, his arms wrapping around her as she hugs him briefly, pulling away to babble excitedly.

"Zawa, we fixed Twenny's hair! I got to cut it, but Yama helped me! Twenny looks really pretty now, and his hair is really soft!" His owner glances up at him, and 27 straightens, hoping the embarrassment doesn't show on his face. "Then we watched a movie, and it's the first movie Twenny's ever seen, so we had to pick a good one! But Twenny fell asleep, and he missed the part where they find out the cat is a ghost, but then we played with Yama's phone and danced the Baby Shark dance! Can Kirishima be Twenny's friend?"

His owner puts his hand on Eri's head, ruffling her hair. It might be a way to distract her from his slight avoidance of the question. "It sounds like you had a busy day. As for Kirishima, Shinsou would certainly be a good influence for him. Kaminari got him into trouble today."

"No! It wasn't my class, was it?!" Yamada asks, still sitting on the couch with his phone in hand.

"I believe Kaminari's argument was, 'If Present Mic isn't here in 15 minutes, we're legally obligated to leave.' Very convincing. Perhaps I should expel him so he can focus on his career as a lawyer," his owner says.

Yamada laughs. "That's one of their memes, you know! I know you hate them, but the translation project I assigned last semester improved everyone's grades too much to argue!"

"Kaminari can be your friend too, Twenny!" Eri says, turning to him. "He's really funny, and kinda goofy, which makes Zawa mad sometimes, but I think he's really nice!"

27 nods, not quite sure how to answer her. He's not quite sure what his owner would want him to say.

"Can Twenny go to school with us tomorrow? He needs to make friends! He didn't have any friends when he was little, so he needs a lot of friends now!" Eri demands, jumping up to prove her point.

She really shouldn't be acting like that, but something has emboldened her today. Something dangerous. His owner's eyebrows raise, and 27 panics, thinking Eri has finally gone too far, but the man just keeps petting her head. "School can be a little overwhelming, Eri. Especially with all the friends you want Shinsou to make. It would be better to start off smaller, like spending the day with Toshinori and Togata-

"Mirio!" Eri yells, as though she had forgotten about him, running into 27's legs to tug on his pants. "Twenny, Mirio is going to be your BEST friend! He's my best friend too! He gets me toys all the time, and he plays all sorts of games and-and-

"Eri," 27 says, putting his hands on her shoulders. She was too worked up over something, acting far too bizarre.

"And you can help me fix him!" Eri says, her fists tightening even further. "He got hurt and lost his quirk when he saved me, and I'm supposed to save him, but I can't! I don't know how to use my quirk, but you do!"

"Eri," 27 tries to stop her, signing ' *Danger* ', because even if they see, even if they know, they couldn't know this. *This* was dangerous.

She ignores him. "You did it before, Twenny! You made me go away but you could use my quirk while I was gone, just like he wanted you to, and you could-

"Eri!" He yells. He doesn't mean to, he just wanted her to stop, to stop telling them what he knew they wanted to know. What was *dangerous* for them to know.

His heart lurches when he looks down.

Her eyes are blank.

Blank and white.

He feels their stare anyway. He feels all of them staring at him, he knows that *they know*.

It's stupid, it's the stupidest thing he could do, but he's too panicked to think, his blood rushing in his ears and his stomach clenched so tight he feels sick.

He drops the control and *runs* , shuts the door and sits in front of it, knowing they'll come, knowing they'll come for him because *they know*.

The only thing keeping him from floating into the fog is the sound of Eri's crying.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus chapter because my week was just a super long Monday, another one is still coming this weekend.

So, Eri's Rewind isn't exactly perfect in this fic, especially considering how absolutely insane Chisaki's quirk is to be able to merge living human beings into his own body. Shinsou was basically human soup, and Eri didn't quite fish out all the parts that were his.

Oh, and don't worry, all of you who are fans of Shinsou being extremely paranoid and distrustful. Despite what Baby Shark is trying to tell you, this is just a honeymoon phase.

Family Night

Chapter Summary

27 faces the consequences of his previous panic, though it only confuses him further. Later that night, he puts his plans into motion.

Trigger Warnings: Dissociation, Suicidal Threat, Panic Attacks, and Intent to Self-Harm (more on that in the notes)

Chapter Notes

Minor Spoilers for the chapter, which may be necessary if self-harm or suicidal threats can be a trigger for you.

Suicidal Threat: Shinsou threatens to bite his tongue off if he's forced to use his quirk on Eri.

Self Harm: Shinsou intends to use a knife to burn part of his skin, but this act doesn't happen. The conversation that follows may be distressing to read for those who have had a parent or guardian catch you during the act of self-harm.

"It *had* been a really good day," Yamada says, offering a cup of tea to his husband.

The exhausted eye roll told him this had just been par for the course.

"He didn't ask her a question," Yamada pries, and hopes Eri, as upset as she had been, had offered some insight while Shouta calmed her down.

"He stopped requiring it last year, for her at least," Shouta answers, turning the cup in his hands. "He had used his quirk on her so much by that point.... It must be a side effect of repeated use, but that's far better than the usual one."

Yamada frowns, unsettled by the reminder. Most people affected by the overuse of mental quirks simply went insane.

"He still asked her," Shouta says, glaring at his tea while his shoulders stiffened. "Every time he had to take control of her, he asked her a question. He only slipped up once, and even she noticed how much it distressed him."

"If *that* was any indication," Yamada says, head tilting towards the living room. "It would be pretty hard not to. Even for a child."

"He can use her quirk," Shouta mutters, frown deepening. "This situation has become a lot more dangerous."

He knows Shouta is just stating the facts, taking inventory of everything that had changed in those scant few minutes, but he bristles at his words. It wasn't logical to dismiss everything that had come to light, but Shouta had only seen the worst parts of the day.

The kid had *relaxed*. He had smiled, widely and without fear behind his eyes. He played games with Eri, and even as ridiculous as he looked, a teenager being bossed around by a toddler less than half his size, he had been *happy*.

"He might do it, if he's pushed enough. But anyone would react against their nature if they're pushed enough." Yamada looks towards the hallway, the direction they really should be heading to so they could take better stock of the situation. "He clearly didn't want to."

Shouta nods, taking a sip of tea. "I think it would be better if it was just you, but considering..."

Yamada raises an eyebrow, earning an exasperated sigh.

"Zashi, the kid is *terrified* of me. You saw the way he reacted when I came home. That's not just a startle response. Considering the way he has lived, what he expects..." Shouta glares at his tea cup, but they both know the people he was really angry at. "He thinks I'm the new *Chisaki*."

"Shou," Yamada says softly, draping an arm over his husband's shoulders. "Eri thought the same thing too. It took *over a week* for her to trust you, and even then, it was probably because you were taking 'Twenny's' place in her life."

Shouta's shoulders relax, and he leans closer to Yamada.

"It will be really hard, Shou. I don't think Shinsou remembers what a caretaker acts like, if he ever had one. He might have only known Chisaki's, but..." Yamada stops, running his fingers through the ends of Shouta's hair. "He *will* recognize that you're different. It just takes time to prove it."

Shouta doesn't answer, but the tilt of his head means he's considering his words. Trying to make a plan of action, how to move forward with their theory in mind.

"So, what does that make me?" Yamada asks, finger pressed under his chin. "Sometimes he startles, but he's also way more relaxed than I really expected."

"Obviously, you're my lackey," Shouta says, with a cheeky grin. "Or maybe you pull off the 'Stay at Home Mom' look better than you think."

Yamada sputters. "Shou! I thought we went over this! If I were a villain, I'd be independant like Gentle and La Brava, but with better editing and way more followers."

"I'd follow you," Shouta mutters, tucking his head under Yamada's chin. "But to hunt you down, and bring you to justice."

"You're such a stickler for police procedure," Yamada says, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I mean, you'd have to frisk me. Really thoroughly. Never know what I could be hidi-"

The sound of a door opening makes them freeze, listening for the sound of Eri's quiet snuffles.

Instead, the door shuts, almost soundlessly.

They wait a minute, listening for footsteps, but there's only silence.

"It sounded like Shinsou's room," Shouta whispers, pulling away from their embrace.

They walk down the hall to investigate, as quietly as they could so as not to startle either of their wards. The hallway was empty except for a piece of paper, folded neatly in front of Shinsou's door.

Shouta picks it up, eyes scanning over the message. His fingers crumple the edges when he finishes, before he shows it to Yamada.

'If you want me to control her, you might as well kill me. I will bite my tongue off first.'

It was written with a steadier hand than the note Yamada had received before the shopping trip, possibly because Shinsou had a great deal more time to write it.

'*Sign to talk?*' Shouta asks after tucking the note into his pocket.

'*Unsure of dialect. Might be PSJ. Not my best language.*' Yamada replies with a frown. With the two signs he's seen from Shinsou, it was hard to tell, but he hoped that it was standard JSL. That would be far easier to teach.

Shouta raises an eyebrow. '*Your mom uses PSJ.*'

'*Too loose. Signs can mean different things,*' Yamada answers. '*This is too important.*'

Shouta nods. '*Laptop.*'

They retrieve the laptop from their office and return to Shinsou's door. Hizashi hesitates while Shouta knocks, waits a moment for a response that's unlikely to come, then enters.

The kid is stock still when he sees them, his hands shaking a little where they hang stiffly at his sides. He's standing in front of his bed, though he was clearly sitting on it before due to how the comforter had an imprint. Everything else in the room looks exactly as it was before Shinsou even arrived.

"We need to talk," Shouta says, barely looking at the kid while he starts setting up the laptop on the desk. "I want you to use this to type out what you want to say."

The kid doesn't move, but his eyes are fixed on Shouta, only glancing at Yamada a few times. Shouta was right, the kid was *terrified* of him.

Shouta notices, hand curling into a fist momentarily, before he remembers himself and relaxes. "Sit down in this chair."

Shinsou moves without hesitation. Familiar with following orders.

"Have you used a keyboard before?" Shouta asks, and though his even tone disguises it, he's worried that this won't work either and they'll be forced to use paper, which could distress Shinsou further.

'Yes.' Shinsou types. His hands rest on the keyboard, typing rather than finger-picking. That was a promising sign, a sign that this would be a better way to communicate from here on out.

"We received your note," Shouta says, pulling it from his pocket to place it on the desk. The kid

glances at it, shaking, before he turns his gaze back to the screen. "I'm glad that you wrote it. That's exactly what I want you to do when you feel uncomfortable with something. Let us know, and we will change it."

Shinsou's eyebrows move together for a moment, confused, before he schools himself back into the eerie blank look he wore when they first entered.

"We don't want you to control Eri. I know that was your role at the 8 Precepts, but..." Shouta pauses, considering his words. "The only time you should ever use your quirk on her is if she loses control of hers, and I'm not there to stop it. Is that understood?"

'Yes.' Shinsou's fingers twitch over the keys after he's done, but he doesn't type anything else.

"I'm not sure if you remember Togata, but he remembers meeting you briefly during the raid. He is an extraordinary young man who cares deeply for Eri. He wouldn't want her or you to suffer any kind of discomfort, even to regain his quirk."

Shinsou's fingers twitch again, and he glances at Yamada first, then to Shouta, who nods.

'Does he-' Shinsou erases, then types again. 'Blonde hair, red cape?' He deletes the question mark as soon as he types it, shrinking in on himself.

Trained not to ask questions. Not even written ones.

"He has blonde hair, but he usually wears T-shirts and jeans when he isn't in uniform," Shouta answers. "I imagine he will wear something of that nature tomorrow when he visits."

Shinsou glances at Shouta, still avoiding his eyes, before he turns back to the keyboard. 'Not' then erases, repeating the action a few times. 'Not angry' finally comes out, no punctuation attempted.

"I'm not angry, Shinsou," Shouta says, as softly as he can. "There are very few things you could do that would make me angry, and I don't think you would ever do them. I wouldn't be angry if you asked me a question, or if you were having fun with Eri. Even if you did make me angry, we would sit down and talk about it."

Shinsou doesn't relax much. He probably doesn't believe half of what Shouta is saying, but the half he does believe makes a difference. It takes a while, his lips thinning while he thinks, then he types, 'Is Eri okay.'

Still no question mark, but it's a start. "She calmed down a while ago, but I think she's worried that she upset you," Shouta answers. "She told me that you always asked her a question at the 8 Precepts, even after you found out you didn't have to."

Shinsou notices the pause, the unasked question, frowning before he answers. 'She needed the routine, and as much control as I could give her. I didn't want-' he erases, tapping the key while he thinks. 'I don't like-' erases. 'It's easy to slip up now. I won't let it happen again.'

Shouta looks at Yamada, and he knows what he wants to do. He knows it's risky, but it might be the most effective solution right now.

Yamada nods, and Shouta breathes a sigh of relief, turning back to Shinsou. "Shinsou, I'm going to demonstrate my Nullification quirk on Hizashi."

Shinsou's eyes go wide with panic, and Yamada quickly realizes that this might be a bad idea.

“It won't hurt me! Shouta's done it before, a lot, actually,” Yamada says, drawing Shinsou's gaze to him, his expression shifting from panic to pleading concern. “I have a Voice Amplification quirk, so when I use it, I get really loud. And I'm going to use it now, but you should also look at Shouta while I'm using it. BECAUSE HIS HAIR STARTS TO FLoat and his eyes turn red.”

Shouta's hair settles back around his shoulders and he blinks hard, trying to get moisture back onto his irises. “My quirk neutralizes the quirk factor of anyone I use it on while I'm looking at them. It isn't painful for the target.”

“It does feel a little weird, though,” Yamada says, and Shinsou looks back at him with a more muted concern. “It's like... I'm trying to walk but my foot's asleep, but with my voice. That's a weird way to put it, but...”

“If you slip,” Shouta says, and Shinsou's shoulders jerk when he does. “And you can't break the control yourself, I can use my quirk. It won't hurt you, but it will break the control you have over someone, and allow you to regain control of the situation.”

Shinsou looks at Shouta, his expression blank, but for once, that's a good sign.

“Maybe we could have told you all of that first, instead of making you worry so much,” Yamada says, elbowing Shouta's arm playfully. “But Shouta secretly has a little complex about how he looks when he uses it.”

“It's not a complex,” Shouta grouses. “I'm simply aware that seeing someone with *glowing red eyes* and levitating hair can be startling. In certain cases, it can work to my favor, but in others, it requires *awareness* .”

Yamada smiles, remembering how timid Shouta had been to show his quirk to Eri, since he had been too far away for her to have seen it during the raid. When his hair settled down, he could barely look her in the eye, softly asking, ‘ *Did that scare you?* ’ Eri had shaken her head, hand reaching out for his hair, though she jerked it back as soon as she realized it. ‘ *Your hair...looks pretty.* ’

Shouta had nearly died on the spot.

“So,” Yamada starts, and though Shouta sends him a wary look, he's a little too excited to hold back. “I really like the computer set up, but it's a little cumbersome to carry around all the time. I noticed you used sign and- and I'm not angry!” He blurts, hands waving as Shinsou's eyes become panicked again. “I'm excited, actually! I think it would be a good way to communicate if it was an emergency, or if we didn't have the laptop nearby. Or any paper.”

Shouta's glare fades. He didn't want to give away that they know the handwriting situation is no longer the best avenue. Shouta must have noticed something that he didn't.

Shinsou looks down, chewing his lip nervously. ‘ *Sorry.* ’ He pauses, hands shaking. ‘ *Not great. Want to learn. Not hiding. Dislike .* ’ His eyes glance around, fingers tapping on the chair.

“Dislike to sign?” Yamada asks, signing as he does.

Shinsou signs an emphatic ‘ *No* ’ then turns back to the laptop. ‘ *Don't want to offend.* ’

“Ah! I see! That's this sign,” Yamada says, demonstrating it in slow movements. Shinsou copies him without prompting, his fingers out of place the first time, but he frowns and repeats it better the next. “And I wouldn't be offended if you missigned, Shinsou. You're learning. I would be a *horrible* teacher if I was upset you didn't immediately know every sign, especially for JSL! It's a

very messy language, you know, kind of like English. Some signs mean different things in different areas, some signs are just made up to be shared between two people. A lot of signs were just made up when someone meant to say something, but found there wasn't a sign for it!"

'Names similar,' Shinsou notes.

"Very true! And Shouta - oh, this is my name sign for Shouta," Yamada says, *'Sho Sleep.'* "Shouta knows JSL as well! I taught him myself, in fact, so he can tell you what a wonderful teacher I am."

'He rambles,' Shouta signs. "Hizashi is a very patient teacher. And very knowledgeable."

'You're rude! Don't teach him that!' "So you can ask me to show you how to sign anything, Shinsou! Maybe we can even find some signs that need to be made," Yamada says. "I still haven't found your name sign, but if you have any ideas for me or Eri or Shou- or anyone! - I can help!"

'Thank you,' Shinsou signs, using the most formal one. *'Will learn.'* The corner of his lips pull into a small smile, and he sign-whispers, *'Excited.'*

Yamada beams, warmth filling his chest. Shinsou was *excited* to learn, *willing* to sign to them. He was nearly overcome with the urge to teach him as many signs as he could think of, when the door slowly opened, and Eri's head popped in.

Her face was still red, eyes puffy from crying, but her nervous expression broke when she saw Shinsou, and she started to cry again, running to bury her face in his stomach. " 'M sorry Twenny!"

Shinsou pulled her into his arms, hand rubbing circles against her back, worry working into his voice. "No, no, I'm sorry Eri. I'm sorry I scared you, I'm really sorry."

Eri cries harder, kneeling him in the side as she jerks in frustration. "Don't-don't-don't go-o away-ay Twenny! I-I'll be go-ood so do-on't!" Eri sobs, unable to speak under the pressure of her terror.

This is a bad fit, one that even Shouta would need an hour to calm her down from, but Shinsou stands up, and begins walking in slow circles, humming so quietly that Yamada's hearing aids can barely pick up the sound. Even that much turns her breathless cries to peaks and waves, and Yamada is impressed to see it.

Shinsou just keeps humming, walking her in circles until she calms down completely, still grasping onto him as though if she relaxes a single finger, he'd disappear in her arms.

"Bad nightmare," Shinsou mutters, avoiding any hint of questioning in his tone.

Eri nods, squeezing him even tighter. "I was bad in the room. I talked to him and told him he was mean, and you got mad. And you left, like you were going to get books, but you didn't..." She squirms, kicking a leg against his side. "You didn't come back. And he told me that I was bad. I was cursed so you left. So you could be happy. But his voice was.... Was your voice. Like back then. And he started to look like you. And it scared me."

Shinsou holds her tighter, pain naked on his face. "Those... are really scary dreams. When someone changes.... I think it helps if you look at them, look at the person who changes in that dream. Here," Shinsou says, guiding her to let go, pull away from where she was tucked so firmly into his shoulder. "You can look at me, and remember what I look like."

Eri traces his scars, then reaches up and tugs at a lock of his hair. She shakes her head, then looks at Shouta.

The world tilts from under him when Yamada realizes that Eri only *looks* .

She doesn't seek any assurances or affection. She wants to remind herself what *Shouta looks like* . That he isn't a part of whatever monstrous amalgamation of Chisaki and Shinsou that had haunted her dreams earlier, taking pieces of those she cherished and mutating them with the person she feared most.

Shouta stiffens when he realizes it, and walks over to them slowly. "Eri," he says, when he gets close enough, and that's all he has to say. Her tiny hands tremble when they reach for him, but she touches his jaw, fingers running over the scruff. It starts to distract her, and she giggles weakly.

"Feels funny," Eri whispers, then lays her head back on Shinsou's shoulder, exhausted from the fit now that she's fully comforted.

"He *looks* funny when he shaves, though!" Yamada cuts in, noticing the increasing tension in Shinsou's shoulders as the kid notices how close Shouta is. "His cheeks are so soft, and he doesn't look as scary when he glares. I think that's why he doesn't shave. It keeps the students in line, thinking he's a *wild man* with nothing to lose. Not even a razor!"

Eri giggles, turning her face towards Shinsou's chest. "Don't leave Twenny," she whispers, fingers twisting in his shirt.

"I won't," Shinsou says, running a hand over her back, then smiles. "I can't, really. There's a scary, crazy wild ma...." He stops and freezes, but Yamada won't let the panic take over.

"He sassed!" Yamada cries, working every bit of excitement he can manage into his tone. "He sassed you! Finally! The sign of a healthy teenager!" He forces an exaggerated laugh, slapping his knee as he realizes Shinsou still didn't appear to be breathing. "Shinsou has a great sense of humor, right, Shou?"

"You two," Shouta says, a bit too gravely for his taste. "Are the only ones who can sass me. Hizashi isn't allowed to."

Eri perks up at that, head tilting to the side. "How do you sass someone?"

"You just mutter something under your breath about them, usually," Hizashi explains. "Like, 'Would be nice if Shouta learned to cook for himself,' or 'I sure was cold last night after *someone* stole the blankets.' "

Eri purses her lips, her eyebrows furrowed in thought. Then she looks at Shouta with determination. "I wish Zawa would let Mirio live with us!"

Shouta smiles and ruffles her hair. "I spend too much time around teenagers already."

"That was a good first sass, though! I'm sure that being surrounded by teenagers all the time will make you a sass-master in no time!" Yamada says, knowing that it's one of Shouta's greatest fears.

Shouta's glare promised retribution, but Yamada was on cloud nine for the rest of the night.

Shinsou sassed!

*

27 glared at the ceiling, ears trained for any noises from the hall. It had been quiet for hours, but he had to be sure. Had to be careful.

He had been so reckless .

The effect Eri had on him was becoming dangerous. He would forget about anyone else in the room, forget that his owner was there. He wished he still had his mask, something, *anything* to stop such stupid words from pouring out of his mouth, so *reckless* .

In the end, nothing happened. But something would. They were going to ease him into it, let him become comfortable.

He could *not* become comfortable here.

He had allowed it, though. He slept through the best night to scout for information, and now he was at a disadvantage, needing that information now more than ever.

He let his hand rest on the doorknob, gathering himself. He needed to be a professional. Call up every last bit of training that he had ever received from The Miasma. This was too important to mess up.

He lifts the handle as he opens it, and the door is silent, thankfully silent. Slowly, he makes his way down the hall, keeping close to the wall where the floor will be less likely to creak, his torso angled away so that his shirt can't brush against anything.

His first target is the laundry room. It has the least amount of risk involved. He doesn't open the washer or dryer, knows there's likely nothing of value there. Detergent, softener, dryer sheets, bleach - he doesn't even touch it, tells himself the bottle is too big to hide anything behind it - lined up on a shelf. There's a bottle marked specifically for cleaning up blood stains, and despite himself, 27 frowns.

Of course there is. He shouldn't have thought any different. Shouldn't have let himself become soft and stupid.

The big black duffel bag catches his eye, and though it takes ages to pull it from the shelf, he barely makes a sound. He places it on the floor, finger pressed against the zipper to muffle the noise.

There's a lot of black jumpsuits, similar to the one his owner was wearing today, along with a few pairs of yellow goggles with vent-like screens positioned over the frames. *Hides which one he's targeting* , 27 thinks. It's clever.

It's interesting.

Interesting enough that he finds himself tucking a pair into his pocket.

He knows he shouldn't, he should have broken this stupid habit long ago, it's a stupid thing to do and he needs to be *professional* .

But he does it, and continues searching through the duffle bag.

Settled at the bottom, he finds what he was looking for, and he sags with relief when his fingers wrap around the handle. It's a good knife, a standard issue military blade with serration close to the hilt and a well-maintained edge when he tests it against his finger. It's not the most balanced knife he's handled, but he likes the sheath and clip it comes with. He wouldn't have to risk injuring Eri when he carries it.

He tucks the clip to the outside of his sleep pants and pulls his T-shirt over it, frowning as he realizes it's barely hidden. It's the best he can do for now.

Next is the office, which becomes the most challenging area. The laundry room was at least partially lit by the nightlights lining the hall, probably set up so that Eri could find her way to the bathroom without having to struggle with a lightswitch, but the office is too big for the light to fully penetrate.

He tries his best in the dark, but all the papers stacked on either desk are unreadable in these conditions. There's a closet on the left wall, but it's even darker, though he can tell that it's full of leather and cotton fabric.

The light above the stove is left on in the kitchen, which 27 appreciates greatly. The cabinets are full of kitchenware and a few machines 27 can't name, others that he can. He doesn't want to risk disturbing anything he doesn't have to, especially since his work has only begun.

He could use his knife, but the blade may be too short, and there's always the risk that it could become damaged, unusable. He finds another one in one of the drawers, nearly a foot long, wide with serrated edges. It's perfect.

He rolls up the sleeve of his shirt, twisting it up into a point that he holds between his teeth. The pressure on his arm isn't enough to really cut off the circulation, but at least the fabric can serve as a gag.

He's learned not to scream for something as tame as this, though.

The burner ignites with a small click, and he waits for any sound from the hallway for a while, before he settles the tip of the blade over the flames.

He's not sure exactly how hot he needs it to be, but he figures that it's better to be too hot than not enough. He doesn't want a blister that would only disfigure the tattoo. He wants it burned off.

He *needs* it to be burned off.

He doesn't even want to look at it, when he checks the position. The blade is starting to glow after several minutes sat as close to the base of the flames as he can manage, orange creeping around the edges. The smell of ozone is starting to seep into the air, but he knows the kitchen will start to smell much worse in just a few more minutes.

The smell was sometimes worse than the pain, if it was done right.

Right as he decides the knife is ready, he hears a door open.

EriYamadahisowner-shit.

27 looks at the knife, and his hand is shaking so badly he nearly drops it. He doesn't know what to do-

Sink.

27 flicks off the burner and starts setting the knife in the sink, as quietly as he can, but as soon as it touches the metal basin, it screams out a hiss.

Shitshitshitshit

He drops it with a loud clatter. He hears footsteps in his direction down the hall, and he turns on the water to try and hide what he was doing. The loud hiss and cloud of steam that blows up just makes it worse, there's no hiding this, he can only hope it's not-

“Shinsou, what-” his owner stops, and 27 doesn’t have to look to know that his eyes are scanning over the room, that he’s already figured out what he was doing. His owner *knows* .

Damaging yourself as a number was just begging for Bug’s attention. When 47 did it, no one knew if he was trying to die. 47 couldn’t tell anyone, because 47 didn’t come out of the Red Room the same way he was when he went in. It was like his mind was trapped there. Like Bug decided that if 47 was going to do something so stupid, she’d just hollow him out so he couldn’t.

He doesn’t know what his owner was going to do.

He knows he made him mad. He made him angry. He tried to damage his property, forgetting that his body wasn’t his, it never had been, and he had the tattoos to show it.

“ *Sit* ,” his owner orders sharply, pulling out a chair from the dining table. 27 obeys, he’s not stupid. He knows it’s going to be bad. *He knows* .

His owner leaves. 27 keeps his eyes on the floor. He knows he’s getting something. An implement. A tool. A punishment. It’s going to hurt.

Don’t let Eri hear it don’t let her wake up don’t let her see the blood

The laptop is placed in front of him.

His owner pulls it to the side as he types a few things, tapping something, then turns it back to face 27.

27 doesn’t move. He knows what his owner wants but he just thinks he knows. He’s a tool. He shouldn’t think for himself. If he does, his owner will hollow him out.

He waits for an order.

His owner sits down, running a hand through his hair while he sighs.

He’s mad and 27 doesn’t know what to *do* . He doesn’t know the angles, he doesn’t know anything. He’s not being told anything.

His owner stands up and walks over to the stove. There’s a click of the burner, and though 27 knows he shouldn’t, he looks. He wanted to know if his owner was turning it back on, but he wasn’t.

He was turning it *off*.

27 looks down, but he knows that his owner saw. His owner doesn’t move, just standing there, but 27 can feel his stare.

If it’s a powerplay, it’s a good one, because 27 would do anything just to get it over with.

“Shinsou,” his owner says, now sitting in the chair again. He slipped out of his mind, but his hands don’t lift to sign. Even though they’re not his hands, they obey him for once. “Shinsou, what were you trying to do?”

His hands lift towards the keyboard before he forces them back down. He was asked a question, but not told to type it out. He has to answer him.

His chest is too tight. He can barely open his mouth, but his throat refuses to open, he can’t even breathe how can he talk he can’t breathe *he can’t breathe the words are stuck in his throat he can’t*

answer he can't breathe

He sees a hand shove the laptop further up the table, he's being turned around, his owner is looking at him. His owner is saying something, he doesn't know the words, he doesn't know what the sounds are, he can barely hear them.

His owner is miming something. His hands are going up and down. He's breathing deeper. Inhales as the hand rises. Exhales as it lowers.

Like Rikiya.

27 tries. He tries to breathe in, his chest is so tight. He breathes out, there's not enough air.

It starts to get easier. He can hear the words now, they're soft. His owner is speaking so softly to him now, *it's a trap*.

"Good, Shinsou. That's good."

It's a trap but the words sound nice. He's too tired to fight them, the way they're said.

"Good. Are you back now? Can you understand me?"

27 nods then stops. *Why can't he control himself he wasn't told to nod.*

"Good, good. You're doing good, Shinsou. I want you to..." his owner stops, testing to see if 27 will look to him.

Why can't he just get it over with?

"Shinsou, I want you to turn and face the laptop." 27 complies, catching his reflection in the screen. Why is he crying? "Good. I'm..."

His owner stops again, and he hears him sit down in the chair again. "Shinsou, I'm not angry. I want to talk to you because I need to know what you were doing, and why. If you would rather talk to Hizashi, I can get him for you."

27 shakes his head. He's loyal to his owner. He can't show preference to an underling.

"Then, I want you to type out what you were doing, and why you were doing it."

27 obeys, his hands shaking on the keyboard. This might be the worst precursor to a punishment yet. 'Took knife from drawer. Turned on stove. Held knife over fire. Put knife in sink. Turned on water.'

He can see his owner nodding out of the corner of his eye. "Okay. Tell me *why* you did that."

27 bites his lip. He knows he's angry, and his tone tells him that it will boil over soon. His punishment might not be as bad if he obeys. 'Tattoo on elbow. Not mine.'

27 clenches his teeth, his hands shaking so badly that he can barely type, but he continues, barely meaning to. 'Won't do again. Won't damage self. Knew it was wrong. Won't happen again. Wante-'

He erases the last word, but knows it was too late. His owner read it. "What did you want, Shinsou?"

‘Wanted’ he stops, he tries to make himself stop, but his hands move like they’re not his own. ‘It off. Not mine. Nemoto’s. Nemoto’s tattoo. From fusing. Not mine. Not my skin. Don’t want it. Want it off. They have my skin. Don’t want theirs. Want it off want it off want it off.’

“Okay, Shinsou, breathe. Breathe with me,” his owner orders. 27 obeys, becoming more aware of himself as he does, falling back out of the fog. “Good, okay. Good.”

His owner stares at the screen, and 27 wants to erase all of it. All the words that spilled out of him.

“You were going to burn the tattoo off with the knife. Is that correct?”

‘Yes.’ 27 answers.

“You would have woken Eri up when you started burning yourself. It’s very painful.”

‘Wouldn’t. I don’t. Learned not to.’ 27 types, tapping a key nervously. Perhaps he shouldn’t have given that away. Now his owner knows he has a high pain tolerance.

The silence drags on, and he knows he can’t look. Knows he can’t look but he wants to.

Just get it over with.

His owner pulls the laptop to face himself, tapping something then typing in a few short words. He turns the screen back to 27, and he sees a business listing has been pulled up. “This is the tattoo expert that Naomasa contacted to evaluate your tattoo while you were in the hospital. Naomasa gave me their information in case you wanted to have those tattoos removed.”

27’s hand curls around the band on his arm. To remove that.... He doesn’t know what he feels about it.

“I can call them as soon as they open tomorrow. The procedure is nearly painless, and safe.” His owner pulls the up the program he had been using to type with. “I will try to get an appointment with them as soon as possible, but in the meantime, you cannot attempt something like this. Are we clear?”

‘Yes.’ That’s all 27 needs to say, that’s all that is safe to say, but he has to curl his fingers under his palm to stop himself from typing more.

“Eri knows where all of your scars are,” his owner says. 27 glances at him before he can stop himself, startled by the soft tone. “She’s very observant when it comes to you, and she would know.”

27 nods. He doesn’t trust himself with the keyboard right now, not with the weight settled in his stomach, full of feelings he knows would spill out. How *stupid* had he become? She could have found out, found out she didn’t save him right, she would *blame* herself-

“Here,” his owner says, now standing by his side, a black marker held out in his hands. “It may help if you don’t see it. To cover it up.”

27 takes the marker, trying hard to keep his hand from shaking. It had to be the bad hand. Even if the tattoo was somewhere convenient to reach - and it’s not - he doesn’t trust his coordination. Things that required tiny, accurate movements like eating with chopsticks or writing were difficult after he had been Remade that time, and he hadn’t realized how much it affected him until he was taken from the 8 Precepts. How hard it was to hide.

His owner takes the marker back, frustrated that he was taking too long. “Would you like me to do it?”

27 isn't sure how to answer. His tone is too even, it doesn't have a mocking edge that would fit those words. It's a test. It's a test and he doesn't know how to answer. He's taking too long to decide.

“Nod if you would like me to help you,” his owner says, again in that tone he doesn't recognize.

27 risks it. He nods. If it was a mistake, then at least the punishment could begin.

He feels calloused fingertips underneath his elbow, guiding him to lift his arm. He can barely feel the touch, but he jerks upwards in surprise. His owner pauses, then presses the tip of the marker over his skin.

He's not sure what he's writing, or drawing. There's a circle, he thinks. Will it be his new tag, his reminder of who he belongs to?

His owner snaps the cap back on, placing the marker on the table. He pulls something out of his pocket, something 27 can't see without turning his head. There's a flash behind him, then his owner shows him what's on his phone.

It's a cat.

It's big, and nothing more than a circle with pointed ears on the top, but he likes it. It doesn't remind him of what's underneath. Instead, he remembers trying to teach Eri to draw that same shape, and how the margins of her coloring books were filled with her attempts. She still draws it in the corners of pieces that she's proud of, even on the ones hanging in her room.

“Is that okay?” His owner asks, tone still indecipherable.

It should put him on edge, it should make him more wary to not know what he means by that, but 27 finds his hands moving before he can really stop himself. ‘*Like*.’

His owner kneels down, and 27 glances at his face before he turns away. The man has a small smile, and his eyes look soft. He looks like he does when he looks at Eri. His hands are angled to where 27 is looking, slightly to the side. ‘*Good*.’

27 knows this is probably a training tactic. A word, repeated enough, in the same context to pull something out of him. He should be used to it.

“You should try to sleep. Eri will be very excited by Togata's visit tomorrow. You would be surprised how much energy they have, it's exhausting to watch.”

He nods, still avoiding looking at his owner. It feels odd to be dismissed like that. It feels like a weight is hanging over him, ready to drop. Perhaps Yamada is waiting in his room, or prepared to jump out at him. Dealing out what would dirty his owner's hands.

But Yamada wasn't waiting in the hallway. His room was empty.

It takes a while for him to risk it, his hands shaking when he reaches for it, worried that Yamada could still be hiding somewhere, waiting for him to get comfortable.

But he pulls the covers from his bed, and pulls them over himself. Nothing happens.

He turns over on his side, and waits. Nothing.

He reaches for Mocha, arguing with himself. It would be bad if he were seen like this, if he showed any kind of favor to the plushie, *they'd know* . But he wanted....

He needed to sleep. His owner told him to.

Holding Mocha made that more efficient.

Good Morning!

Chapter Summary

27 meets three new faces, though one of them isn't exactly new.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None! A nice fluffy chapter for you guys!

“Shou-chan, my sweet, loving husband,” Hizashi croons, as Shouta refuses to open his eyes. When he makes the effort, he sees that Hizashi hasn’t even put on his jacket, and his hair has only been backcombed and hair-sprayed, creating the form but not the hold that gel would provide.

“Too early,” Shouta grumbles. He knows he doesn’t need to wake up until Hizashi has finished his hair at least.

“Shou-chan, why is there a scorch mark in my sink?” Hizashi coos, his sweet tone attempting to hide the vengeance soon to come. “I thought we agreed that if I’m not there to supervise, you should stay away from the stove.”

Shouta grunts. It’s far too early for this. “Shinsou had a bad idea. Stopped him. Luckily.”

“What?! What bad idea?! Shouta, don’t fall asleep on me!” Hizashi pulls him up by his shoulders, unconcerned by Shouta’s glare.

“Handled it. Tell you at school. *Coffee*,” Shouta groaned, slumping forward against Hizashi’s hold. He could probably fall back asleep like this. “Signed at me. Good.”

“Shouta! You can’t just tell me he signed at you - he *signed to you* - and fall - ugh!” Hizashi gave up, allowing his husband to fall sideways onto the bed, already asleep. “If you weren’t so cute when you sleep...”

*

Aizawa disregarded the intense burning behind Hizashi’s green eyes, taking the offered cup of coffee. It was his super dark blend, so strong that it had been banned in 4 countries. His favorite.

After he drinks half of it, he manages to look around the dinner table to check on his wards. Eri was nearly bouncing in her seat as she wolfed down her breakfast, still caught up in the excitement of Togata’s visit. It was unusual for her to be so energetic, especially this early in the morning, but

Shinsou's effect on her appeared to be a strong one.

Shinsou appeared to be in the same boat as he was, but without the aid of caffeine. His head was propped up by his hand, as he slowly chewed a piece of toast, smeared hap-hazardly with jam. Prepared by Eri, no doubt.

He was still eating with his left hand.

Aizawa could tell he wasn't practiced with it. There was a slight hesitation when he picked up a piece of food or cutlery, and the movements afterwards were clumsy. He also noticed a subtle clench in Shinsou's jaw when he made a fist with his right, something approaching a habit when he felt he had done something he wasn't supposed to.

Perhaps more things didn't come out right after he had been unfused from Chisaki.

Shinsou felt the need to hide it, and to a point, Aizawa would let him. Taking away all of his secrets now would leave him too vulnerable, leave him in the exact kind of position that the people who had abused him before created. In the short term, he would cleave onto them more, obey every word they said and each one they didn't. They may even be able to close the investigation faster. But in the long term, he might never recover.

Darkly, he wonders if Naomasa knew that. If, at certain points, the urgency of finding out how and where Nomus were being produced allowed him to overlook something he shouldn't have.

Aizawa shouldn't throw stones, he thinks with a grimace. He had been convinced to look away himself.

His phone buzzes with an incoming text, and though he fumbles with it a minute, hands still uncoordinated with the lack of sleep and coffee, he sees that Toshinori had texted him instead of knocking, as he requested.

He chugs the rest of his coffee, then heads to the door, closing it quickly behind him since Toshinori had decided to stand right in the doorway, not fully comprehending the need for the text message.

This would be the first time that Shinsou would be left with someone other than Hizashi and himself, and there was no room for error in the introduction. Especially after last night.

Togata was standing next to the wall, like Toshinori should have. Aizawa tampers down the urge to pat the overgrown teen's head, rising out of habit from spending too much time with Eri.

"Thank you both for agreeing to come here today. Naomasa already told you everything, right?" Aizawa asks Toshinori, earning a bloody sputter from the man.

"I- well, yes. Since it's connec-"

"Togata doesn't know," Aizawa interrupts, glancing at the teenager in question. "And he shouldn't be read into it. I'm going to report my findings so far to Naomasa today, but I trust that you won't do any digging of your own, Toshinori."

Toshinori frowns. "I wouldn't attempt it. I know very well that I don't have the proper training for that, or talent, as teaching has shown me. Did Naomasa give you the impression that I would?"

Aizawa realizes how hard he had been glaring, and forces himself to relax. Last night had rattled him a bit too much. The instinct to protect was a requirement to be a hero, but he let it affect him in

a way that wasn't becoming to that title. He had given enough lectures on the subject to know better. "I haven't been given official clearance to discuss it with you, so we'll leave it at that. Do you both remember what I've told you about the situation so far?"

Togata nods, then begins rattling off the instructions he had been texted yesterday. "Call you if there's an emergency, Nemuri-sensei if you don't answer, Principal Nezu if she doesn't. Eri's quirk doesn't have a specified trigger, but the size of her horn is a precursor. Call if there's a noticeable increase in size. Shinsou's quirk is Brainwashing, if you answer a question he asks, he can take control of you, but he seems to be unable to speak to anyone but Eri, and based on your observations, unlikely to use his quirk on her."

"There were a few new developments," Aizawa says, as Togata pauses to take a breath. "Shinsou doesn't need Eri to answer for his quirk to activate, but the reluctance is still there. It's highly unlikely, but in the event that he becomes hostile and takes control of her, you should evacuate. He can use the quirk of the person that is under his control. Likely originating from that person's body, but it hasn't been observed."

"Was it a quirk slip?" Togata asks, but his eyes are hard with suspicion. The teen knows that's the likely answer, but due to his protectiveness for Eri, he's set on edge by doubt.

"It was. If it happens again, call me immediately, and keep watch over him, as an S-1270 situation." The falter in Togata's smile reassured him he wouldn't have to say it.

Togata nods. "He's averse to being touched by anyone but Eri, and has reacted violently to it before. Unlikely to eat anything she doesn't give him. Eri herself has become more expressive and excitable, which poses a risk for more frequent quirk slips, but that hasn't been observed. Avoid asking Shinsou questions, and give him a paper and pen if he needs to communicate something, *but*," the teen pauses, pulling out his phone. "I wanted to offer this instead!"

Aizawa's eyes narrowed. That was the same phone brand Aizawa himself carried in his pocket, albeit several generations ahead. But Sir Nighteye's agency was far more likely to invest in improved features than government agencies did for their heroes.

"Bubble Girl insisted I keep it, but I really don't need to keep two phones. I lose track of my personal one enough!" Togata says, laughing. "Of course, she has the SIM card, so it can't make any calls to blacklisted numbers, if that's what you're worried about."

He sees Toshinori twisting his hands nervously out of the corner of his eye, but Aizawa certainly doesn't think his input is necessary right now. Any bold declarations of hope or heartfelt connection would fall off of Togata's smile like water off a duck's back.

He was still hiding it.

"Yamada and I are more than capable of getting Shinsou a phone, though the thought hadn't occurred to us. It would be more useful," Aizawa states, still staring at the phone.

"Well, of course you *could*, but I really don't need it. Helping Shinsou with it is far better than just letting it collect dust in a drawer. I already downloaded a few games he might like, and a text-to-speech app!" Togata says, typing on the phone.

" *It's no trou-ble sen-sei* ," the phone speaks, in a feminine yet eerily mechanical voice.

Aizawa grunts, hiding how amusingly different the voice was from Shinsou's shockingly deep timbre. "If you're certain that's what you want to do, I won't stop you. Though I'm surprised you

didn't bring your usual offering for Eri."

"I couldn't find any she didn't already have," Togata admits sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. "But the cashier said they're going to have a new line of giant mochi plushies coming in next month! They're so big and cute-"

"We're running out of room as it is!" Hizashi yells, as he throws open the door, closing it behind him. "Seriously, Togata, you're the only gift you need to bring for Eri and Shouta knows it, he's just bad at teasing you. And Shouta, we're going to be late enough! Good morning, Toshinori!"

"Good morning to you, too," Toshinori answers, seeming shocked that he was addressed. "Please, don't let us keep you. I understand the situation far better now, and if I should have any questions, Togata is here to defer to."

"Wha-no, sir, All Might sir, I didn't mean to-" Togata sputters uncharacteristically, waving his hands frantically.

"My boy, I know Aizawa well enough to recognize when he trusts someone. He certainly places a great deal of trust in you, especially with someone as dear to him as Eri," Toshinori placates. "I hope you'll take care of me in this endeavor."

Togata seemed to combust with the sight of Toshinori bowing so formally. "I. It's not- Please take care of me as well!" He exclaims quickly, answering with his own formal bow.

"Good! Briefing over, '*Mission start off*' !" Yamada yells, slipping into English.

Aizawa sighs, and opens the door, ushering Toshinori and Togata inside with him. Eri takes one look at who it is and bolts, hurtling herself towards Togata's arms. "MIRIO!"

"ERI!" He answers, sweeping her off her feet.

Shinsou stares, the subtle clench in his jaw the only break in his masked expression, as he watches Eri and Togata's greeting. Aizawa sighs, knowing that this really went as well as he *should* have expected. "Shinsou, this is Togata and Toshinori. They will be here while Yamada and I are at school-"

"Shou, I went through it because you were taking too long," Yamada grumbles, tugging on his arm. "Shinsou, are we good?"

The purple haired boy's face slips into a more neutral calm, and he gives two thumbs up, then signs, '*Bye Now Music*.'

Before Aizawa can even raise an eyebrow, he's pulled out the door by his husband, who is mumbling that half of his homeroom is legally obligated to leave now.

"Now Music?" Aizawa asks, hoping that would explain Yamada's frantic mood.

The blonde stops, sighing. "I'm being bullied in my own home."

*

27 opened his eyes to see Eri's face close to his, their noses were nearly touching.

"Mirio's coming," she whispered, pulling the comforter towards herself with a gentle tug. 27 sighed, trying to force himself to wake up.

“Excited,” he asks without asking, around a yawn.

Eri pulls the comforter over her head, and that wasn’t exactly the response he was expecting. 27 forces himself to sit up as best as he could, since her head still trapped his arm. She squirms into a little ball, and he shakes his head, collapsing back onto the bed to pull the covers up over his own head.

She looks at him nervously.

“He doesn’t have to,” Eri says, picking at the bedsheet beneath her. “If he makes you mad, I won’t be his friend anymore. I promise.”

“Eri,” 27 says, giving her a half-smile. “I’m sorry that yesterday was scary for you. But that doesn’t have anything to do with today, rig...”

“Twenny,” she whines. “You’re talking weird.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” 27 answers, running a hand over his hair. “Yesterday was...scary. For me. I don’t want to use my quirk on you, *ever* again. So now I have to be careful with how I talk, at least until I get better control over it.”

Eri pouts, holding herself tighter. “But you’re big. You can control your quirk. I’m only cursed because I can’t, but Zawa said that’s okay because I’m little. And when I get bigger I’ll be able to control it. Was Zawa lying?”

“No, he wasn’t. It’s just...” 27 pauses, looking at the blanket stretched over their heads. “If someone has to go through a lot of things - a lot of bad things, they can start to have problems, like me. They aren’t as us- as able to control themselves. And that might be happening to me, a little.”

Eri’s eyes widen in concern, the corners of her mouth twisting down. “Did bad things happen when I was with Zawa?”

“Not- no, they didn’t,” 27 bites back the truth, for Eri’s sake. “Before I met you, some bad things happened. And I guess I was able to ignore them until now. Now I have these problems, but I don’t want you to worry about them. They’re problems for big people like me.”

He’s the only one who knows he’s talking about both his quirk and The Miasma, but Eri relaxes a little, staring up at the blanket then looking up to him with big, pleading eyes. “Mirio’s big. He could help you. I promise he could.”

27 smirks, hardly able to keep from rolling his eyes. “Well, I really can’t hate a guy who you like so much, Eri. I know you only know good people.” She squirms, not sure how to take his playful words, and he rests his hand on her side. “Eri, I’m sure I’ll like Mirio. Even if I seem kind of scared at first, I don’t want you to think I don’t. I just get scared sometimes. After all, Mirio’s a hero.”

“He’s the one that caught me when you threw me!” Eri says, her nervousness forgotten in the face of an opportunity to talk about Mirio’s good points. “He gives me plushies all the time, *every* time I see him! He helped me pick out the cat I got you, that you like so much. Maybe he’s like the cat, ‘cause the cat scared you at first, but I know you like it because you were holding it!”

27 notices that Mocha was now laying in between them, and he bites his lips nervously. “I think he is kind of like that, but Eri...” Maybe he shouldn’t, maybe it’s stupid to ask her, this is *Eri* after all. “I don’t want you to tell anyone I like the plushie. I know it sounds weird, but for someone like me, who’s older, it’s kind of weird and embarrassing.”

Eri squirms again, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“If you promise not to, I’ll tell you his name,” 27 bribes, even if he feels a little sick saying it. “And I’ve never told *anyone* his name.”

Eri’s excitement lessens it a little bit. “I promise! I won’t tell! Is it Smokey? That’s what it said on the tag on his ear, but I don’t like the names they get on their ears, I think they should get their own ones.”

27 smiles, wondering if he thought the same way as a child. “It’s Mocha. And my mom used to....”

He didn’t think he remembered that.

His mom used to drink something she called a ‘Mocha’ all the time. He always wanted to try it, and she always refused to let him. He thought that if she liked mochas so much, then maybe if he named something he liked ‘Mocha,’ she would like him a little more. She’d like him like she used to.

“Twenny,” Eri calls, holding Mocha in her hands. “I don’t remember my mom. ‘Cause she gave me to him. But that’s ‘cause moms do that. And that’s okay, ‘cause I have you. And you have me, okay? So don’t be sad.”

27 pulls Eri into his arms, and he feels her tighten her hold on Mocha. “Yeah, Eri. It’s okay. I’ve got you, and you’ve got me.”

“And we got Mocha!” Eri cheers. “But I won’t call him that anymore,” she promises, shaking her head fiercely.

“You can call him that, but don’t let anyone know that *I* call him that,” 27 said, running a hand over her hair to find it was full of knots. “You need to get ready for Mirio to come over.”

“Yama helped me pick out my clothes, but I didn’t want him to do my hair,” Eri says, shaking her hair. “I wanted you to do it.”

27 smiles to himself. “I can’t braid it, though. You’re going to have to teach me how.”

“Yay!” Eri squeals, kicking off the comforter and bounding out of the room, racing back in with a comb. “I’m going to get braids from Twenny!”

In the end, 27 could only manage what could loosely be called a braid. He forgot which way the locks of her hair should go, and couldn’t find the right balance between pulling the hair too loose or too tight. Too tight made Eri whine in pain, so he erred on the side of safety. It looked *bad*, but Eri claimed she liked it.

“Now I have to get ready,” 27 said, stifling a yawn. Eri quickly bounced onto his bed, standing up behind him to start combing his hair. He wouldn’t protest if this became a ritual for her, it was oddly soothing.

“Your hair doesn’t lay down!” Eri whined in frustration. “It floofs right up!”

“It does that,” 27 answered, barely able to keep his eyes open. “My head is really hot, if you touch it.” A tiny hand pressed against his scalp, then ruffled the hair there. “I think it makes my hair floofy.”

“It’s like a kotas-kotak-”

“Kotatsu,” 27 corrected, smiling. “If your hands get too cold, you can just put them in my hair. Like a kotatsu.”

“Zawa’s hands get *really* cold,” Eri explained. “He could-”

“Nope,” 27 said, stiffening at the thought. “I’m Eri’s kotatsu. No one else’s.”

Eri jumped down to kneeling, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Mine!”

27 was pleased the distraction went so well. He put his hands under Eri’s knees and stood up, carrying her on his back to glare at the contents of the closet.

There were a few pieces of clothing that had some utility to them, with large pockets or parts that could be rolled up to serve as a make-shift one. Most of them did have long sleeves, but there were a few T-shirts thrown in as well, in the very back as if they were supposed to be hidden.

27 didn’t know what he should dress for today. Training was unlikely, but not impossible. He had no idea what he was really allowed to wear, what his owner would allow him to.

Chisaki never cared, as long as it was completely clean and free of any wear. He learned that condition the hard way when Eri had knocked a bowl of soup he had been spoon feeding her, and some of it spilled on the hem of his shirt. He had forgotten to change before Chisaki came to collect her that night, and Chisaki made sure he never forgot again. That beating was so brutal that Rikiya let him have a free knock out at the next training session.

“Can I pick?” Eri asks, tugging at the hair at the back of his neck.

“Yep,” 27 agrees, relieved. She pulls on a deep purple sweatshirt that had a gray cat’s face on it and a pair of black pants, and he thanks her for her help before telling her to brush her teeth.

After 27 dresses, he folds his nightclothes and places them in the growing stack on the inside of his closet door, then makes his bed, placing Mocha in the center, just as he had been when Eri first presented the room.

He walks silently out of his bedroom, just in case he wasn’t supposed to leave yet. He wouldn’t have risked it otherwise, but he needs to keep an eye on Eri. He finds her in the bathroom, struggling to open a bottle of mouthwash. After he opens it, and she gargles and spits, she watches him brush his own teeth. It seems to make the scars on his face more interesting to her.

“You’ve got to gargle!” Eri orders, when he tries to leave.

27 picks up the bubble gum mouthwash skeptically. “I think this is your mouthwash. I don’t really need-”

Eri shakes her head vigorously. “Don’t want to get sick!”

He’s long since learned how to pick his battles. If his owner is keeping track of how much mouthwash is used and faults him for it, the punishment would be far better than having to worry Eri with the possibility of him getting sick.

Eri pulls him to the dining table and begins fixing his plate, while he fights the sleep that threatens to take hold of him again, now that he doesn’t have a task in front of him. Something about this place was too comfortable, it made it hard to stay awake. He had even fallen asleep in the living room, and he had been trained far better than that.

He looks to see if Yamada is in the kitchen, but what he sees he nearly writes off as a hallucination.

Present Mic is grumbling to the machine that made the delicious smell from yesterday, as though that was a perfectly normal occurrence.

Present Mic.

Blonde hair, green eyes, weird mustache, similar build.

A hero.

Yamada?

Present Mic catches him staring, and smiles that unmistakable smile, even though it's a bit more manic at the edges. "Good morning, Shinsou!" he says, signing as he does, fingerspelling his new name.

27 waits a beat too long before he manages to reply. '*Good morning.*'

Present Mic definitely noticed it, laughing a little as he pulled at the collar of his ridiculously impractical leather jacket. "It's definitely a new look to you, right? Kind of shocking to see in the flesh."

27 ignores him, feeling his lips quirk while he thinks, though he tries to stop it. '*Now Loud.*'

"Right! Well, the exact signs are a little more like this," he says, signing '*Present M-I-C,*' the 'Mic' fingerspelled. "But some of my fans also use this!" '*Present Microphone.*'

27 stares at his own hands, knowing that he should probably copy those signs. But irritation boils up from his chest, and he feels his lips frowning even as he tries to stop it. '*Present Mic. Present Microphone.*'

"Wow, you pick things up so fast--"

'*Present Noise. Now Sound. Today Sing.*'

"You sure know a lot more signs than I thought," Present Mic chuckles, voice strained. "But I actually picked out my hero name as part of my training at UA! I wanted something that was cool and easy to sign, and it took me quite a while to--"

'*Now Music. Today Noise. Present Loud.*'

"Shinsou, are you..." Present Mic pauses, and he knows that he should probably stop. It was a reckless thing to do, but even if Present Mic was an underling he could bully a little and get by with it, it's becoming a little less playful.

He still can't quite hide the way he's glaring at his hands, even as he tries to.

He hears a loud smack and turns, frightened that he's really done it, he's made Yamada angry, but instead he sees Present Mic covering his face with his own hand. "I really didn't tell you, did I? Wow! And I look so different, no wonder, it's..." He pulls his hand away, straightening. "Shinsou, lay it on me. I deserve it."

27 raises his eyebrows, not sure why signing different variations of his hero names is such an ordeal for him. But he was given permission. '*Today Music Equipment. Present Loud Stuff.*' He taps his fingers on the table, having run out of signs that he knows. '*C-u-r-r-e-n-t-R-a-d-i-o.*'

Present Mic slouches over, sighing. “Current is usually just ‘Now,’ but this is ‘Radio.’ ”

27 repeats it. ‘ *Radio. Now Radio.* ’

“And I’m not mad! You’re allowed to sass me,” Present Mic declares, pulling himself up. “I just *really* like my hero name!”

‘ *Present Loud. Speak.* ’ 27 signs back. He doesn’t know why, but he wants to test this.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Present Mic mutters, his voice again strained. “Good for JSL lessons!”

27 isn’t sure if the hero is talking to himself, but he ignores him in favor of breakfast regardless.

His owner enters and takes a cup of that really nice smelling drink from Present Mic, looking half-dead. He sits and sips on his mug for a while before looking up, and 27 makes sure that he’s eating and looking elsewhere when he does. He doesn’t want to attract attention, especially if last night had anything to do with how bedraggled the man looked this morning.

His owner looks at his phone, then walks across the room to the door, opening and shutting it before 27 could turn around to see what he was doing. He seemed angry.

His owner was angry. There must have been some reason that he didn’t punish him last night, but the desire to must have remained. Perhaps he didn’t have the right tools, or the right person. Yamada had a voice quirk, but perhaps it was difficult to use for punishment. He could probably make 27’s ears bleed, but then 27 would have hearing damage. Perhaps they needed him to be able to hear for his jobs.

Present Mic walked closer to him, also staring at the door. When their eyes met, the hero pulled a frustrated grimace. “Ugh, that man! I swear! Not that I can talk, but...” He stops, taking a deep and audible breath. “Shouta is talking to Togata and Toshihori outside, to remind them what *I know* he’s already told them yesterday. Togata is - well, you know what Togata looks like. Toshihori looks a little scary, I guess. He has black instead of white eyes, with blue irises, *really* damaged hair that he should *definitely* see someone about, and he’s really skinny. But I promise he’s a lovely person! Very proper and has a kind of grandfatherly way about him! I think this is the first time that he and Togata have spent time together, but I’m sure that they’ll take good care of you two while Shouta and I go to school.”

You two .

This could not be happening. Not Eri. *Not Eri.*

He knew what Toshihori would do. He was feared, even by Yamada. Perhaps Yamada had even been punished by him before. Why would Yamada do this if he knew? Why would he let-

27 looks at Eri, who tilts her head at him in confusion. “It’s okay, Twenny! Mirio’s really nice! Toshihori is kinda nervous a lot, but I think he’s nice too!”

Maybe not Eri, at least. There were very few people who would stoop to that, and Eri hadn’t done anything wrong. Mirio was there...

To distract her.

That was fine. Whatever Toshihori did to him would be fine. As long as Eri didn’t see, as long as she didn’t know. She had always been kept out of the rooms it happened in, only once did Chisaki show her, but he meant to do that as punishment for her. And as bad as that was, it could have been

worse.

He could do this. He could bear anything.

Present Mic gets frustrated when he checks his watch, pulling at his hair. “Oh, we’re going to be late, why is he like this?! I’ll be right back! And I’ll tell you so because I’m a decent person in the morning!”

He stops at the door for a moment instead of opening it, and then presses his ear against it. He hears something he didn’t like, because he then throws it open and closes it behind him.

His owner is the one who opens the door, guiding two men in behind him. Eri recognizes the hero and runs to him, shouting his name, and the hero kneels down with her name yelled in answer, hugging her tightly.

27 bites down on something ugly, something he doesn’t have time for, and looks at the other man.

He *is* thin, far too thin. 27 knows that he’s not one to cast stones in most cases, thanks to too many days without meals, but this man is *dangerously* thin. His hair looks only slightly better than 27’s did, but Present Mic was right about his eyes. They are startling.

The red sweater that hangs off the man might hide a blade, but that seems a bit pedestrian for the reputation this Toshinori has built up. His pants only appear to have two pockets, and though he’s far away, he thinks they only contain keys, phone and a wallet. Just as 27 suspected, the man must have a quirk well suited for punishment.

His arms are too skinny to be the same quirk as Bug’s, and Chisaki’s quirk was so powerful that it could only appear in one man.

27 would be fine.

He’s aware his owner is speaking to him, and shifts his gaze back to Mirio and Eri. He tries to ignore the ugliness again, knowing that he has more important things to worry about, but it flares up in him all the same.

“Shou, I went through it because you were taking too long,” Present Mic whines, grabbing his owner’s arm to try to pull him outside. He stops, turning to 27. “Shinsou, are we good?”

Well, he really has nothing left to lose. He throws two thumbs up, then signs to Present Mic. ‘*Bye, Now Music*.’ He thinks that’s the one he hates the most, and the way his mustache twitches tells him he’s correct.

Present Mic drags his owner out the door and shuts it, leaving Eri and himself to the care of the underlings.

Call Me Something Else

Chapter Summary

27 discovers the joys of caffeine in a disastrous way.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None again!

But if you, like me, have lived through the dark ages of the 2000's Internet, the excessive use of the word 'cookie' might bring to mind several cursed memories. But, an homage to The Last Resort was rather necessary here.

Aizawa hated using his phone at school, even if it was allowed in the rulebook. It always felt extremely inappropriate, in a way that a well-earned nap didn't. But he reasoned that since he was planning on taking a nap during homeroom anyway, he could make an allowance.

"Are there any questions regarding the new ward?" Aizawa asked, in a tone that he hoped would sway his students to *not* ask questions.

Ashido raised her hand, but upon noticing his glare, decided that she wouldn't be called on. "Why do we have so many more rules with him than with Eri?"

Because I didn't think to give you rules before I brought her to the classroom, and it was a disaster. "Different circumstances." Midoriya wavered under his gaze, but his hand remained up. Aizawa sighed. "Midoriya."

"If the new ward is who I think he is, he has a voice related quirk, which means that difficulties in communication are a sign of very serious issues, but is he considered a vocal type emitter if his quirk factor hasn't been determined to be—"

"*Midoriya*," Aizawa repeated, his voice far more gravely in irritation. "*A question.*"

"R-right, sensei. Is that person who I think he is?" Midoriya finally managed to ask. Aizawa glanced around the room, and too many students looked interested rather than confused by the question.

Aizawa sighed. "The new ward is Shinsou Hitoshi. He was rescued from the 8 Precepts of Death alongside Eri. Don't interact with him, he is unlikely to speak to any of you. That is all the information you need to know, and you *will not* inquire further."

Asui raised her hand, and Aizawa felt the cold sting of betrayal. He couldn't even manage a glare.

"Asui."

"Would he recognize those of us who were part of the raid, kero?" Asui asked. "I'm not sure if one of us bringing it up would be distressing, or if we should avoid him more overall, kero, but his state of mind at the time makes the possibility...unclear. Kero."

At least she had a good question. One that Aizawa hadn't even prepared for. "I would like to remind you all that you should avoid approaching Shinsou *at all*, but for those of you who participated in the raid, simply leave it at that. His state of mind at the time remains unclear, but he would be unlikely to remember you."

Aizawa needs to remember to pull Asui and Uraraka aside later, to gather more information about what happened during the rescue operation. He hadn't been present, but based on what Asui said, Shinsou wasn't unconscious. He may have said something that could help the investigation.

"Now, I need to step out of the room for a few minutes. As you are all aware, any destruction or injuries that occur while I'm gone will result in *severe* discipline on my return." After staring down Bakugo for an appropriate amount of time, Aizawa steps out and dials Naomasa's number.

"Good morning, Eraserhead! I wasn't expecting your report so early, but that's a good sign," Naomasa greets him, and he hears the closing of a door in the background.

"I need an appointment with the tattoo expert as quickly as possible," Aizawa stated, checking the hallway as he made his way to a nearby conference room that he knew would be empty.

"I didn't expect that to be needed so suddenly, but I'll make the call after this one. Any time in particular-"

"Yesterday would have been preferable," Aizawa answers, closing the conference door behind himself. "Shinsou tried to burn off a tattoo that he gained after being fused with Chisaki."

"I'll pull as many strings as I have." Naomasa says, and his tone leaves no room for doubt. *"Is he still unable to talk?"*

"He can speak to Eri, and he knows sign. Not much, but the basics of communication are there. We've also used a laptop, but I suspect something is wrong with his right hand. He becomes distressed when asked to write something. Is that news to you?"

"I'll talk to Sansa, but when I supervised part of his statement, he didn't seem distressed. I did suspect an old injury, but we didn't give the hospital much time to do a thorough investigation. Perhaps Recovery Girl could shed some light on it."

Aizawa frowns. "Naomasa, do you remember Bearclaw?"

He's surprised that Naomasa says yes. The case was closed years ago, a villain who had killed 25 people by tearing them to pieces using his Bear-quirk. When he was apprehended and brought in for questioning as to his motives, suspected to be a member of a crime syndicate, he refused to talk. He had gone stock still and silent, just staring at the wall. But when Naomasa brought in a keychain sized teddy bear that had been in his affects, Bearclaw broke down. He made a full confession, right there, interspersed with pleas to have his keychain back.

"Why did you take off Shinsou's mask?"

Naomasa doesn't answer for a while, almost long enough to confirm his suspicions. *"Aizawa. This has become the most unfortunate case I've ever handled. There are many things I wish I had done differently, but I had to remove the mask. It was rigged to Chisaki's vitals. The moment it was taken off, it opened, and if it was still attached, Shinsou's jaw would have been torn from his skull. We believe that was the moment when Chisaki's hands were destroyed."*

"You took it off before you knew that," Aizawa states. *You stacked the deck against a child before you even knew about the Nomu organization.*

Naomasa doesn't disagree. *"I would like to give Shinsou a bugged laptop. In the privacy of his own room, he may type things or search for terms that could be helpful in the investigation. It would be the least invasive way of gathering information."*

As much as Aizawa would like to refuse, he knows that he can't. There's no logical argument against it. "I or Yamada will pick it up when it's ready."

"Good. Unless there's anything else -"

"I want direct access to what the keylogger finds," Aizawa interrupts.

"Of course, I'll make sure that's available. And I'll let you know when the tattoo removal appointment is." Naomasa says. *"For what it's worth, I'm glad that he's with you, Eraserhead."*

Aizawa hangs up, glaring at the wall.

He could try to say that being taken off of his patrols for the immediate future was having an effect on him, or that he was simply running on too little sleep, but he knew better.

He hated how much Shinsou was afraid of him. He hated that he had been taught to fear someone that much.

He hated that he had taken advantage of it too.

*

Eri looks up from her coloring book and frowns. It's probably the hundredth time she's checked on Shinsou and found something that disappointed her.

Mirio looks up from his own coloring book to see Shinsou sitting on the couch, ostensibly reading a book about JSL. But he only signs once every four or so pages that he flips through, and he turns each page slowly. His eyes aren't focused on the book now, they're turned to All Might, who seems oblivious to the attention as he reads his own book at the dinner table.

Mirio cups his chin with his hand, wondering what All Might's strategy was. When they first arrived, a hands-off approach seemed like the best method. Shinsou was extremely agitated, which was to be expected with two basically unknown intruders entering his home. He needed time to observe them, to know what kind of actions to expect from them.

But the hard lines from tension in Shinsou's body had only grown stiffer, and the way he glanced at All Might was shifting from fear to irritation. He had also shifted from just sitting on the couch to crouching in the corner of the arm rest, ready to spring forward.

He was becoming more agitated about something, and if it wasn't resolved soon, he may do something drastic.

"Hey, Eri," Mirio called, drawing a flinch from Shinsou. "Have we watered the bean yet today?"

Eri pulled a panicked face. "No! I forgot!"

"It's okay! Let's get some water and check on it!" Mirio said, picking Eri up to help her pick a cup from the cabinet and turning on the faucet so she could fill it with water. He noticed an odd scorch mark in the basin, probably evidence left from Aizawa-sensei trying to make instant noodles again.

Mirio let Eri down and followed her to her room, where she was relieved to find the beansprout on the windowsill no worse for wear. "I'm sorry, Beanie. There's just been a lot of stuff going on," Eri apologized to her science project, gently trickling water into the styrofoam cup.

" *It's okay, Eri!* " Mirio answered in a high pitched voice. " *I know you've been really busy, so I've been working hard to grow a whole lot for you!* "

Eri giggled, her panic forgotten. "I want Beanie to grow really big, and make little beans so me and Twenny can both have Beanies. And you can have a Beanie too! Maybe..." Eri trailed off, her voice becoming smaller. "Maybe Twenny won't be scared of you if you both had Beanies. 'Cause Twenny said he likes you, he's just scared."

Mirio nodded, ruffling the top of Eri's head. "I like Twenny too! But I can be kinda scary, since I'm such a big guy. I know he'll stop being scared of me pretty quick, because he knows we're good friends-"

"BEST friends!" Eri corrects, throwing her arms around his legs. Mirio melted at the sight.

Eri had always been shy, even after she had time to warm up to him. Even if she had always felt this way, something had kept her from expressing it in such a happy, normal way.

Mirio definitely liked Twenny, even if just for allowing Eri to feel safe enough to act like the happy girl she deserved to be.

"I don't think Twenny is really scared of me, though," Mirio says softly, patting Eri's head. "I think he's kinda scared of Toshinori, and I'm kind of in a pickle, because I don't know why."

Eri presses her head against his knees, curling her toes into the carpet. "Mirio, I'm not supposed to tell anyone, but... If you don't tell anyone, never ever ever.... I can tell you."

Mirio crouches down, solemnly offering his pinky finger with his other hand across his heart. "I won't tell, Eri. It'll be our super special secret."

Eri frowns at his offered pinky, becoming far too serious for Mirio not to be concerned. "It's about the bad place that Twenny was at, so you *really* can't tell anyone, Mirio. Really. Twenny said I can't tell anyone, or something really bad would happen, and he was really scared, so it's got to be *really bad*."

Mirio grinds his teeth behind his smile, knowing he's have to betray the very confidence he was promising Eri. "I won't tell anyone, Eri. I wouldn't tell any of our secrets, but especially if it's something dangerous."

Eri stares at his pinky for a while, trying to decide whether to trust him, before she wraps her tiny pinky around his. "Twenny drew a picture, a long time ago. I think he had a bad dream, where people change. And he says that looking at those people makes it better, 'cause you remember what they look like. But Twenny couldn't look at the ladies he drew, so he drew them. And one of them looks kinda like Toshinori."

"And they were from the bad place," Mirio whispers.

Eri nods. "He said I can't tell anyone. And he got really scared when I looked at it. Really *really* scared. And the picture was scary too."

"Does he still have it?" Mirio asked. "It sounds really scary."

Eri shook her head. "He got rid of it. But the lady had a black eye, like Toshinori, but she only had one. And she had yellow hair, but it was really long and swirly. I had bad dreams about her, 'cause she was so scary."

"What about the other lady? Was she scary too?"

Eri shook her head again. "She looked nice. She was kinda smiling. Twenny got really mad drawing her, but I think he wanted to do a good job. I think it was a really bad dream..." Eri fidgets, her head lowering. " 'Cause when someone nice changes with a bad person, it's really scary."

Mirio knows he should try to get more information on the other woman, but Eri is far too upset for any more prying. "Those are really scary. I'm sorry you and Twenny have dreams like that."

Eri looks up at him, opening her mouth to say something else, but then decides not to, and pulls her pinky away. "Maybe if we get Twenny a stuffie, he won't be scared of Toshinori."

"Maybe! But I had another idea we could try," Mirio says, standing up. "I think that we should try doing something together! All four of us! That way Twenny can see that Toshinori isn't scary, because you'll be right there with him! And nothing bad can happen when Eri is here!"

"Yeah! I can keep Twenny safe and you can too!" Eri cheers, pumping her fist in the air with a toothy not-quite smile.

Mirio grabs her sides and lifts her up, inspired by the heroic pose. He runs into the living room, shouting, "Never fear, Super Eri is here!"

Shinsou flinches, looking at them with wide eyes, but something in Eri's expression pulls a soft smile from him. All Might covers his bloody cough with a handkerchief, then chuckles at the sight. "If I were an active hero, I do believe I'd ask you to be my sidekick, Miss Super Eri! What a bold and reassuring catchphrase!"

Eri shrinks a bit under the scrutiny, embarrassed, and kicks to be put down. As soon as she's on the ground, she runs over to All Might, putting her hands on his knees. "Mr. Toshinori, can we do an activity together? All four of us?"

All Might wrings his hands, nervous in the face of Eri's polite pleading and puppy dog eyes. "O-of course! What would you like to do, Miss Eri?"

Mirio knew that Eri wasn't likely to answer. She was getting better at open-ended questions, but still needed a suggestion or two before she could make a decision. "Maybe we could make lunch together," Mirio offered, wondering how badly a group rendition of Baby Shark could go.

"I'm afraid my cooking skills are on par with Aizawa's, but I am getting better at baking!" Toshinori said, raising his finger. "Perhaps we could bake some cookies to enjoy after lunch?"

"You can *make* cookies?" Eri asked, eyes wide with wonder.

"Why, yes, I can." All Might answered, nervously scratching the back of his head. "I may have scorched the first few batches I made, but now I'm quite competent!"

Eri raced to Shinsou, placing her hands on his legs. "Twenny! Toshinori can *make* cookies! A lot of them! Not just the ones in those little packages! That means you can have them too, right? 'Cause you said you can't eat those cookies because they're Eri cookies, but these can be everyone's cookies!"

"Y-yeah, Eri," Shinsou answered, resting his hand on her head. "As long as you get enough, I can have some too. If that's okay."

"Of course! I'm sure Yamada has enough for a few batches, but if not, we can definitely have some supplies delivered," All Might reassured, rising to look through the cabinets. "Yes, we do have a few options... Sugar, snickerdoodle, chocolate chip, oatmeal, perhaps there are a few lemons in the refrigerator too."

Mirio went to check, if only to allow his smile to drop for a few minutes while he searched.

He had allowed himself to forget it, but seeing Shinsou and Eri interact for the first time reminded him of it.

Shinsou was a *kid*. A kid who had gone through so much already, gaining far more scars than the ones on his face and hands. He was a scared, traumatized kid who ended up raising another kid all by himself. A kid who denied himself cookies so Eri could have enough. A kid who deserved his own cookies.

A kid who needed a hero for *years*, but never got one. And when he met with Sir Nighteye....

He begged for *Eri* to be saved, not him.

"We have lemons and oranges!" Mirio announced, painting his smile back on. "And it looks like enough butter, milk, and eggs for several batches. Maybe even one of each!"

"Excellent!" All Might said with a clap. "Now, I have heard that little Miss Eri is quite a fiend for lemon muffins, and young Togata for oatmeal cookies, so I'm quite pleased with our supplies." Mirio blushed, wondering how on Earth that information had gotten to *All Might* of all people. "I myself enjoy chocolate chip, but what type would you like, Shinsou?"

Mirio flinched. Surely All Might hadn't forgotten....

All Might's jolt and ensuing panic told him he did. "Oh, I mean- you do seem like someone partial to snickerdoodle, but, uh..."

Mirio sent a pleading look to Eri, and noticed how Shinsou's shoulders had risen to his ears. Eri nodded in determination, turning to Shinsou. "Twenny, what's your favorite cookie? I wanna make your favorite ones!"

The tension seeped out of Shinsou all at once, and he smiled at Eri. "I'll like any cookies you make, Eri. I don't really remember my favorite, but I remember liking chocolate."

"I like chocolate too!" Eri cheered.

"Me too!" Mirio cheered as well.

"Perfect! I was hoping to try something a little different if we have enough left over," All Might

said, glancing at the coffee pot. "Togata, my boy, if you could get the ingredients from the top shelf - I don't quite trust myself not to drop any - then I can check the instructions for the meal Yamada has prepared for us. And perhaps Eri and Shinsou could set out a few mixing bowls-"

"Yeah! Come on, Twenny, we've got to be good helpers!" Eri cheered, pulling on Shinsou's hand.

"I'm coming," Shinsou answered, pausing to put his book down before allowing himself to be dragged to the kitchen.

Mirio beamed as they set to work, noticing that Shinsou became more relaxed with a task at hand and Eri by his side.

Even if Shinsou still followed every move All Might made as he directed them, it was a far cry from what he had seen before.

The kid even looked happy at times.

*

27 watched as Eri broke her cookie in half, chocolate stringing then breaking as she did so. She handed half out to him, a little ritual she had made with the last few batches of cookies.

He found that he did like chocolate, as well as snickerdoodle and lemon, but Mirio was the only one to actually enjoy the oatmeal cookies.

Even though 27 couldn't remember being able to eat to the point he felt this full, not counting the times he was force fed, he took a bite of the cookie.

"It's kinda...yucky," Eri said, pulling a small frown.

27 didn't know what she was talking about, it was *delicious*. It had a bitter flavor throughout, only broken up by globs of chocolate chips, but something about the combination just made it better.

"Well, coffee is an acquired taste!" Mirio says, frowning around a bite. "But, this kind of tastes like..." The hero turned around to investigate the coffee machine, pulling out a canister from behind it. "Oh no! This is Aizawa-sensei's illegal blend! When Nejire stole a sip from it last year, she almost passed out from caffeine poisoning!"

"Oh goodness! I really should have-" Toshinori fumbles, reaching forward to take the tray.

27 sweeps a stack of cookies into his hand, pulling them close to his chest with a glare, challenging the man to take them from him.

Toshinori withers under his stare. "Shinsou, my boy, I really don't think it's a good idea to eat those."

27 stuffs the rest of the cookie in his mouth. Come what may, he wasn't going to give these up.

"Maybe the batter cuts through enough of it, so it isn't dangerous?" Mirio says, though he clearly doesn't believe his own words. "In any case, I don't think we're getting those back."

"Nope," 27 says around a mouthful. His hands are starting to tingle, and his mind has never been so

alert. Why didn't The Miasma have these things on hand? 27 felt like he could fight a room full of 98 clones and come out without a scratch.

"Twenny, you really like them!" Eri says, handing him her half. He stuffs it in his mouth before Toshinori can stop her.

"They're really good," 27 says, reaching for his glass of milk. He drains it and wonders why he's still so thirsty. "Kind of familiar. I was wondering what that machine made. Coffee? I think I like coffee. It's really good. Why is it so familiar? I think I've at least smelled coffee a lot. I don't know where. These are really good though. Effective for combat. Why haven't I had these before? Maybe it's not good for long term use. Maybe it's damaging. I don't know. Why do I remember what coffee smells like? It's weird. It's so familiar."

Mirio refills his glass of milk and pushes it forward with a pleading tension in his eyes. 27 drains the glass again with several chugs.

"My hands feel weird. So does my head. Huh. It smells really familiar." 27 can't stop talking, even when he tries to. He feels like if he stays quiet, the words will build up and his head will explode. "Huh. This is a good interrogation tactic. Why didn't the police officer try it? I mean, he tried a lot of other things. I really can't stop talking. This feels weird. I don't like talking. What's your quirk? I don't know. I'm not trying to use my quirk. I hate it. I don't want to use it. Especially not on you. Sorry."

Toshinori looks shocked for a moment, surprised that 27 would do something as stupid as ask him a question directly. He doesn't know why he can't stop asking questions, he knows better, and he can barely blurt out a sentence afterwards to keep his quirk from activating. It was starting to give him a headache.

Instead of lashing out, like 27 is sure he will, like 27 has been waiting for him to, Toshinori just wrings his hands. "Oh! Uh, well, it's hard to believe now, but before I retired I was known as All Might."

27 is shocked out of wondering what Toshinori was going to do to him with his quirk. *All Might* .

It has to be a joke. He's convinced it is, but then Mirio shows a rare frown. "All Might, sir, even without your quirk, you'll always be All Might. You'll always be the greatest hero of our time. Sir Nighteye would tell you the same thing."

All Might .

"O-Of course, my boy! A quirk certainly doesn't make the hero, but I *am* quite unrecognizable now. It's been quite a change, but one that I've found I'm growing to like."

He had been sitting in the same room as All Might, the man that The Miasma made millions off of just for knowing the most benign things about him, such as his shoulder width or the name of a fan he spoke to. He had been waiting for and half-goading All Might to punish him. And thought he'd survive that.

"You know, young Shinsou," All Might said, drawing his attention back to the man. 27 doesn't know how he does it, but he manages to look him in the face. "I can understand that you have difficulties with your quirk right now. I myself have heard others speak about quirks negatively, to describe them as villainous. Perhaps, you could see me as somewhat of an authority on villains, given my career, but I've always disagreed with that way of thinking. Quirks are always what you make of them, and I think yours has the makings of a heroic one."

Heroic? His quirk?

Mirio nods, beaming from ear to ear. “Of course! There are a lot of flashy and offensive quirks out there, but the utility of yours is really far beyond any of them! Instead of dragging out a long fight, risking casualties on either side, you could just walk up to the villains and say, ‘Hey, are you guys making trouble?’ and then they’d answer you, and you’d have them completely restrained! In an instant! Without anyone getting hurt! It really doesn’t get more heroic than that!”

Toshinori sputtered another stream of blood into his handkerchief, wiping the red smears from his mouth as he chuckled. “Just imagine how differently my last fight would have gone with young Shinsou by my side. The man was a hapless rambler. He wouldn’t have been able to resist.”

27 took another bite, considering. Mirio’s strategy would never work, he couldn’t use his quirk on multiple people at once. He would start a fight and have to take the rest down, and depending on how many they were and how strong they were, he might not make it. And taking down a villain that ended All Might’s career? Just like that? With his quirk?

Ridiculous.

“If a quirk is what you make of it,” 27 says, staring at the counter. “Then I’m already a villain anyway. I shoplifted. A lot. That’s not even close to the worst thing I’ve done.” He takes another bite, even though his hands are starting to shake. “Or maybe I’m a criminal. What’s the difference between a villain and a criminal? They never covered that. They should have. I should have gotten a rulebook or something. I probably messed up a rule for criminals. Maybe I should have gone to villain’s school. Is there a villain school? I mean, probably. There’s a hero school. There must be a villain’s school somewhere. I’m still talking a lot. It doesn’t make any sense. Can I have- wait, no, I’m not going to ask questions, I got lucky that time. Is it- it’s really hot to me. I feel really hot.”

“Shinsou, maybe you should give-” Mirio starts, then flinches when 27 takes another bite out of spite.

“These are mine. You can’t have them. If you try to take them from me, I could probably throw you across the room. I mean, with the proper leverage, I could throw a lot bigger people than you, and you’re pretty big. A really tough opponent. Especially the quirk. I’d definitely try to quirk you first in a training match. But that only works once. Next time, you’d probably be mad. That happens a lot. I’m pretty sure Dragon Face never forgave me for what I said about his face, but he was really easy to rile up. I never caught his name. Why are names weird? I have a lot of them. A lot of people do, but my names are weird. Huh. 27 stuck though. Maybe it was my second name? I don’t remember the first one. I don’t like the new one. It’s weird. Why do these-”

“Hey, uh,” Mirio interrupts, holding out an open tupperware. “I think those cookies are going to make you sick if you keep eating them, so why don’t we put them in here and you can keep them without eating them? Is that okay?”

Eri jolts up in panic, hands wrapped tight around his arm. “Twenny, don’t eat those! They’ll make you sick!”

27 doesn’t need any more reason than the panic in Eri’s red eyes to put the cookies in the container, though he holds it to his chest as soon as the lid is shut. He tries to breathe, but finds himself breathing a lot faster than normal, and he is starting to feel sick to his stomach. “It’s okay, Eri. Even if I get sick, it’ll be okay. Chisaki isn’t here, and the new people don’t care that I can’t talk, so it’s okay. But I won’t get sick, so that’s okay.”

Eri’s eyes well up with tears, and he feels guilt wrap around him tightly. He knows he’s acting

strange, and it's worrying her, but he can't really stop it. He feels his arms twitching, itching to do *something*, anything. He feels more restless than he ever has in his life, but the nausea increases with his restlessness as well.

"Eri, it's okay. Shinsou's not sick, he just ate too many cookies, so he's kind of hyper right now," Mirio says, placating her. "I'm going to look up on my phone what to do to help."

"Perhaps if he takes a medication that causes drowsiness, it can cancel out the effect," Toshinori offers, looking through the cabinets.

Mirio winces. "I thought that too, but this article says that's a bad idea. Water, exercise - well, maybe not, that could make it-"

"I do need exercise though. I haven't trained in a month. I haven't really trained in a long time. Am I going to have to fight hero students? I don't know. Their quirks must be really powerful. Like those hero cartoons, since they're heroes. When is that going to happen? I don't know. When is..." 27 feels his stomach clench, and it *hurts*. He felt like he was going to throw up before, but now he wants nothing more than to do so.

"Twenny," Eri whines, noticing his arm wrapped around his stomach.

"Herbal tea! Herbal tea is best, All Might, can you-" Mirio starts, looking up from his phone.

"Mint and chamomile would be well suited for this, I think," Toshinori says, pulling out a tea kettle.

"Eri, it'll also help if Shinsou has something to hold onto, like a stuffed animal, so can you-" Eri runs away before Mirio can finish his sentence, and returns with Mocha held in her hands.

"Thanks, Eri," 27 manages to grunt, nearly doubled over from nausea. Holding Mocha to his stomach did seem to help. "Is Mocha magic? I used to think so, I think. Maybe."

"Perhaps a bit too magical," Toshinori chuckles, picking out some dried herbs. "It is good to know that those mocha cookies could become dangerous in the wrong hands. For a moment, I truly believed you *would* throw young Mirio, my boy."

"Mocha," 27 repeats to himself, pressing his sweaty brow to the cold countertop. "I wonder if my mom likes me now. I thought she would. Probably not."

"It's okay, Twenny," Eri says, pressing herself against his side.

"It's okay. I've got you. You've got me." 27 says, wrapping his arm around her. His stomach churns ominously, and he can feel the saliva build up in his mouth. "And it's okay, but I'm going to throw up."

27 races to the bathroom, hoping that he managed to reassure Eri enough beforehand.

What's New, Pussycats?

Chapter Summary

27 has been poisoned, and now faces a new interrogation tactic while he's weakened, and distracted by his favorite Saturday morning cartoon.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Again, none!

Also, Happy birthday Aizawa! This week's update will be an early double post to celebrate.

(Hopefully this will help me finish the chapter in which his birthday actually takes place....)

When he hears a knock at the door, Toshinori is prepared to throw himself into a dogeza and beg for Aizawa's forgiveness, before he realizes that neither Aizawa nor Yamada would have knocked.

Togata looks up from his phone and gives him a reassuring smile. "Oh, I asked Midoriya to pick up a caffeine detox drink from the combini down the street. He just texted to confirm that it's him."

"Young Togata, are you certain that's a good idea?" Toshinori asks, glancing at the still miserable Shinsou, wrapped up in blankets as Eri lays on top of him, watching a cartoon. "Aizawa may not approve of any visitors he doesn't know about."

"I'll take full responsibility," Togata pledges, bowing quickly. "But if Aizawa-sensei sees Shinsou in this state, we'll die."

The cheerful smile only makes the truth of the statement more haunting. "*I will take responsibility, young Togata. I was the poisoner in this instance.*"

Togata tries to protest, but another polite knock at the door stops him. He walks forward to open it and greets Midoriya, who takes a look around the darkened room before his eyes fall on Toshinori. "All Might, are you okay? Did someone give you caffeinated tea?"

"Jeez, you're basically accusing me of poisoning All Might," Togata pouts exaggeratedly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“O-Of course not, Sempai! But why would you need caffeine detox?” Midoriya asks, holding up the bag in his hand.

“To cover up a crime!” Togata cheered with a thumbs up. “Otherwise, Aizawa-sensei will kill us both.”

“Izuku!” Eri cries, running to the green haired teen. “I need the medicine! Right now!”

Midoriya’s eyes look haunted as he turns to face Togata, his movements stilted and tense. “Sempai. Did you-”

“Loud,” Shinsou grumbles, probably due to the headache that had set in an hour ago, stretching his arm weakly towards Midoriya. “Relief. Now.”

“Oh! You must be Shinsou!” Midoriya says, toeing off his shoes to walk over to the miserable teen splayed across the couch. “It’s very nice to meet you! I’m Midoriya Izuku! It’s nice to be able to meet you before tomorrow when you meet everyone in school, since it might help to see a familiar face! Other than Eri and Aizawa and Toshinori and...”

The glare beneath Shinsou’s furrowed brows knocks the wind from Midoriya’s sails, and he rushes to pull out the detox drink.

“R-right, sorry! I got a little too excited, you must feel miserable right now! I grabbed a couple flavors, because I wasn’t sure which one to get. This one is coconu-”

Shinsou yanks the bottle from Midoriya’s hands and chugs it, his eyebrows furrowing further with the effort. He stares at the empty bottle afterwards, then sits up to stare at Midoriya.

“O-oh, here’s another one if you need it!” Midoriya offers, and Shinsou only shakes his head, scanning the room. “Uh, Sempai, why was Shinsou-”

“It was my fault,” Toshinori says, bowing at the waist. “I unwittingly made some mocha cookies with a coffee that is apparently poisonous to all but Aizawa. The effects are, as you can see, quite devastating.”

“The illegal dark blend,” Midoriya mutters, hand raising to cup his chin. “I noticed he was drinking it, which is odd because the forums didn’t pick up on any eventful patrols in his areas, and he wasn’t assigned to watch our dorm, even though it was supposed to be his shift last night. He didn’t appear to be injured, so a mission is unlikely, but not impossible. Maybe he was able to remain on the backlines and had the proper support to-”

Shinsou points to his chest, then his hands flutter into a sign, as he grimaces.

“Oh! Uh, I know that you’re referring to yourself, but I don’t recognize the other sign. Sorry, I only remember a few signs since it’s been so long. I tried to learn with my friend, Kachan, but since it’s him, I only remember the signs for bad words,” Midoriya admitted, scratching the back of his head.

Shinsou stares at him blankly, until Eri runs up to tackle Midoriya from behind. “Twenny, this is Izuku! He talks a lot, but he’s really, super nice! He should be your friend!”

“Eri!” Midoriya says, turning to ruffle her hair with a smile. “It’s nice to see you so excited! I’m sure me and Shinsou will definitely be friends!”

Shinsou watches Midoriya speak to Eri with a guarded expression, something akin to jealousy

flashing across his eyes, but then turns around to make sure that the tupperware with the mocha cookies are still on the other end of the couch, along with the stuffed cat. Toshinori has noticed he was quite possessive over those items.

“Hey, Midoriya, is Aizawa-sensei running late? He was supposed to be back around this time.” Togata asks, checking the time on his phone.

Midoriya tilts his head in confusion. “He asked to see Ochako, Tsu-chan, Kachan, and Todoroki after school. I’m not sure why he needed to talk to Ochako and Tsu-chan, but I thought he was going to take Kachan and Todoroki to their provisional licensing training since Yamada-sen...” The teen cups his chin again, eyebrows furrowing. “No, Present Mic doesn’t have a show scheduled for tonight, since it’s Wednesday. And his show is usually cancelled if something comes up, not rescheduled, except for the Christmas special five years ago-”

“I suppose I should call Yamada and ask if he will be the one to return home first, but I do recall he had a meeting with Principal Nezu scheduled,” Toshinori said, pulling out his phone. “Perhaps if we have a few more hours than expected, Shinsou and young Midoriya could become better acquainted.”

Togata pulls an unsure face, probably seeking to gently scold him, but Toshinori raises a hand to stop him.

“I do think it would be good for young Shinsou to have a familiar face tomorrow. After all, class 1-A is an excitable bunch.” Toshinori isn’t sure if his smile is reassuring enough, or if he had simply left no room for the young man to protest politely, but Togata brightens all the same, and agrees.

His phone call to Yamada confirmed his suspicion that he did not know that Aizawa was going to be running late, and that it would indeed be a few hours before Toshinori and Togata would be relieved of their duties. He waved off Yamada’s profuse apologies, and reassured him it was no trouble, before returning to the living room to check on his young charges.

Shinsou still had command of the couch, with only Eri allowed to sit on it, perched on his legs in a way that made Toshinori’s knees ache in sympathy. Togata and Midoriya were sitting on the floor, as the green haired teen spoke excitedly about the cartoon they were about to watch, having seen it during his childhood.

Satisfied, Toshinori began preparing a pot of tea while he searched for a bag of popcorn. The excitement of nearly being slain by Eraserhead had died down, and left him quite worn out for what had otherwise been a pleasant day off.

*

27 doesn’t like this show.

He remembers it.

He remembers watching a lot of it as a kid. Him and Mocha, curled up on the couch, alone for most of Saturday before his mom finally came out of her room to make him dinner.

The show explained a lot of things to him as a kid. Like why his quirk was a bad one.

The heroes on this show had good quirks, like the boy who could be twisted up into any shape and come out unharmed, or the girl who could move the earth, or the other girl who could sense where people were.

His favorite one was the telepath girl. He thought he could be a telepath.

He thought his quirk was just developing funny, but if he tried hard enough, he could send messages into people's brains. He could start sending messages that would make his mom happy to his mom, and she'd smile like she used to. But every time he tried, his mom got mad. She'd stop moving, even after he snapped the threads tying her mind to his. She'd stare, for a really long time, not moving, until she went back to her room and stayed there for a while. Sometimes hours. Sometimes days. Then she'd come back out, and everything would be fine.

Until his head itched. Until he thought to himself, *this time I'll do it right*.

What a stupid little kid.

Eri dug her elbows into his side, curled up behind him, holding her head with her hands as she watched both Izuku and the television show with tired, half-lidded eyes. Izuku was fun to watch, though. He's pretty sure the kid has seen this show a million times, but he still jumps and gasps when the villain is revealed, or hums and nods about the first aid technique each episode explains. Eri does too, but she has an excuse.

Izuku keeps looking at him. 27 doesn't like it.

He knows he's looking at his scars.

They're hard to see in the dark, only lit up by the television screen. When the screen gets bright, that's when Izuku looks.

27 misses the mask.

He knows he shouldn't. He knows that Eri would hate it. That it would remind her of the 8 Precepts.

But he can allow himself to miss it. Miss the way it kept him from speaking. He said a lot of things that he didn't mean to, and without the mask, he'd keep saying those things. People would keep staring.

Izuku glances over at him again. It's rude. This time, 27 glares, and Izuku jumps.

"S-sorry! I didn't know I was- I just- didyouwatchthisshow?" the green haired boy stutters, hand scratching furiously at his messy hair.

27 must not have hidden his surprise, because Mirio laughs.

"Midoriya used Search! It's super effective!" the hero says, glancing up from his phone game.

"You could try out the phone to talk to him, if you want. But I think Midoriya is going to combust if he doesn't know whether you're a fellow hero fan or not."

27 doesn't really care whether the kid combusts, but he does want him to stop looking at him. He fumbles for a minute, trying to remember which button turns the phone on, then pulls up the text-to-speech app that Mirio showed him and types in his response. "*I wa-atched it when I was young-er.*"

The voice is weird, but at least it works. Izuku grins at him. "Oh! Who was your favorite hero? I really liked Tiger, but my favorite hero overall was-um. Uh." He suddenly blushes, glancing over at Toshinori. "Who was your favorite? In the show and in general, I guess."

27 frowns at his phone. He didn't have a favorite hero overall, not one he remembers, but.... "*Man-da-lay. Her qu-irk is the mo-ost useful in these e-episodes .*"

"Right? She's the perfect support hero, and she always comes up with a great strategy! I couldn't believe it when I got to speak to her during Summer Camp!" Izuku gushes.

Mirio sees something in 27's face that betrays him again, and smiles even harder. "Maybe Aizawa-sensei should call her so you can meet her, Shinsou."

27 tries to hide it, but he wanted to meet her. Even after all these years, a part of him still wanted that. Wanted to meet his favorite hero, even if the dreams her character had promised him had all turned to ruin.

"Tis I! Brainwash-io! Oh oh oh!"

27 forgot it was this show.

"If you talk to me, I turn you into a zombie! Look at how I've turned these cute little kitties into evil, gross zombies! Oh oh oh! Your mother is allergic to zombie kitties, isn't she, Ragdoll? Oh oh oh!"

"Achoo! Achoo! Leave me, Ragdoll! Achoo! He's too evil! Achoo!"

Maybe that's why he remembered it. He must have been heartbroken as a kid.

"Izuku! I don't like this episode!" Eri whined, turning to look at 27 with a pained expression. She shouldn't throw a fit for his sake, shouldn't draw attention to herself like that.

"It's just a show, Eri," 27 says to try to reassure her. "My quirk doesn't even work like that. Cats can't answer questions."

"It made you sad, though," Eri says, laying herself on top of him. She's been fighting sleep for a while now, which might be making her a bit more sensitive. Maybe once Mirio and the others leave, she'll finally get some rest, and be in a better mood for his owner and Yamada.

"When I was little. I'm not sad about it anymore," 27 says, tugging at her unraveling braid. He hadn't even tied it right.

"You don't like your quirk 'cause the show made you sad, so I don't like this show anymore," Eri mumbled into the blanket, before she sprang up with her eyebrows drawn together in irritation. "And I don't like Izuku for bullying you!"

"Eri?!" Izuku cries, looking stricken. "I didn't mean to-"

"And I don't like Mirio or Toshinori for poisoning you! I hate today! It was supposed to be fun but it's ruined!" Eri screams, kicking her feet in a flurry.

27 sighs, dragging her up by her armpits to hold her up, looking at her grumpy pout and teary eyes. "Eri, you need to calm down. I know you're tired-"

"You're not my mom! You can't tell me to take a nap! No one's my mom if you're not my mom! I don't need a mom, Twenny!" Eri yells, scrunching her face up as it turns red.

Guilt falls over 27 heavily. He should have realized it sooner, but Eri had a hard enough day already, and all these episodes about the Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats' parents needing to be rescued

had just compounded the issue.

Eri always got upset when they read books with parental characters in them. She had nightmares about Hansel and Gretel for years, her mental image of her parents growing more grotesque each time. He always had to be careful which book he picked for her after that.

“Then I’m your mom,” 27 says.

Eri is shocked out of her fit, just like he wanted her to be, just like Big Quirks and Little People recommended. If he made the fit more ridiculous, she would stop for a moment to wonder what was going on. Eri did just that, staring at him, her teary red eyes wide.

“And I’m going to put you in your room, so you can take a nap,” 27 says, his tone calm and soothing to try to entice her into agreeing.

Eri is limp for a moment, still staring at him in shock, before her face turns red again and she covers her eyes with her hands, whining, “I don’t need a mom, Twenny.”

“Too bad, I’m your mom now. Next time you get upset, you should tell someone, or walk away to calm down, instead of saying mean things to your friends,” 27 scolds. He knows it’s better to do this when they’re alone, but if Eri doesn’t apologize soon, Izuku and Mirio might start crying.

Eri starts crying instead, one of her more volatile mood swings hitting her hard. Hiccups and sobs jolt through her while he still holds her up. “I-I’m sorr-ry! I d-don’t h-hate you g-guys!”

“Aw, Eri! We know that! We’re sorry that we didn’t realize how tired you were!” Mirio apologizes, wiping his own tears from the corners of his eyes. “I’m still your best friend!”

“Y-Yeah!” Eri agrees, nodding violently. “A-and Izuku too! And Toshi! Y-you made me cookies and I was m-mean!”

The green haired kid and the skeleton both wave their hands in front of them in the exact same way, almost copying each other’s reassurances as well. 27 found himself wondering what kind of relationship they had to be able to mirror each other so perfectly without meaning to.

27 gathered Eri into his arms as he stood up, snatching his cookies and Mocha off the couch afterwards. Eri rubbed her nose against his sweatshirt, but he didn’t have the heart to scold her further. He would just make sure to change before Yamada or his owner returned home.

He let Eri down once he entered her room, though she held on to the hem of his shirt. “Pick out a good book for us to read, and your favorite stuffie.”

“Can I hold Mocha?” Eri asked, in a voice she knew he couldn’t refuse.

“Yeah, you can hold him. He’ll make you feel a lot better,” 27 answered, shaking what remained of her braid loose.

Eri took Mocha and held him close to her chest, picking out a tall but thin book about a black alley cat. 27 made himself comfortable on the bed, though he felt like he might sink through it as he wondered how anything could be so soft, and held out an arm for her to lay on.

Eri curled up into his side, handing the book to him as her head fell heavily on his chest. She probably wouldn’t be able to stay awake through the whole story, but she kept picking at his shirt as though to stave off the inevitable.

“Once, there was a black cat, and his fur was sleek as the night-”

“Mom?” Eri muttered in a soft voice, almost too quietly to hear it.

27 ran a hand over her back. He shouldn’t encourage this. It was weird, *really* weird, and they were already weird enough. “Yeah?”

He didn’t have to let the string drop, still doesn’t feel it pull, and Eri just hums, curling herself even closer to him. “The cat is Zawa.”

27 nodded, and turned back to the book. “Once, there was a black cat named Zawa, and his fur was as sleek as the night...”

Eri fell asleep after 3 pages.

27 fell asleep after realizing he couldn’t get up.

*

“I’m getting real fucking tired of seeing these dumbass kids,” Bakugo grouched, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Oi, Sensei, can’t you do something about that?”

Aizawa scanned the hallway as they turned the corner, frowning. “The provisional licensing training isn’t under my discretion. And I don’t disagree with their methods.”

“ARE YOU KIDDING?! I didn’t get into UA to be a damn babysitter! If I see one more snot-nosed little freak I’ll-”

“Shouto!” Endeavor called, exiting a room Aizawa hadn’t been able to check. From the corner of his eye, he saw the flinch. It was a familiar one. “Shouto, you know better than to ignore a message from me.”

“Endeavor,” Aizawa greeted, keeping his tone as level as possible. “If you have something to say to Todoroki, and haven’t gotten a response, reach out through the proper channels provided by UA. This isn’t one of them.”

Endeavor leveled a glare at him, the wreath of flame growing higher. “This seems perfectly adequate to me. I’m speaking to my son, and as I had to take time away from my duties as the number one hero to do so, I suggest you *stay out of it* .”

“It seems Present Mic gave you the wrong impression last time,” Aizawa said, turning on his heel to approach Endeavor. If the action put Todoroki out of Endeavor’s line of sight, it was just a coincidence. “This isn’t a place for parents to meet with their children. It’s a provisional licensing building. I would expect the number one hero to be aware of that.”

The flames flickered as Endeavor ground his teeth, glaring over Aizawa’s shoulder. He struggled not to use his quirk just to see them flicker out. “Shouto. You *will* answer my phone call. Am I understood?”

Todoroki nodded, still looking away.

Endeavor turned on his heel and stormed off.

“Sensei,” Todoroki says, far too quietly for even him. “That wasn’t necessary.”

Aizawa knows it was. That it had been. That it had been for a while, but he had looked away from

it. “I only do things that are necessary.”

“Thank you.”

Aizawa glances at Bakugo, his arms crossed and his body language unnervingly demure. Hizashi must not have noticed that when he ‘strategically’ left the boys with Endeavor last time, admitting that he hoped Bakugo could give the hero the what-for and only jump in to ward Endeavor off from retaliating.

Aizawa reminded himself to ask Toshinori to take over the provisional licensing chaperoning duties. It would probably deter Endeavor more efficiently.

TV Parents

Chapter Summary

Eri really likes living with Twenny and Zawa and Yama, but she's still trying to figure out what that means for her. Luckily, she watches a lot of TV, and the TV is very informative.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None!

Welcome to my favorite chapter to write, and Happy Birthday again, Aizawa!

Eri woke up from her nap feeling a lot better. She kind of wanted to wake up Twenny too, but she knows she has to be a good girl, and not bother Twenny. Even though he said he wasn't sick, she knows he isn't feeling good, and when you don't sleep enough when you don't feel good, you could get sick.

When Twenny got sick, it was really scary. She had to be a really good girl, or else Twenny wouldn't get medicine. Twenny had a cough and couldn't talk, so he couldn't say anything to her, but he really tried to. When He found out about that, He took Eri away from Twenny for a long time. She had to be really good, and go to the chair all on her own. He even made her sit in it without the straps once, but it hurt too much and she couldn't be good. He just stared at her and put them on. She was glad He did that.

Eri didn't like going to the chair. She liked going to the Safe Place a lot more. Twenny always put her in the Safe Place when he took her, but He didn't know how. Or He didn't want to.

When Eri got to go back to Twenny, he cried a lot. Twenny told her he was sorry, and she knows Twenny says he's sorry for a lot of things he doesn't do. But Twenny was really sorry, and Eri cried because he was really, really sad.

Twenny didn't get better until after they got rescued. Twenny tried to hide his cough, or how he was really tired and clumsy a lot, but Eri knew he wasn't okay. Eri worried a lot.

Eri still worries about Twenny. She hopes he never gets sick again, because it made him so sad. She tries to take care of him, like he always took care of her. Eri knows that Yama and Zawa worry about that. They give her weird looks when she feeds him or when she cuddles with him when he gets really scared, but it's Eri's job to take care of Twenny now that she can.

Izuku and Mirio and Toshinori gave her really weird looks when Twenny said he was her mom, but it really made Eri happy. And embarrassed, a whole lot. At first, she thought Twenny was being really mean to her. But Twenny's face was kind of red when he said it, so even though he was embarrassed, she thinks he was happy too.

Eri knows Twenny isn't her mom. She knows her mom gave her away, just like Twenny's mom did to him. Eri doesn't think a lot of moms are nice, only the ones on the TV, but Twenny is like a TV mom, and Eri really wanted to have a TV mom.

But if Eri has a TV mom, Eri needs a TV dad. And Eri wants to see her TV dad right now, and let Twenny sleep. Zawa said that Twenny can sleep alone without having bad dreams, and Eri isn't sure about that, but she can make him feel better if he does since she'll be awake.

When Eri opens the door, Zawa changes the picture on his computer. Sometimes he does that when he's working, because he looks at things that only adults who are 'read in to the investigation' can see. And Eri never gets read in, unless it's an investigation about a cat that went missing. When it is, Zawa shows her a picture and relies on her to tell him where the cat is hiding. He texts what she says to his boss, and after a while, he tells her that she saved the kitty! Eri likes those investigations, because she's really good at them.

"I heard you had a very busy day with Togata and Toshinori," Zawa says when she stays by the door, not sure if she can bother him. Zawa sounds really tired, but he also sounds like he wants to talk to her.

Eri walks over and puts her arms over his lap, sighing. "They poisoned Twenny instead of being friends with him. And I got really mad, and really sad. It wasn't a good day."

Zawa just stares at her for a while, then puts his hand on her head. "I'm sorry you didn't have a good day. I know you were excited about it. It was probably Toshinori's fault, wasn't it?"

"He didn't know you drink poison, so he put it in some cookies. I really liked the other cookies, and Twenny REALLY liked the poison ones. He was kind of being bad when he didn't stop eating them, but I think he knows not to do that anymore," Eri says, then sighs. "Toshinori scared him too. Twenny gets scared of people a lot, but today he was so scared we couldn't do the fun things I had planned."

Zawa frowns, and looks at the computer like he's kind of mad. "I was planning to take you two to school tomorrow, but it sounds like that's not a good idea. Shinsou might need some more time to get comfortable here."

Eri tugs on Zawa's shirt so he looks at her. "Zawa, can you call Twenny 'Twenny'? He doesn't like the name you call him. He said it was weird, and he didn't like it. But I know he likes being called Twenny."

Zawa kind of frowns, but then he stops, because he doesn't like frowning at her. "Eri, would you like to see a picture of Twenny when he was around your age?"

Eri is really excited. She's never seen any pictures of Twenny, and she was really happy that he took the cat picture, because at least she'd always have that one. She nods, and Zawa picks her up so she can see the computer.

He has to type a lot of things in, and some of them look like dots, even though there's not a button for dots on the computer. He clicks on something, and a picture of a boy shows up on the screen.

One of his teeth are missing, and he's kind of smiling in a weird way, kind of like she smiles when she tries really hard to, and he doesn't have any scars. But he has the dark lines under his eyes, and his hair is poofy and purple, just like Twenny's is.

"That's what Twenny looked like?" Eri asks, still surprised. She hopes Zawa isn't playing a trick on her, even though he never does that.

"That's what Twenny looked like when he was 4 years old. Can you read these little words up here?" Zawa points to the words above the picture, and Eri can read it without saying them out loud, but she always likes to read for Zawa and Yama, because they smile when she does.

" 'Shinsou Hitoshi,' " Eri reads, then looks at Zawa. "But that's the name you guys gave him."

Zawa smiles at her, but his eyes are kind of sad. "When children are born, their parents give them names, and those names are called 'legal names.' Some people change their legal names later on, because they don't like them, or if they get married, but the name they receive from their parents is meant to be their name for the rest of their life. Twenny's parents named him Shinsou Hitoshi, and since it's his legal name, we call him that. But I didn't know he didn't like his name, I thought he was just unfamiliar with being called it."

That makes Eri really confused. "Why did Twenny's mom give him a name if she gave him away?"

Zawa doesn't like what she said. His eyes get bigger, like he's scared, but everything else about him stays the same. "Did Twenny tell you that?"

Eri nodded. "But that's what a lot of moms do, Zawa. It doesn't really make sense for moms to name their kids and then give them away. My mom gave me away, but she only gave me half a name. You and Yama tried to find the other half and couldn't, but maybe He was supposed to give me the other half."

Zawa puts his arms around Eri's stomach and hugs her, like Twenny does when he's really scared. He's quiet for a long time. "Moms aren't supposed to do that. Most moms don't give their children away. I'm sorry that happened to you two."

Eri looks up at Zawa, and he does look really sad, even though he tries not to. "Zawa, did your mom give you away?"

Zawa's lips look funny for a minute, and he looks at a corner even though there's nothing there. "My family wasn't like most families."

"What about Yama? Did his mom give him away?"

Zawa doesn't like that question either. He's really quiet for a long time, long enough to know that Eri was right. Zawa just wanted to make her feel better, somehow. It doesn't really make her feel better to know she was right, but she might be even more sad if she found out he was right, and she really *was* supposed to have a mommy and daddy like on TV.

"Zawa, can I get another name? I want to still be Eri, but I want to have another half of my name, like everyone else has when they write their names." Eri doesn't know why, but Zawa's face turns a little red when she says that.

"The other half of your name is called a 'family name.' My full name is 'Aizawa Shouta,' and my grandfather's full name is 'Aizawa Shoga.' If someone knew my grandfather's full name and met me, they would know that we were related, because our family name is 'Aizawa.' "

Eri nods, but she doesn't know why Zawa is taking so long to answer her question. He likes explaining things, but Eri really just wants to know if she can have a real name, like everyone else does.

"To be given a family name, it means that you are adopted into that family. If...you took Toshinori's family name, for example, your name would be 'Toshiori Eri.' And that would imply that Toshinori adopted you, and was legally your father."

Eri frowned. 'Adopted' and 'Legally' sounded like really serious words. Zawa didn't seem like he liked saying them. "So, if my name was 'Aizawa Eri,' then you would be my dad?"

Zawa's face got really red, but he nodded. "I would."

Eri felt her face get really red too. She tried to hide it by hugging her knees together. The name sounded kind of funny, but she did think Zawa was a good dad. He was a real TV dad, because he smiled at her and hugged her and helped her stop crying when she was sad.

But Yama was a pretty good TV dad too. He was really silly, and kind of loud, but he made her favorite food and always let her help, and he taught her how to braid. 'Yamada Eri' sounded kind of funny too.

"Zawa, why aren't you Yamada if you're married to Yama?" Eri asked.

Zawa laughed a little, with his really quiet laugh. "Because I went to school with a man named Yamada Shouta, and I didn't like him. And Hizashi didn't want to be 'Aizawa Hizashi,' because it had too many 'z' sounds. It hurt his teeth to say it. So we just decided to keep our own names."

Eri tilts her head. That sounded really silly to her, since Zawa sounded really serious when he said married people changed their names. But Zawa and Yama were pretty silly sometimes.

"We talked about it for a long time before we decided that, because family names are very serious. Maybe we should talk more about your family name before we decide on one. Does that sound good?" Zawa asks her, and she's glad he says it like he really wants her to agree. Family names do seem like serious business, and Eri isn't sure which one she wants.

"Yeah, I think so. Can we go outside?" Eri asks. She likes this place a lot better than her old one. People called her old one a 'compound,' and she doesn't like that word. People call this one a 'dorm,' and she likes dorms. Everyone she knows lives in one close by, and she likes being able to see them whenever she wants.

But sometimes, if she stays inside too much, she forgets that it's different. Zawa always lets her go outside when that happens, even when he's really busy.

Zawa nods, even though he's probably busy, and tells her to pick out a jacket and scarf because it's cold outside. Eri picks her really puffy pink jacket that makes her look like Thirteen when she has it all zipped up, and her favorite scarf that has cat faces on the ends that make pockets for her hands. She likes that it's a really long scarf, so it kind of makes her look like Zawa when he wears his hero clothes.

Zawa helps her put on her jacket, but lets her put on her shoes by herself. He doesn't put on a jacket, but Eri can't really tell him to do that when he's a grown up. It's really cold outside though, and it's really dark. There aren't even stars out in the sky.

Zawa hums, looking up. "It might rain tomorrow. The clouds are covering up the sky."

"Oh," Eri says, then grabs his hand so they can walk down the stairs together. She likes when Zawa explains things to her like that, before she even has to ask him. She used to get really nervous asking him things, because she thought he might get mad, but she knows he won't now. He even likes answering her questions, even though he answers a lot of questions at work when the heroes ask. He must like answering questions a lot.

Except when Ashido asks questions. He gets mad at her questions, but not Eri's.

Even when they get down from the stairs, Eri doesn't let go of Zawa's hand. His hands get really cold, and it's already really cold outside, so she needs to make sure they don't turn into icicles like Todoroki's. She knows Zawa wouldn't ask Todoroki to fix his icicle hands if that happened, and Twenny was just her kotatsu head for now. Maybe he could share his kotatsu head someday, but he must be really embarrassed about it now.

There aren't a lot of people outside, probably because it's so cold, and maybe it's really late. Eri gets to say hi to Nemuri, and she says hi back and tells Eri how cute she looks. People tell Eri she's cute a lot, and it used to be really embarrassing, but she had to get used to it.

Nemuri also teases Zawa, and he uses his Teacher Voice at her to make her stop. Zawa sounds mean and even extra tired when he uses his Teacher Voice, but he never uses it on Eri, even when he teaches her things.

Nemuri laughs at Zawa, because she gets his Teacher Voice a whole lot, then tells them to stay warm and leaves to go to her dorm.

Zawa doesn't really take her anywhere in particular. He knows that Eri just wanted to be outside for a while. They get to walk around for a long time, before Zawa gets a phone call. "Is everything alright?"

Eri is glad he answers like that. If he sounded mad, it usually meant he had to go to work, but he sounds like he's talking to Yama.

"We're near the cafeteria, close to the break area outside. We could meet you there, but..."

Zawa listens for a while, then says "Okay," and hangs up.

"Yamada and Shinsou are going to meet up with us. Can you pick out a table for us to sit at while we wait?" Zawa asks, and Eri tries to find a really good table, even though there are a lot of leaves on the one she picks. She tries to brush them off by herself, but Zawa has really long arms, so he does it a lot quicker.

Even though Zawa is really cold, he puts his arm around her while they sit, so Eri can be warm. Eri wishes she could be bigger than Zawa so he could be warm too, but she does like being little and warm.

Zawa puts a leaf on her head, because he's silly. Zawa tells her she looks like a Kappa, and then tells her about how Kappas are magical children that swim all the time and wear bowls on their heads. And if you fill up a Kappa's bowl, they do favors for you.

Eri doesn't need anyone to put water on her head to be helpful, though. She really likes helping anyway.

"Shou! You don't have a jacket on! You don't want to catch a cold, do you?" Present Mic yells. It's a good thing Present Mic's there to scold Zawa, since no one else can.

"I'm fine," Zawa says, but he only says that to tease Mic. Eri knows he's really cold, but he doesn't want Mic to know he knows he's cold. It's 'admitting defeat,' and Zawa doesn't like doing that.

Twenny looks really worried, but he stops looking like that when he sees her. He smiles at her, and she tries to smile back, but she knows she doesn't do it right. At least Twenny knows she meant to.

"Twenny! This is the lunch area of school! Zawa said that the heroes eat here when it's a nice day, but it's too cold for nice days now. When the trees have green leaves again, we'll have nice days and we can eat out here!" Eri is really excited to see trees with green leaves, because she's only seen that on TV or in picture books. She's also excited to eat outside, with Zawa and Yama and Twenny.

Twenny sits down next to her, really close so she's extra warm. Zawa moves his arm before Twenny sits down, and Eri doesn't like that. She really wishes Twenny wasn't scared of Zawa, but she knows he won't be scared forever, because Zawa wasn't really scary at all.

"Twenny, did you know trees grow leaves every year? They're green first, but then they turn orange and red and brown and fall off. And they do that every year! Trees must get really tired of doing that," Eri says, making sure to talk a lot because Twenny doesn't look like he wants to talk much right now.

He gives her a proud smile, for being so smart, but it turns a little sad. "I did know that. I'm really glad you learned about that too."

"I want to learn a whole lot of stuff, so I can be like Momo! She's really smart, as smart as you are, Twenny! You guys can probably talk about how smart you are for hours! Maybe you can meet her tomorrow, if you're comfortable. It's okay if you're not, though. School was scary at first for me too," Eri kicks her legs out under the table. She wants to be good and not pout, but she *really* wants to take Twenny to school tomorrow. She wants him to be friends with all her friends, because her friends made her feel better when she used to be scared all the time.

"We were going to have Nemuri come over tomorrow, though! She has all sorts of games and art lessons already planned out! It'll be really fun!" Mic says, waving his hands around. "She's been around kids a lot, so she's an expert at having a great time!"

Eri knows that Nemuri *is* a whole lot of fun, but she looked really tired tonight. She would need to sleep a whole lot not to be tired tomorrow.

Twenny takes out his phone, and starts typing stuff on it. "*I a-am fine wi-ith going to schoo-ol. I ca-an only be poi-soned once before I le-earn .*"

Present Mic frowns and rubs his forehead, like he does when Zawa really scolds him. "I'm sorry, alright?! Shou tried to tell me Toshinori was a bad idea, but I didn't know it would be this bad! Nemuri is much better equipped to watch you guys!"

Twenny types some more, before Mic even finishes talking. "*To-oshino-ri was fi-ine. I ca-an go to schoo-ol, Insta-ant Tra-ansmi-itter .*"

Present Mic puts his head on the table and groans. He must have had a really rough day. "This is the sign for 'Transmit.' 'Instant' is just 'Now,' but with quicker movements."

Present Mic lifts his head to watch Twenny copy what Mic's hands did, and smiles.

"Yep! Just like that! Do you have any ideas for Shou's hero name? I can help you come up with some if you're getting tired of picking on me," Mic says, and he really wants Twenny to say yes.

But Twenny doesn't want to. He just shakes his head, and looks at the tree close by. "Eri, have..." Twenny picks at his orange wooly scarf while he stops. "Trees are fun to climb, too."

Eri didn't know that. She really likes trees, but she's never climbed one! She doesn't even mind that Twenny was talking weird again. "Can I climb a tree? I'll be really careful! I've *never* climbed a tree before!"

Zawa smiles at her and ruffles her hair. "That one looks like a good one." He points at the one that Twenny was looking at.

Eri gets up to run over to it, and Twenny follows her. She's glad he did, because the tree looks really tall, and Twenny isn't even as tall as the tree is. "Twenny, how do I climb it? It's so big!"

Twenny laughs a little, then puts his foot on a big root at the bottom of the tree. "If you stand on this, you can put your hands on this branch and pull yourself up. It looks like someone used their quirk on the tree to make it easier."

"You have a good eye. Kamui Wood took some landscaping liberties when he visited," Zawa says, while Present Mic sits down next to him to keep him warm. "And he refused to undo them when he left."

"But that's good, 'cause now I can climb the tree!" Eri says, standing on the root while she stretches up to reach the branch.

"Wait, let me," Twenny says in a kind of scared voice, leaning over to take her scarf off. "Don't want you to get tangled up."

Eri keeps reaching for the branch, but it's hard to do with her puffy jacket. "But... Zawa's scarf... doesn't tangle."

Eri tries her best to reach it, but right before she gives up, the branch under her grows enough to grab it.

"Zawa! Did Kamui make the tree magic?" Eri asks.

"Maybe." Zawa answers like he's right behind her, and she can hear something that sounds like his magic scarf.

It takes Eri a long time to get her leg over the branch, and Twenny looks really scared, even though he told her how to do it. But when she does it, and pulls herself on the branch, she feels really proud of herself.

She looks at Twenny and Zawa, and they both smile at her. She wishes they could see each other smile, but smiling at Eri will have to be enough for a while. "I did it! I climbed it!"

"Do you want to try standing up?" Zawa asks.

Eri knows she shouldn't, because Twenny looks worried, but she knows it'll be okay because Zawa is here too.

Her legs get really wobbly when she tries to stand, and it starts to get really scary. She puts her arms out to try not to wobble so much, but it's really tricky. She only stands up for a second before her legs wobble really bad and she starts to fall.

But Zawa's magic scarf wraps around her stomach so she doesn't fall. She just stands up straight,

and it seems really easy to do it now. "I can stand up! See, Twenny! I can climb *and* stand up too!"

Twenny gives her another proud smile. "You're doing a great job, Eri."

Eri smiles. She knows she did it right, because the muscles in her cheeks get kinda sore, but Zawa's eyes get really soft, like when he looks at cats, or when he's really proud of her. Yamada takes a picture on his phone, and she's really glad he was recording the whole thing.

Twenny looks really happy too. She likes that he looks so happy with something she did.

"Twenny, can I use your kotatsu head?" Eri asks. Twenny's face gets really red, and Zawa and Yama give her really weird looks, but he nods and walks closer to her, crouching down when he turns around. She's already up so high that she can sit on his shoulders with just a little help.

She sighs when she puts her hands in his floofy hair. It's really, really warm, and it feels really nice.

"Twenny, your kotatsu head is the best." Yamada laughs when she says that, and puts his hand in Zawa's hair.

"Emitter quirks do have hot heads, don't they? Super useful on cold nights like these! They're like walking handwarmers! I never thought to call Shou a 'kotatsu head,' though!" Zawa glares at Mic, but doesn't make him take his hand away.

Zawa looks at Twenny, then at Eri. Then he walks over to them, leaving Mic's hands to get cold. "Eri, can you tell me if Shinsou's head is hotter than mine?"

Eri puts one of her hands on Zawa's head, and frowns. Maybe she needs to get closer to his scalp. She messes up Zawa's hair when she ruffles it, but his head is still kind of cold. "Twenny's head is a whole lot hotter."

"How about now?" Zawa uses his quirk, and his hair gets real floaty and pretty.

"Yours is hotter than before, but still not as hot as Twenny's." Zawa frowns a lot when he hears that, and he makes his quirk stop. "It's okay though! Your head is still a pretty good kotatsu! Twenny's is just 'top of the line' kinda kotatsu!"

Present Mic laughs a little, but his eyes look worried. "Well, it's a good thing you have a top of the line kotatsu head! I'll just have to make due with second best." Zawa makes a hissing sound when Mic puts his hands in his hair again, but Mic pretends he didn't. "It's about time we set up the kotatsu at home though, isn't it, Eri?"

Eri nods. Yama had been telling her about how warm and comfy kotatsus are, and she really wanted to try one out.

Twenny's face was really red still, even when they got home. Eri hopes that Twenny doesn't start hating the word 'kotatsu,' even though Yama says it a whole lot to tease him, because she really likes kotatsus.

But out of the three of them that she knows, Twenny and Zawa are still her favorite kotatsus.

First Day of School

Chapter Summary

27's first day of school manages to be worse than he expected it to be.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Gory imagery from a dream, Food avoidance, and canon typical violence.

Yep, THREE chapters this weekend! How could I not when there's a new chapter of The Last Resort to celebrate?!

"Hey, little bro."

27 can't find him. He's using his quirk. He can't find him.

He can't find Eri.

"You can't make her behave, Dog?" He looks around, but there's nothing but empty corridors. Chisaki is close, but he can't find him, can't see him.

There are screams behind a door. He didn't realize there was a door there, but he opens it. It's completely dark, he can't see anything.

Eri screams. He tries to shout for her, tries to move his hands in the darkness to feel for her, but his mask is closed, his hands only shake.

The lights flick on. It's not Eri in The Chair.

It's 50.

She's bleeding, blood pouring onto the floor. The needles stuck into her too deeply. Her eyes are terror wide and full of tears as she shakes her head, as much as the restraints will allow. *"Shinsou, don't do this. Please, please, please let me out. Don't take me there, don't take me to The Chair,"* 50 sobs, her lips twisted around the word of each plea.

He sees his hand rise, but it's not his hand.

He doesn't wear gloves.

The hand that isn't his hand is lifting up, towards his mask. It will take his mask. Chisaki will take his mask.

Not his hand, Chisaki's hand is his hand, they're fused he's stuck he's Chisaki he's become Chisaki he can't get out he's going to hurt Eri-

"Twenny?"

27 opens his eyes, breathing hard as he does. His hand is clutched tight around his mouth, and if he was screaming, at least it was muffled.

It was a dream.

Eri still clutches at his arm, her red eyes wide with concern. 27 tries to breath, tries to reel in his panic. He can't deal with it right now. Eri might have had a bad dream herself. "I'm okay. Bad dream. You okay, Eri."

Eri frowns, but nods her head. "I'm sorry, Twenny. Yama said I should get ready first and let you sleep. I shouldn't have."

27 shakes his head, sitting up. "No, you need to listen to the heroes, Eri. I'm fine. It was a dream, but now I'm awake. Just like I tell you."

Eri nods, then pulls herself onto the bed to wrap her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. The last of his rattling nerves are melting away in her embrace. She's here, she's safe. There aren't any Chairs here. "Now you're awake, 'cause I'm here. And I keep bad dream things away from Twenny, and Twenny keeps bad dream things from me."

27 forces a hollow smile, hugging her back. "That's right. Thank you, Eri."

Eri pulls away to bat at his bedhead, frowning at the mess even though it's a far cry from the one he had before. "You have to get ready for school, Twenny! It's your first day, so you gotta make a good impersonation!"

27 feels a real smile pull on his lips. " 'Impression,' but they sound really similar. Need to brush my hair."

27 yawns while Eri runs off to fetch a comb. He convinces himself that this ritual is good for Eri while she fixes his hair, which seems to be even more tangled after he went to bed with it half-wet from his shower.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to wear," 27 mutters, glaring at his closet. Eri had a couple of dresses that resembled school uniforms, and was wearing one of them now, but he had nothing of the sort. He did have a few button-up shirts but the brown leather jacket was the closest approximation to a blazer he had.

He didn't want to choose the wrong thing to wear, especially today. He knew it would be impossible, but he wanted to blend in as much as possible. The less attention he drew to himself, the quicker the hero students would be to forget he existed. The less they would bother him. The less they would stare.

He missed the mask.

"You should wear your favorite clothes, Twenny!" Eri said, trying in vain to make his hair lay flat. "That's what Yama told me on my first day! We're lucky we don't have to wear uniforms like the

heroes, 'cause Izuku has to wash his a whole lot."

27 frowned. The cat hoodie wasn't a good thing to wear to blend in. The colors were dark, but not dark enough, and it was probably the farthest thing from a school uniform that he owned. And if they knew that it was his favorite, that he liked it, they could take it from him.

He looked at Eri's outfit again. White button-up shirt, dark blue suspenders and skirt. The hero students might wear something similar. He picked out a few dark blue clothes and held them up for Eri to decide, and tried to seem grateful for the help even when she picked a V-neck sweater. He could probably wear one of those T-shirts under it to hide the many scars it would show.

Now that he had a reason to investigate those shirts in the back, he realized they had a theme. They were all hero merch. Two Present Mic shirts, two more for his radio show, a Ms. Joke shirt, a Midnight one that made him want to ball it up and hide it somewhere that Eri wouldn't find, and a few heroes that he didn't know. The Lemillion shirt looked like it was hand-made, and the tagline was already peeling off. Three Eraserhead shirts were in the same shape, but one of them had all the lettering so peeled that some looked to have already fallen off. The Delete Face shirt looked professional, at least. Clearly not a well-known hero, but at least he had a somewhat decent agency. Even though the picture they selected was weirdly blurry, to the point that it somewhat resembled his owner.

Only the tip of the 'te F' lettering peeked out from under his sweater, so hopefully Izuku wouldn't comment on it in the hopes that he was a fan of a hero he had never heard of.

He wavers before finally picking the orange wool scarf he wore yesterday. He knew the urge to use it as a make-shift mask would rise in him, but maybe if he allowed himself to pick at it, that would be enough.

Eri was helping Present Mic cook something, though it looked like breakfast had already been served. "Good morning, Shinsou!" Present Mic greeted, signing as he did. 27 returned the sign, but still felt too tired to tack on a variation of his hero name. Present Mic didn't seem to mind that. "Would you like to help make lunch? I've got one of my favorite helpers here, doing some great bento-box organization, but if you wanted to chop up a little salad-"

' *Yes. Can help.* ' 27 signs as he approaches, hoping that it could distract Present Mic long enough that he wouldn't notice 27 not eating breakfast. Present Mic put the lid on the sausages he was searing, pulling out a bowl of vegetables and a cutting board.

"Sweet! So, I've got these veggies already washed, if you could just cut them up about this thin-" Present Mic sliced a carrot, nearly the size of a toothpick, "-then we'll be golden! But don't worry about making them too uniform, it's pretty tricky at first!"

27 picked up the knife and twirled it in his right hand, wondering if he should use his right or left hand. He didn't seem to have much trouble with such a basic trick, just threading the hilt across the back of his fingers. Perhaps being Unmade couldn't take away the skills he had learned at The Miasma.

The skills that 50 taught him.

Chopping the lettuce and carrots was pretty easy, and he only messed up the size when he forgot to measure before he cut. He spun the blade idly after he was done, wondering if he could still catch the handle if he tossed it spinning in the air.

"We've got a budding sous chef on our hands!" Present Mic says, examining one of the slices

before he looks at the knife 27 was still holding, caught between two fingers. “You definitely seem to know *the way of the blade* .”

27 tries not to roll his eyes when he watches Present Mic swing around an invisible katana. So few Numbers trained in depth with swords that he never received the basic training for that.

“I wanna know the way of the blade!” Eri says, trying to arrange the seaweed on a rice ball to look like a happy cat. “Twenny, can you teach me to do that?”

He swallows the instinctive ‘No’ that comes to mind. Eri was barely younger than he was when he was first taught, and she could probably use some instruction on self-defense. But the thought of a weapon in her tiny hands made him feel ill regardless. “Hold up your hand,” he asked.

Eri did, and he swallowed the sick feeling inside him.

“Maybe when you’re older, but your fingers are pretty close together. You’d probably be better off with a staff weapon, or a baton. With knives, you have to be able to adjust your grip quickly, and fingers with a wider span between them are better for that,” 27 says, recalling Bug’s evaluation of his ‘dainty but stubby’ hands. “But I can show you how to twirl a baton, like the girl from that show you like.”

“That should be the extent of any weapons training,” his owner says, pouring himself a cup of coffee. His tone was edged with something less than neutral, but without seeing his face, 27 wasn’t sure if it was just exhaustion or anger. He nodded his agreement anyway.

Eri pouted, turning to 27. “Mom, Zawa won’t let me learn weapons because I’m a girl, and that’s not fair. You said I just have to be older.”

27 ignored the sound of his owner choking on his coffee, weighing his options. He wasn’t sure how his owner would respond to 27 answering to ‘Mom,’ but if he didn’t respond to Eri, she might throw a tantrum. The blame for the tantrum would be placed solely on Eri, no matter what he said, and 27 didn’t want to know what would happen if his owner was displeased to suffer it so early in the morning. “I don’t really want you to learn how to use a weapon either, Eri. It’s not because you’re a girl, it’s because weapons are dangerous, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Her frown softened, but her eyes still looked angry at the perceived injustice. 27 flexed his hand to show the thin white scars littered among old calluses along his fingers, and showed his palm to Eri.

“When I was learning how to use a knife, I cut my hands a lot. Especially when I tried to learn tricks like throwing them up in the air and catching them. It happened a lot because my hands were really small, because I was young.” Bug said he’d have been better off picking the gun, but he never wavered. 50 told him not to pick it. “So even if I did want to teach you how to use a knife, I would wait until your hands are bigger. But really, I don’t want to. I don’t want your hands to ever get hurt like mine did.”

Eri traced the scars, the ones so small that she hadn’t noticed before, and nodded. “Not just because you want me to be cute forever?”

27 smiled, trying not to laugh. “I think you’ll be cute forever anyway.”

Despite her own bravado, Eri blushed and turned back to her riceball art. “As long as it’s not because I’m a girl! Because that’s mean!”

“Eri, we would never!” Present Mic declared, resting a hand on his heart. “Even though you’re living with a house full of men, we’re *sensitive* men at least! Sensitive to the struggles of being a

woman! Sensitive to the microaggressions common in the workplace and the world at large! We are feminists! Death to the patriarchy!”

“Not particularly sensitive to time, however,” his owner added. “We need to leave in 10 minutes or we’ll be late.”

“Shou! Grab that thermos I - Shinsou, you haven’t even eaten yet! Grab a muffin at least! Eri, we’ve got to finish up these boxes on the double!” Present Mic yelled, panicked at the thought of being late.

27 did grab a muffin from his plate, but waited until the kitchen was properly distracted to walk to the bathroom and flush it down the toilet. It seemed like a waste, but it couldn’t be trusted.

When he returned, his owner was helping Eri into her backpack, and Present Mic handed him a thermos. “This is some of my coffee! I added a little hazelnut creamer, but let me know if you like it! I swear it’s fine to drink, it’s not Shou’s.”

27 waited until they had walked halfway across the campus to smell it. It still had that delicious aroma, just a sweeter and nutty note woven into it. Not a poison that could be detected through smell.

Maybe it wasn’t poison, though. They were walking to a building full of witnesses, and the likelihood of every hero out of the many he saw running across campus being complicit in his gruesome death seemed unlikely.

He took a small sip, and waited.

Even if nothing happened, his stomach turned every time he tried to take another.

*

It was a good thing Eri asked to be carried once they entered the building. If he tucked his chin just right, his scars were hidden behind her head.

Everyone still stared though. He kept his eyes on his owner’s back, and trained himself not to flinch at every ‘Who’s that?’ and ‘What’s his quirk? It must be something bad if Aizawa-sensei has to watch him too.’

He had to keep his head down. Blend in. Eventually they would forget. This would be the worst it will ever be, because the newbie is an oddity at first, and normal at second.

Hopefully the hazing would be pretty light here. Chisaki had given him free reign when he realized that the underlings disliked keeping fights to the sparring ring, wanting to improve their own ranking by bringing the ‘9th Expendable’ as they saw him down a peg. Kick the Dog was a fun game, until it wasn’t, and they learned that quickly enough.

These heroes didn’t look like they’d be too quick on the uptake. When he glances around, there’s a few that look strength-enhanced, but there are too many he can’t even guess. Three animal characteristics, but guessing their quirk from that would be a crapshoot. Froggy’s tongue could be her only weapon, or she might spit poison as well. Blackbird might fly, or mimic voices. Tailman might have a hidden strength enhancement.

They had to be powerful to get into this school. They had at least a year's training, probably more. 19 of them, even if they weren't used to coordinated attacks, and they probably were, they were a threatening force.

And every last one of them was staring at him.

Eri started slipping out of his hold, going limp, and though he could just hold her closer to stop her, it would look odd. It would be a visible weakness. He couldn't afford that.

"Everyone!" Eri called, pointing at 27. "This is Twe- um, Shinsou Hitoshi. He's glad to meet you!"

Eri bowed, and he followed, embarrassed that his high school class introduction was being performed by a 5 year old who only knew how to do it from watching cartoons, in front of a class that he wasn't really a part of.

"So, please be friends with him!" Eri asked, still yelling far more than she needed to. 27 stood up, refusing to look anywhere but at Eri.

"W-We welcome you to class 1-A. Shinsou!" a boy shouts, though 27 still refuses to look. "And I'm sure that we will be very good-"

"Tida," his owner says, a bit of bite in his tone. It softens dramatically when he addresses Eri. "Thank you for the introduction. You two can sit behind Yaoyorozu."

27 keeps his eyes on Eri, even as they walk through the rows of desks to the very back, where an empty desk is accompanied by a much smaller one with a bright yellow top and blue chair. Eri takes the small one and he breathes a sigh of relief knowing he'll be able to be close to her, taking his seat.

"Sensei, we have revised the search and rescue plan that we devised yesterday per your instructions, and have organized a presentation for your approval-"

"Tida, it's fine. We're going over the midterm scheduling again, for the last time, so pay attention," his owner interrupts.

Eri pulls a coloring book and supplies for herself, then his JSL handbook, which he hadn't even noticed her putting into her little backpack this morning. He was thankful regardless, given something to do between checking on her work and listening to his owner's angry tone.

These underlings must have caused a great deal of trouble in the past to earn that kind of angry tone. It could make them more likely to strike out at them, in a fit of desperation. Prove their worth by taking down someone perceived to be close to the boss, never fully realizing that they were the ones that were the higher rank. They were volunteers. He was a pet. He was owned.

"Now, for the remainder of homeroom, I suggest that you study, but I insist that you not bother me," his owner orders, sitting down at his desk at the front of the room. He felt the eyes turn to him, now that his owner's lecture was no longer a distraction, and he refused to acknowledge them. He didn't want the confrontation now. Not with Eri right beside him, likely to be caught in the crossfire if he didn't move fast enough.

"Psst, Momo!" Eri whispered, causing the girl in front of him to turn around. 27 caught the action out of the corner of his eye, but kept his eyes on the pages in front of him. "We can share my banana chips."

"Oh, thank you Eri! Do you want me to help you open the bag?" The girl asked with a prim voice.

“Yes please,” Eri answered, and he watched the exchange out of the corner of his eye, making sure the product return to Eri. It was the least he could do, now that he wasn’t deemed worthy enough to open the banana chips for her. “Here’s some for you, and some for Twen- um, Shinsou!”

27 stared at the chips placed on the corner of his desk, and listened to the girl in front of him eating hers. Despite his hunger, despite the food being from Eri, he didn’t want to eat a single one.

“Momo, Shinsou is really smart. He reads a whole lot of books because he likes books a lot, and he taught me a whole lot of stuff before we were rescued. I think you should be really good friends,” Eri prodded, and 27 was beginning to feel like the chips were part of a much larger scheme concocted in a child’s mind.

Just like any deal, you had to get the interested party to lay down their guard. Food was a go-to in any instance, alcohol to go with it in the best scenario. Talk up the product, nudge them closer to agreement, then seal the deal while the mood was still positive. Momo unfortunately fell for it. “Of course! I would like to be Shinsou’s friend, Eri, but, it’s quite understandable that these things take time. Whenever Shinsou would like to, we could discuss our favorite books, or find other common interests.”

27 found tried to ignore Eri’s stare, though he knew it was useless. “Twenny, Momo is really nice. I promise you can talk to her, and nothing bad will happen. You can talk like you used to. You even used to talk to him, and he did really bad things, so it’s not fair that you can’t talk to Momo.”

27 bit down on his cheek. He knew that. He knew nothing bad would happen. He knew it was confusing for Eri that she was the only person he could talk to now, even though he had been able to talk to Chisaki just a month before. She didn’t know. She couldn’t know.

He got mixed up when he was fused. He lost some things, gained others. Eri had saved him, and she could never know any differently.

“Eri, it’s okay. Aizawa-sensei told us that Shinsou has trouble speaking to others sometimes. None of us will take it personally. Perhaps, instead of being frustrated that Shinsou can’t speak to us, you can think about how much he must trust you to be able to talk to you. You must be a very important person to him.”

27 looked at Eri, to make sure she wasn’t on the verge of a tantrum, but the sight of her staring despondently at her banana chips with her head on her arms made the guilt even worse. He put his hand on her head, and didn’t even get a glance in his direction.

“I’m sorry, Eri,” 27 whispered. *I’m sorry I’m broken now. I’m sorry I made you sad. It’s all I seem to do now.*

“It’s okay, Twenny,” Eri said, at least raising her head. “Can I ask if Kirishima remembers you? You don’t have to talk to him, though. I’ll tell him not to.”

“If you’re allowed to. Aizawa is in charge, so if that will make him mad, you need to wait,” 27 stipulates. He doubts that Eri is allowed to wander around during class time, even if she’s not a student, and even if this free period hardly counts as class time.

“She is. Aizawa-sensei lets her have free reign of the class, which we appreciate,” Momo says, as Eri gets up to walk towards the front of the class, approaching a boy with bright red hair. “Did you know Kirish- I mean...”

The girl goes quiet, realizing her mistake. It was odd how often that happened here. The police

officers never cared whether he could answer or not, they still asked their questions, sometimes demanding that he answer with the pen and paper. One of them had mentioned a name, Kenma, perhaps a telepath that would dig into his skull and pull out the answers they wanted. The one with the too honest eyes had shot that down, then pleaded with 27 to just write something. Anything. Anything about the place he was at before the 8 Precepts.

27 didn't. His Bug scars didn't have to burn, but they did, and he found himself in an empty room still rubbing them hours later, trying to convince himself that there were no bugs under his skin.

He met his owner a few days later. The police had sold him, or rented him out long term. There really wasn't a difference to him.

He would always be owned by The Miasma. Their claim ran deeper than the tattoo or scars. They gave him his name. The one he would always keep. They made him.

The Miasma would kill him soon enough. It would be done by now if Chisaki hadn't taken Boss' vial of his blood when he bought him. Now he was left to wait, waiting for Boss to get enough information to break in to this place, to pay off someone on the inside and send a Number in to finish him off. Maybe it will be 127 again. Even if he failed the first time, 127 was still too useful to be thrown away so easily.

27 looks at his desk and notices the note, folded in half on his desk. He looks at the girl and realizes he's only seen her hands and her back, has no idea what her face looks like. He doesn't want to know, he doesn't even want to know what she wrote. She was still an underling, still a threat, and he knew nothing about her.

But the note might reveal something. He needed information, desperately. And if she went through the trouble of writing it down, it might have information that his owner wanted to keep hidden from him. A warning about what would set his owner off. The punishments used here. His intentions when he bought 27, his job here.

He opens the note, and notices her penmanship is so clean that it looks like it's an excerpt from a textbook.

'I apologize, I was wondering if you knew Kirishima in some way, and forgot that asking may make you uncomfortable. If you would like, we could pass notes to converse, but it's understandable if you would rather study instead. I always tried to stick to the background and observe when it was my first day at a new school, or a new situation. I feel it calms me to know what to expect, somewhat. But if you have any questions at all, you can always write me a note and I can answer them. It's my duty as the Vice President of Class 1-A to make sure all of our members are kept informed.'

Nothing. Nothing of value in that note, beyond knowing that she was higher ranked. Not the highest, not a President, but not like the rest of this group.

She offered him information, though. He just had to ask for it. She didn't list any prices, but perhaps she would once she knew what he wanted to know. If she operated like The Miasma, he wouldn't be able to buy anything. He had no money and no information he could trade in exchange. He had no idea what she wanted from him. Was it a test to see what he knew? To keep him off-kilter, to know his weaknesses from what he didn't know? To gather that information for the group and plan an attack?

Or was she like Nemoto? The man never realized the importance of keeping information hidden, perhaps as a neurosis from his quirk which left no secrets from his prying eyes. Nemoto had an

odd, one-sided kinship with 27, not unlike 127, but as a mental quirk user rather than having a similar name. He gave 27 information freely, on the few instances they were given the chance to talk. The only thing he ever tried to take from 27 was a look inside his mind.

Nemoto was never able to do it, and that only made 27 more interesting to him. All the better for 27. Nemoto's eyes would glow through his goggles, the muscles on his neck moving as his mouth opened for the words he was waiting for to come.

But nothing ever did. And Nemoto would chuckle to himself about the raging storm inside 27's mind, the clouds sheltering him from prying eyes.

All the better if she was like Nemoto. The storm had probably worsened, becoming a black, twisted thing. Her face would reveal if she had a mental quirk, dropping into shock or pain depending on how deeply she found herself trapped.

There was one thing he wanted to know, enough to risk letting her know he didn't know. Enough to trouble himself to find a way to ask without asking.

27 takes one of Eri's crayons, and tries in vain to make his fingers not shake and jerk as he writes. He frowns and scribbles out the first word, and rewrites it more carefully. After he reads it again, he folds it up and holds it out near her waist on the left side, where his owner's line of sight would be obstructed, though the man looks like he's sleeping on his desk.

Her hand takes the note, and he watches her read the few words he had written, then write a reply to hand back with the same trade-off.

'My quirk is Creation! I can create anything that I know the chemical and molecular make-up of using lipids from my body. If you're asking for everyone else's quirks, I'm sure that they will let you know soon enough. Iida wanted to organize a roll call of everyone's name, quirk, and hero name so you can become more familiar with us, but Aizawa-sensei may have realized that it can be overwhelming to have 19 people introducing themselves all at once. I would write them all down, but I believe Iida is still working on a way for everyone to introduce themselves to you in a more organized way.

'I almost forgot to add, but my name is Yaoyorozu Momo, and my hero name is Creati!'

Eri returns to her desk in higher spirits, after 27 had tucked the note in his pocket, unsure of what to write next, but sure that he didn't want to encourage the ache in his hand. "Kirishima said he doesn't remember, but he wouldn't have bullied you if you did go to the same school. He thinks you're really cool, and he really likes your hair 'cause it's manly," Eri says, kicking her legs before she speaks. "And it's okay that you don't want to be friends with anyone right now. I forgot how scary it is, and I'm sorry I made you sad."

"It's okay, Eri. I know you want me to make friends, and I'm sorry it's frustrating right now," 27 says, running his fingers over the hair at his nape. "But, I'm trying. I'll get better at it."

"You can do anything if you try! So I know you'll be friends with everyone soon! I just gotta be patient," Eri cheered, humming as she went back to her coloring book.

27 watched her for the rest of the period, slipping the banana chips into his pocket one by one, so he could keep Eri from noticing he didn't eat them.

Perhaps he could eat them later, when the thought didn't make him feel so nauseous.

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His owner handed them off to Present Mic for the next two classes, and though the voice hero was unbearably loud, 27 was able to go through a refresher on Eri's JSL lessons during the brief moments of silence.

The difference between the two English classes was startling. While Present Mic seemed to struggle to keep class 1-A in line and attentive, he was able to actually teach class 1-B, and progressed a lot farther into the subject. 27 noticed that if one of the students started to talk to a peer, or pull out their phone, the girl with red hair would clear her throat, and the student would jump to correct themselves.

1-B didn't just have discipline, but a disciplinarian. A Bug. That Iida guy could certainly use some instruction on the subject.

When the bell rang, 27 noticed the manic looking blonde guy walking towards him, followed closely by the redhead. As though the blonde had sensed his pursuer, he quickly lept onto a desk and ran across the tops of the row, to land right in front of 27.

The blonde swept a hand through his hair to play off the dramatic stunt he had just performed. "How nice of you to finally arrive, Mr. Transfer Student! You must have a good reason to miss two classes and to forget your uniform, I hope. Class B doesn't tolerate such sloppiness, unlike *Class A*."

The way he hissed those words made 27 wonder if the blonde had plans to eliminate Class A, or if he was still working on them.

"So, what's your excuse? You haven't even introduced yourself either, though judging by your half-feral appearance, you may need a demonstration before you can manage that much," the blonde said, bringing the back of his hand to his cheek like a haughty cartoon villain. "My name is Monoma Neito, but you can address me as-"

A large, blocky hand chopped the blonde on the top of his skull. If the hand was a bit heavier, or combined with a hardening quirk, it would probably cause brain damage or death.

The disciplinarian didn't seem too concerned with those risks though, glaring at the blonde in disappointment. "Monoma. You know you're not allowed to speak to students outside Class 1-B without supervision."

"He...must be," Monoma answered, fighting against the weight of the hand to rise. "Why else...is he here?"

"Kendo," Eri whined, pulling out her biggest puppy dog eyes. "Monoma was bullying Twenny, and it made me really sad. He was acting scary."

The redhead reeled back to deliver a chop that splayed the blonde on the floor with a solid 'THUNK.' Kendo then looked at Eri with an apologetic expression. "I'm really sorry, Eri! He knows better than that, I swear! I'm sorry you had to suffer Monoma, um, Twenny?"

27 hoped that the nod conveyed whatever this Kendo wanted to hear from him. He could probably take her down if it was necessary, but he didn't want it to be. With someone like her, like Bug, she would hold a grudge until he had been ground under her heel appropriately enough, and he couldn't risk having divided loyalties to his owner.

"Twenny can't talk yet, but he says it's okay. He knows you try your best, Kendo!" Eri translates, and 27 nods again in agreement.

"Oh! That's okay! Is Twenny a ward of UA, like you are, Eri?" Kendo asked, casually grinding the heel of her foot into Monoma's back as he struggled to get up.

"Yeah! He lives with me and Aizawa and Yamada now! Me and Twenny used to live together with just us, but when we got rescued, he had to live at the police station, 'cause they must have gotten him mixed up," Eri says, swinging her legs under the desk. "But I'm really happy Twenny gets to live with us now!"

The brief shock that crossed Kendo's face must have translated to a lack of pressure under her heel, as Monoma rolls away, crashing into several desks, to rise up and point his finger at 27. 27 can't help but point a finger at himself as the blonde pants and fumes.

"He's a criminal! Why did UA allow a gangster like him into our classroom?! *Class B!* Not even the lowly, despicable, oddly well-suited for *Class A-* "

"MO-NO-MA," Present Mic yells, making 27's ears ring. "Shinsou isn't a criminal, more at 5! I'll ask Kan to give everyone the deets, but you guys are going to be late for hero training! Go! Go! Go!"

Kendo didn't spare another glance as she dragged Monoma out of the classroom, which was all the confirmation 27 needed. Two hero students knew he was a criminal, information that had oddly not been disclosed to them beforehand. Now it would spread like wildfire, the previous deception incensing them further. 27 would be lucky to avoid a school-wide riot at this point.

Present Mic sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sorry about that, guys. Kan was supposed to give 1-B the rundown, but I guess he really doesn't read the staff memos. I'm sure Kendo will get the message across before tomorrow! Now, let's check in with Shou to see if he's spending his free period in the staff room."

27 kept his ears peeled for any whispers in the hallways, but any conversations about himself seemed to have died down. For now.

But that would change in just a matter of time.

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The free period was blissfully calm in the staff room, where 27 was able to go over Eri's math lessons while his owner mostly ignored them in favor of grading.

Present Mic popped in, carrying their packed lunch, and didn't have to say a word before Eri grabbed 27's hands to tug him into standing. "C'mon, Twenny! We got to wash our hands before we eat lunch together!"

"Alright, don't run off, or I might get lost," 27 chided, looking back to see if they had an escort from either hero. No such luck.

At least the bathrooms were close by, so that if 27 was attacked, Eri would be able to return to the heroes safely. The students that populated the hallway seemed to run with single-minded

determination to be the first to get lunch, ignoring 27 and Eri completely. His habit of crowding Eri against the wall saved them more than once from a reckless speed quirk.

27 noticed that one of the bathroom stalls seemed to be in use, and purposely chose the sink in front of it to keep an eye on the occupant with the mirror. He didn't have to wait long, as the door burst open as soon as he turned on the faucet.

The angry blonde from Class 1-A hissed as their eyes met in the mirror, realizing his amateur ambush had been expected. "Oi, you've got it real fucking nice now, don'tcha? Probably gave Sensei some bullshit sob story to get out of jail, so that snot nosed brat could keep waiting on you hand and foot. That right, bastard?"

27 started washing his hands. He probably had some time before the blonde got himself worked up enough.

"You listening, shitrag? Or are you pretending to be deaf now, too? Yeah, real fucking smart to give that up on the first day," the blonde growled, stalking towards him. "Everyone else here is too fucking shitbrained to see it, but I'm fucking on to you. Who the fuck are you working for? The League? You little pansies can't drop in anymore?"

His hands started sparking when he mentioned 'The League.' Fire quirk or explosives, he wasn't sure.

But he was glad the blonde was stupid enough to spin him around before he could dry his hands. "You wanna answer me, you piece of-"

27 grabbed both hands and slid water across the boy's palms, before grabbing a wrist and shoulder, slamming him into the sink counter. "I'm going to win," 27 threatened, watching the boy scramble against such an easy lock.

27 noticed those beady red eyes turn to something more unhinged, before the kid kneed him in the side. His grip wavered and the blonde charged from his hold, trying to tackle him. 27 struck first with a palm to the nose, disorienting the boy long enough to sweep his legs and shove him to the floor.

Before he could manage a better pin, the blonde grinned, and swept a loud fireball where 27's head had been. The fireball pattered out in a cloud of smoke.

Explosion hands. And now they were back in use.

27 couldn't do much more than dodge. The blonde had a wide range with tight movements, too quick to counter. In a confined space like this, he had a huge advantage, and the feral grin said he knew it.

"Twenny!" Eri's voice called from outside the door. 27's sleeve was singed from the distraction. "Are you okay?"

27 threw himself into a stall and closed the door, then pulled himself over it as he heard the blonde level an explosion against it. He landed on the boy's shoulders in a crouch, hands tucked under his chin to keep from being bucked off immediately.

Eri peeked in shyly, eyes wide with fright. 27 ground his teeth, hoping that she would obey. Hoping he wouldn't have to use his quirk. "Eri, go back to the staff room."

Eri turned and let the door close, her movements shaky and panicked. 27 felt the urge to snap the

blonde's neck rise before the boy made that decision for him, leaning forward to charge him into a wall head first, his forehead meeting plaster with a thud that vibrated in his skull.

The blonde dislodged then spun him around, hand fisted in his sweater. "The fuck did you do to her, you fucking-"

27 kicked out his ankle, earning just enough time to grab the blonde's wrist and tackle him onto his stomach on the floor. 27 kept the boy's palm twisted towards his back, the other arm trapped beneath him, and 27 made sure the pin was secure before he brought out his knife, pressing the blade to the back of the blonde's wrist. "Stay down or lose a hand, Blasty. I really couldn't care less."

The blonde ground out a laugh, bluffing to try to distract what 27 already knew. His hands were tied to his quirk, to his career as a hero, and 27 could destroy at least one of them if he wanted to right now. The boy turned his head to try to face him, teeth bared. "That'd make me a lot less useful to your chucklefuck gang, wouldn't it? You fucking bastard."

27 just glared at him. "I'm not part of any gang, or league. You mean nothing to me," 27 clenched his teeth, pressing the blade hard enough to draw blood. "But you made Eri see something that frightened her."

The blonde snarled. "Yeah, I bet you do that every fucking night, you-"

27 reared the blonde's head back by his hair, ready to slam his chin against the floor. He might break a few teeth, bite a chunk of his tongue clean off if he was lucky. The door opened before he could, his owner standing in the doorway with his white scarf floating around his head.

His owner didn't say anything for a moment, just staring, before he sighed. "Shinsou, let Bakugo go."

27 complied, tucking the bloodied knife back into its sheath and rising to stand. Bakugo sprang up after him, throwing a sparking hand towards his face, and he grabbed his wrist instinctively before he realized the sparks had gone out.

"Bakugo. *Stand down*," his owner growled, eyes glowing red. "And explain yourself."

The blonde tugged his arm out of the hold, spinning to face his owner. "How about you explain, huh?! Why didn't anyone know he was a fucking villain?! You bastards partnering with the goddamn League for some fucked up midterm exam? Leaving us in the dark while you get information from him? Which fucking is it?"

"It's exactly as I said before," his owner answered, tone surprisingly calm. "Shinsou is a ward, and as a ward, he has no active involvement in any criminal organizations-"

"The shitty extra from Class B said-"

"*Monoma*," his owner interrupted, "Doesn't override my instructions. You were told not to interact with Shinsou."

The blonde hissed, turning his head away. "Yeah, and he sure talks a lot of shit for being a fucking mute."

His owner glanced at 27, and he kept his gaze on the floating scarf, watching as it dropped to his shoulders. His owner sighed again. "How badly are you two injured?"

“I’m fucking fi-”

‘ Broke nose. Wrist bleeding. Left ankle. ’ 27 signed, pointing to the blonde.

The boy turned to glare at him. “Don’t fucking pull that mute shit now-”

“Do you have a concussion, Shinsou?” his owner asked.

27 shook his head, then winced as an ache bloomed behind his eyes. *‘ A little. ’* He didn’t want to admit the injury, but a concussion wasn’t easy to hide. Being caught lying would be worse than being caught injured. *‘ E-R-I. ’*

“Eri is fine,” his owner answered. “I’m going to leave you with Yamada and Eri while I take Bakugo to Recovery Girl’s office. Tell Yamada if you start feeling worse.”

27 nodded, then walked to the sink to wet a paper towel, cleaning the blood from the scrape on his head. It still looked awful, with a swelling lump beneath it, but if he cleaned it off a bit, perhaps he wouldn’t scare Eri as much.

He handed another paper towel to the blonde, who swatted it on the floor petulantly despite the blood sprayed across his lip and chin. “Don’t fucking pull that shit, you’re the one who fucking hit me.”

‘ I did. Scare E-R-I. Will break you. ’ 27 signed. Even if the threat wasn’t understood, at least he said his peace.

Bakugo narrowed his eyes, hands moving in a flurry. *‘ Try me, fuck faced shit eating- ’*

“Enough,” his owner growled, turning to open the door. “If I have to break up another fight between you two, Principal Nezu will be signing expulsion forms by the end of the day. *Move .*”

27 allowed Bakugo to stalk behind him, but kept a hand on the knife just in case he was that stupid.

Now that he knew his name, he wished he had taken a chunk of his tongue, if just for teaching Eri swear words.

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Aizawa watched Recovery Girl take inventory of Bakugo’s injuries, debating on whether he really should expel his student. Not for the fight. Though it was completely out of line, he would have been able to predict it if he knew that Shinsou would restrain Bakugo in a wrist-lock. And given that Shinsou was clearly trained to counter a multitude of quirks, he should have.

There was a reason that Bakugo was only partnered with Kirishima during hand-to-hand combat drills, and Bakugo himself might not be aware of it. At least Kirishima knew to avoid certain restraining holds after Kamino ward.

“Am I gonna get expelled for this?” Bakugo asked, glare still present, but his usual expletives were absent. The adrenaline must be dissipating after Recovery Girl’s treatment.

“I’m assigning you a 100 page essay on the topic of PTSD and trauma-induced disorders. If it’s not completed by the end of the month, you won’t return from winter break,” Aizawa stated. Bakugo’s eyes widened at the page count, but he didn’t complain. “I would suggest you start by researching trauma-induced Selective Mutism. It would be very enlightening for you to know that Shinsou speaking to Eri this morning was normal, not fraudulent.”

Bakugo hissed through his teeth, turning his head to the side. “He’s fucking faking it. Just came up with some bullshit story to go with it.”

“Do you think that I would allow someone dangerous into my classroom?” Aizawa pointedly ignored Bakugo’s finger pointing to his bloody nose. “At what point did he bring out the knife?”

Bakugo’s eyes darted to the side. “When he already had me pinned on the floor, what fucking difference-”

“I suspect that knives are his weapon of choice. His quirk isn’t an offensive one,” Aizawa interrupted. “In what scenario would you try to pin or restrain someone without using your quirk?”

Bakugo looked away again, but he remembered this lesson. Aizawa made sure to drill it into him harder than the other students, knowing his personality. “To deescalate. I fucking...” The teen ground his teeth, snarling. “I didn’t...fucking want to, alright? I wasn’t trying to start shit when I went in there, but he fucking...pissed me off.”

“The second topic you will research,” Aizawa said, making sure to meet his student’s eyes. “Are triggers. A somewhat benign action or stimulation that causes a dramatic emotional response. Shinsou grabbed your arm, or wrist, I assume, and you reacted disproportionately to the situation.”

Bakugo laughed bitterly. “I got fucking triggered, is that right? Those shits at the League didn’t mess me up, they didn’t do *shit* to me-”

“I couldn’t stand having someone touch my head after USJ,” Aizawa admitted.

He’s never told that to anyone but Hizashi, and he’s not sure if it’s appropriate to tell Bakugo now, but he needed his student to understand. The naked shock on the blonde’s face told him that he did.

“Most heroes have something akin to that, thanks to our line of work. Like the rest of class 1-A, more was thrown at you before your time.” *I’m sorry.*

Bakugo grinds his teeth together, glaring at the foot of the cot. “What about All Might?”

Screaming, certain accents, car alarms, gun shots, pressure on the scar on his side. “That’s not my place to say, though he would tell you if you asked.”

The teen’s face falters for a moment, but Aizawa is sure that he won’t. He might assign an interview as another essay topic, after he considers whether it would be helpful or devastating. “He’s fucking weird around Eri. You should be protecting her, not letting some weird guy like him around her. He could be doing some messed up shit when you’re not looking.”

Aizawa allows the change in topic, crossing his arms. “A psychologist recommended that they continue living together for the foreseeable future, because though their relationship is odd, right now it’s beneficial for them both. I have only ever observed a parent-child relationship between them. If it became anything close to what you’re implying, Shinsou would be removed.”

Bakugo nodded, as though Aizawa needed his approval. “It’s not like I care about the snot nosed brat or anything, but she didn’t get too freaked out, right?”

Aizawa only barely kept from rolling his eyes.

*

27 ignored how much Eri pouted when he could only eat half of the bento box. He ignored how

much Recovery Girl reminded him of 10, to the point that it hurt. He ignored the stares and whispers in the hallway, and his own shock over being able to speak during the bathroom fight.

But 27 could not ignore Class 3-A.

Just walking into the room, he could tell the difference that two years of training made. Their eyes weren't just hostile, but evaluative. He was being dissected by heroes who could smell any old wounds he carried just by the way he walked to his desk.

It was a small mercy that Mirio was their buffer for this classroom. 27 could trust that he would get Eri to safety, though 27 liked his chances against this class far less than Class 1-A.

"Hey, Mirio," a student resembling a spiny toad hissed, drawing the blonde's attention. "You mind switching seats with me today?"

27 frowned. If he had to guess, this one could shoot projectiles out of any point that they had those spiny protrusions, which was everywhere. Sitting directly in front of him was the cheapest shot any assassin could take.

Mirio lifted an eyebrow, that eternal smile not wavering. "Aizawa-sensei assigned the seating chart, and if you think I'll give up the closest seat to Eri easily, you're very mistaken, Shizuo."

Shizuo scratched the side of their chin nervously, claws dragging on rough scales. "Well, you know, with your quirk and everything, I just think it's better if someone else sat in front of that guy. Just in case."

27 wasn't sure if Shizuo was a good actor, or if the story about the bathroom fight had been grossly exaggerated to the point of striking true fear into these heroes. Mirio's grin gave nothing away when he turned to face 27. "Oh yeah, Shinsou. Did you really murder Bakugo in the bathroom and then attack Yamada-Sensei? It seems kind of out of character for you."

27 raised an eyebrow. Murdering Bakugo was pretty easy to fathom, but attacking a pro hero and walking around campus afterwards? These students were supposed to be heroes, not stupid.

Eri slapped her hands on the desk, leaning over it to frown at the blonde hero. "Mirio! That's not funny! Twenny got really hurt, and he wouldn't hurt Yamada! Never ever ever!"

The smile fell away into placating shock, as the hero waved his hands in front of him. "I'm sorry, Eri! It was just a crazy rumor I heard, I didn't really believe it though!" He then turned back to 27, the smile returning. "Maybe you could tell us what really happened, using your phone! I bet that would really put those rumors to rest, don'tcha think?"

27 looked at his owner, who was writing an outline of the lecture on the chalkboard, facing completely away from him. As much as Mirio thought his own telling of the events would smooth things over, he couldn't risk breaking one of the few rules his owner had established.

"Wow! You're not even a student and you're better behaved than us! Sensei!" Mirio called, causing his owner to look over his shoulder. "Shinsou can use his phone to talk, right?"

"Of course he can," his owner answered, returning his focus to the board.

Mirio stared expectantly as 27 began typing, a bit too giddy to see him use the phone. "*I bro-oke Bakugo-o's nose and cut his a-arm. Tha-at's hardly mu-urder. A-and I'm not stu-upid enough to atta-ack a pro. My ea-ars aren't bleedi-ing, if you-ou haven't no-oticed.*"

Shizuo glared, slamming a hand on his desk. “Still! He attacked a first year with his knife-summoning quirk! I’ll be able to detect it if he tries to attack you, Mirio!”

“Shizuo, just because I don’t have my quirk, doesn’t mean I’m helpless,” Mirio replied, his smile waning at the edges. “Besides, Shinsou’s quirk isn’t-”

“No o-one has a kni-ife summoni-ing quirk. I ha-ave a knife. A he-ero should fi-igure that out, at le-east. A-and Mirio is u-under Eri’s pro-otection.” 27 continued typing. *“E-even if he wa-asn’t, he-e seems like the-e only one he-ere who has a-any situa-ational awa-areness. Tha-at’s more formi-idible than shooti-ing spi-ines.”*

Shizuo paled, staring at 27 with a slack jaw. “Did you read my record? How did you-”

“Shizuo, that’s kind of easy to guess, since you’re in the hero course,” Mirio interrupted, scratching the back of his head. “Of course, Shinsou and I just have a lot more situational awareness!”

A blue haired girl in front of Mirio screamed in frustration, rubbing her head frantically. “Jeez! Can you guys really call yourselves upperclassmen?! You’re bothering Shinsou with dumb-dumb rumors, and now Mirio won’t let me bother him! And I *really* wanted to bother him today! Mirio, can’t I-”

“Nope!” Mirio declared, putting his hand up. “We can only bother Shinsou for 5 minutes a day, and Shizuo just used all of them up!”

“Now that you *can* pay attention to the class,” his owner grouched, and every head flipped to the front of the room in eerie synchronization. “We will discuss the use of excessive force as a deescalation tactic in instances where your opponent is a danger to themselves.”

27 found himself paying more attention to the discussion than his book as the class went on. New tactics and strategies, especially with a psychological aspect to them, were always useful, but the debates that went on between the students and his owner were interesting as well. How to determine when an opponent’s will was failing, whether that was a time to persuade them to surrender. Was it better to break the will of a group by devastating their leader, or to let that leader surrender and hope that a rival didn’t take up the charge?

When it led back to a question of morality, 27 found himself losing interest. These heroes were willing to sacrifice an easy win just to uphold the idea of ‘The Hero’s Mantle.’ Risk getting killed or injured more than necessary to be seen as a martyr for other people to worship. They clearly hadn’t faced the reality of the world if they could say those things so easily.

Chisaki might have been right about Hero Syndrome.

When the class ended, 27’s eyes met the blue haired girl’s, and she grinned widely. Mirio threw out his arms to block her, but before it was necessary, the dark haired boy in front of her wrapped a tentacle around her waist as it shot out from his arm.

“TA-MA-KIII!” the blue haired girl complained, pumping her fists up and down against the tentacle. “I just want to say hi! Can’t I say hi?! It’s rude if I don’t say hi!”

The dark haired boy turned to look at 27, but quickly looked away, slumping further into himself. “You really shouldn’t bother him today, Nejire. You’re a lot to handle on a good day.”

“Shinsou, do you mind just waving at Nejire?” Mirio asked, clapping his hands in front of his chest to subtly beg. “She’s going to be in a mood if you don’t.”

27 didn't particularly care if she was in a mood, since he wouldn't have to interact with the third years again until tomorrow, but something about her watery eyed pout was familiar enough to make him cave.

"YAY!" Nejire cheered, kicking her feet in the air while she was still in the tentacle's grasp.

"Shinsou waved at me! We're going to be best friends, Tamaki! You're going to be really jealous! I bet you're going to be SUPER jealous! He looks like he could be your little brother, but he's going to be MY little brother, and we're going to make you SUPER jealous!"

"He does look similar to..." Tamaki muttered, before he glanced at 27 again and slammed his head into his desk. "I mean..."

"I hope you guys have a good rest of the day!" Mirio cheered, raising his hand so Eri could give him a high-five, as seemed to be a ritual. "If anyone gives you trouble, just call your big brother Mirio!"

"MIRIO! I'm their big sister! Big sister Nejire! Call me instead!" the blue haired girl wailed as she was dragged out by both Tamaki and Mirio.

His owner rubbed at his eyes, exhaustion plain on his face. 27 knew that was because of him. Because he made trouble. He should have found a way to avoid the fight with Bakugo. He could have been half-way forgotten by now if he did.

"Shinsou," his owner said, tucking his hand into his pocket. "Show me the knife."

27 stood stiffly, angling his body away from where Eri was sitting. He hadn't cleaned it yet, and didn't want her to see it besides. He didn't want his owner to see it either. He knew he would take it, and he knew he couldn't refuse that. He pulled the knife free from the sheath and gripped it a little tighter than necessary to keep from shaking.

His owner's eyebrows rose slightly before he spoke again. "How long have you had that?"

' 2 days. ' 27 answered, his signs awkward while still holding the knife. ' *I am sorry.* '

His owner nodded, leaning his back against the wall. "If I trust you not to use it again, would that be a mistake?"

27 shook his head. It could be a test, a test that he was failing miserably, but if there was a chance, a chance that he could keep this knife, he would risk it.

"Good," his owner said, repeating that training word. "You have an appointment after school tomorrow. For now, Hizashi has his free period, and then we have one more period with Class 1-A. Hizashi should be in his classroom."

27 followed, and didn't mind that Eri wanted to hold his hand as they walked through the halls.

An appointment.

A job.

English Theory

Chapter Summary

27's English class is going well, but Eri's homeroom is a bit more

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Mild Dissociation,

The free period with Present Mic ended up being 27's favorite part of the day. Even though he struggled to forget his impending assignment, or the hostile students right outside the door, he was able to do something he had truly missed since The Miasma.

He was able to learn from someone.

Teaching himself sign language and bits of English had been difficult. It was time consuming to constantly drill himself on the same subjects, frustrated when he found out he had remembered something incorrectly, and someone wasn't there to just tell him what he was doing wrong.

Present Mic's teaching style was completely different from Bug's. He never tutted under his breath to make 27 second-guess himself, or beat him into the ground until he learned how to avoid her blows on his own. Even when 27 was wrong, he explained why he might have thought that before he explained why it should be different.

Present Mic never fumbled with his words and go quiet while 27 simmered in confusion, like 10 would at times. He explained everything confidently, and seemed to struggle to hold himself back from going on too many tangents.

Present Mic taught him like 50 did, during the few lessons 27 had with her. Smiling, encouraging, correcting him confidently and gently. When Present Mic tapped his hand against his arm, pleased that 27 circled the right noun, he almost jumped out of his skin at the memory of 50 doing the same.

"Sorry, sorry! I got too excited," Present Mic said, wiping the corner of his eye. "It's just, I've been teaching Class A for almost a year and they still get stuck on capitalization for state names! It's because a good chunk of them study with Midoriya, and he just *struggles* to understand that 'Texas' isn't just shorthand for 'Texas Smash.' "

' Class A too noisy. ' 27 signs. ' Deserve better. '

Present Mic raises his arms as though to grapple his shoulders, his eyes watery, but instead he throws his arms against the chalkboard, groaning. "I KNOW. Iida tries, but they're animals sometimes, Shinsou! Animals! Beasts without reason! Without a hunger to *know*! I know it's second period and they're tired and Shou lets them sleep in homeroom *which just makes it worse*, but Shinsou," Present Mic whips his head around to fix 27 with a pleading expression. "I just wish I had a class full of kids like you."

27 can't help but quirk an eyebrow. ' *Quiet.* '

"No! Kids who *want* to learn! Kids who see the value in something other than throwing punches and taking down villains!" Present Mic says, miming a punch and heroic stance. "I know that's why they chose UA, but so few appreciate that UA is a high school, and they need to learn their fundamentals too! They all think my class is just a waste of time, but when they fumble through an interview for American broadcasts, ho! They'll realize it's too late!"

" ' *Thank you for meeting me, Mr. President!* ' " Mirio calls from the doorway. " ' *I will save one million people as hero!* ' "

" ' *Lemillion, after you save one million people, what will you do next?* ' " Present Mic asks, holding an invisible microphone towards the blonde hero.

" ' *Go to DisneyWorld!* ' " Mirio answers, throwing a thumbs up as he completes what must be an inside joke. "Ecto-sensei let me out early, so I figured I could walk with you guys to Aizawa-sensei's homeroom. One of the Big Three walking around the first year hall should draw more attention to how Shinsou didn't paralyze you from the waist down after you risked your life to save the entire hero course from Shinsou's Demon Shadow Sword Quirk."

Eri sighed with more exhaustion than she should really have, laying her head on her workbook. "Why are the heroes being so *dumb* to Twenny? I've tried *everything* but they're still being mean!"

"I'm sorry, Eri. I'm just interesting to them now," 27 apologized, shrugging. "They'll move on to something else to talk about in a few days."

"As long as you keep your Ogre Rage Nether Weapon quirk to yourself," Present Mic joked, elbow falling short of giving him a nudge. "Just one more class! Homeroom for you guys and... 1-C's English for me."

27 could hear the despair threaded through the voice hero's words. ' *Bad.* '

Present Mic's smile was hollow. "I wish you were there... to give me hope."

27 couldn't help the bitter feeling that rose up in him the more he thought about it. His life would have been far different if he was.

*

Eri stuck close to Twenny as they walked to their desks, and hoped that it helped him not be so scared.

Twenny was having a really bad day, and Eri was having a *really* bad day too. All thanks to the heroes being dumb.

Twenny's first day at school was supposed to be awesome! Eri had a plan for him to have at least five friends by the end of the day, but he was too scared to even talk to his future best friend, Momo.

But that was okay! Twenny's next best friend would be Kirishima, because they both had fun hair and liked Baby Shark, even if they didn't remember each other from school. Kirishima didn't want to talk to Twenny after Bakugo glared at him, but he still said he liked his hair, and that Eri did a really good job on it.

Twenny kept her busy with studying during the first English class, so she couldn't talk to Kaminari or Ashido. Eri wasn't sure if they would be good friends, but they both talked a lot so Twenny wouldn't have to, and they both needed good influences. Zawa said that a lot.

Then, after the second English class, scary Monoma ran up to them instead of Kendo. Kendo is always super nice to Eri, and Yama said she's the mom of Class B, so Eri was sure Twenny would want to be her friend so they can talk about how hard it is to raise kids. But even when Kendo did come over, Monoma started yelling crazy stuff, and that made everyone look at Twenny weird.

Eri usually likes Zawa's free period the best, and she really wanted to spend time with him since she had to start going to Yama's classes instead of just staying with Zawa. But Twenny was really scared. Twenny always looked around rooms, but he kept doing it every time he thought Eri wasn't looking. And he looked at Zawa a lot too, but Zawa was ignoring Twenny. And Zawa ignoring Twenny meant that he didn't really talk to Eri, but he looked at her and smiled whenever she got a question right.

Eri hoped that things would get better after lunch. She was really excited to see Twenny open his bento box and find the happy cat rice ball she worked so hard on. When she was making it, she thought about how much she wanted Twenny to be happy and have friends, just like Yama does when he cooks and thinks about how he wants the people who eat his food to be happy. Yama says that makes the food magically better.

But Eri didn't make it right today.

Eri already knew that Twenny was fighting someone in the bathroom, but seeing him on top of Bakugo with that scary look on his face made Eri's head feel dizzy and her legs feel weird, kind of like they weren't there.

Eri should have been more worried about Twenny, but she kept remembering the fights Twenny had when they lived in the compound.

Sometimes, Eri's quirk didn't work when He wanted it to. When that happened, He did bad things. Sometimes He injected her with something that really hurt. Sometimes, He showed her videos of Twenny fighting people.

Twenny was a good fighter, and Eri always hoped he would win. But that never happened. Twenny would get more and more hurt, until he stopped moving. Twenny would bleed, and his arm would get turned wrong, and his mask would get kicked. Twenny would make sounds that made Eri cry, because she knew he really had to be hurt to make sounds like that.

And Eri couldn't save him.

That bad feeling inside her would make her quirk start working again. And He would tell her that since it worked, He would fix Twenny. But if she ever stopped making it work, He wouldn't, and Twenny would die.

That happened once. Eri felt the bad feeling, and she cried, and she *tried* to make her quirk work. She tried as hard as she could. But He didn't do what He said He would.

Even when Twenny begged Him to.

Yama and Zawa knew something bad happened, and Zawa went to save Twenny while Yama calmed her down. He asked her to name all the things she could see in the room, to wiggle her toes and make fists with her hands until the dizzy-numb feeling went away.

Then Twenny came back with a bump on his head. Eri was glad it was just a bump, but she was still really mad at Bakugo. When she hugged Twenny, she gave Bakugo the meanest look she could, even though it made her sad to do that to a hero.

She tried to get Twenny to eat more, but he said he couldn't in a really tired voice. He kept pulling at his scarf when he thought she wasn't looking, and he looked kind of scared of her when he caught her watching him do that once.

Eri just really wanted to go home. She felt bad for making Twenny go to school. Even Mirio didn't make her feel better, and she knew he was trying his best, even though he did it wrong at first. Eri was pretty sure Twenny just wanted to go home too, because he didn't even read his book during Zawa's class.

After Zawa talked to him about the knife, Twenny started walking weird. It was like he would walk after Hari took Twenny out of the room sometimes. He was really stiff, kind of like Iida walks when he has to do some class president stuff he's nervous about, but Twenny didn't have class president stuff to do. Twenny was probably scared of the doctor's appointment.

Zawa tried to hide it from Eri by just calling it an appointment, but Eri knew it was a doctor's appointment. And she knew that Twenny knew that too, because he was really scared. Maybe if Eri begged and cried, Zawa wouldn't take him. When Eri was supposed to see a doctor about her quirk, she did that, and Zawa called a lot of people and said that Eri couldn't go. The people were really mad, and Zawa got really mad back, and he even he walked outside to yell at them. But after that, Zawa told her she didn't have to go if it made her upset.

It was a good thing Twenny likes Yama so much. Eri likes Yama too, but she really wishes Twenny will start to like Zawa as much as she does. Yama started teaching Twenny more English, by writing a bunch of words on the chalkboard and asking Twenny to circle things or use his hands to tell him what they meant. Yama smiled so much at how smart Twenny was that Twenny even smiled a few times too.

But Twenny went back to being slumpy and scared when they had to go to homeroom, even though Mirio was there. And Eri heard the heroes talking about Twenny, and saw them look at him like they were scared.

Eri was starting to hate school, and that made her really sad. She just wanted the day to be over so she could cuddle with Twenny on the couch and keep him safe.

So when Todoroki walked up to Twenny, Eri felt like she was going to cry. She liked Todoroki. He never bothered her, and when he said hi to her, he was always really quiet. Todoroki was the last hero Eri thought she would have to get mad at.

"Todoroki," Eri said, looking at her desk as she tried to keep her eyes from watering. "Don't be mean to Twenny. Please."

Todoroki stepped back really quickly, like he got scared of what Eri said. Maybe he was scared that she was going to use her quirk, because she knows heroes think she uses it when she gets really upset. Sometimes she wonders if that's why they're so nice to her. "I'm sorry, Eri. I wanted

to ask him a question, but if you would rather-”

Eri looked up at him, and even though his face was still really calm, his eyes were a little wide. He was definitely scared of Eri.

“Eri, it’s okay,” Twenny said, rubbing her back. “It’s just a question.”

Twenny stared at Todoroki, and Todoroki stood up a little straighter as he looked back. “Can I see what your teeth look like?”

Eri looked at Todoroki confused, and Twenny didn’t really move, except to tilt his head a little. Eri was used to Todoroki saying things that made people confused, but that was the most confusing thing Eri has ever heard him say.

Izuku looked a little embarrassed as he looked over at them. “Todoroki, maybe you shouldn’t ask him like that? Or maybe not today?”

Todoroki looked back at Izuku, but then turned back to Twenny to stare at him. It didn’t even look like he was blinking. “I’ve had this theory for a long time, and only you can unlock its mysteries. Can I look at your mouth, please?”

Twenny’s eyebrows screwed up for a minute before he went back to looking like Twenny, then smiled weird to show Todoroki his teeth. Todoroki nodded with a small smile.

“Thank you,” the hero said, then turned back to Izuku. “My theory is correct.”

A lot of students wanted to know his theory. Some of them were excited, but a few of them just laid their heads on their desks and covered their ears.

“He’s only been here one day and Todoroki already has a theory! Spill! Spill! Spill!” Ashido chanted, pumping her fists up and down.

Todoroki looked at Zawa, who was pretending to ignore everything going on, like he usually does when they don’t make too much trouble. “It would be inappropriate to tell everyone here.”

Zawa looked up, and Todoroki jumped when he noticed. “Todoroki. Why is this theory inappropriate to talk about?”

Todoroki didn’t look like he wanted to tell Zawa. “It may have been insensitive to tell Midoriya about it. I apologize, Sensei. And I don’t hold any judgements for your personal history.”

Izuku laid his head on the desk and covered it with his arms. “Todoroki, please don’t...”

Zawa ran a hand over his mouth as he leaned back, like he was trying to hide whether he was mad or trying not to laugh. “Since your classmates are so intrigued now, please explain your theory. You can use the chalkboard if that’s more effective.”

Todoroki nodded, and walked to the front of the classroom. Everyone turned to watch him, even Twenny.

Todoroki wrote Aizawa’s name at the top of the board, then Eri’s a little further down, with a line between them and ‘Red eyes’ in the middle. ‘Parent’ was written under Aizawa’s name, and ‘Child’ above Eri’s. Todoroki then turned to face the class. “I have begun to suspect that the reason that Aizawa-sensei and Eri’s relationship formed so quickly is due to Aizawa-sensei being Eri’s father. Until today, their similar eye color when Sensei activates his quirk was my only evidence.”

Midoriya hugged his head tighter. “Todoroki, that’s not how quirk heredity works.”

“It could be,” Todoroki answers. “But if Aizawa-sensei were Eri’s father, she wouldn’t have been in the situation she was previously. It wasn’t until we learned about Shinsou that I was able to connect the pieces.”

“You haven’t connected shit,” Bakugo growled. “What does looking into Shit-sou’s mouth like a fucking pervert have to do with any of this?”

Todoroki just turned back to the board and wrote ‘Shinsou,’ with a line going to Aizawa and ‘Emitter quirk,’ ‘Tired,’ and ‘Teeth’ written in the middle. Then he drew a rectangle and lines inside of it to make a bunch of little squares right beside ‘Teeth.’ “Shinsou and Aizawa share several similar attributes. The most valuable evidence is their teeth. They both have perfectly aligned teeth, something too rare to be coincidence. It’s genetic.”

Sero raised his hand. “Todoroki, you’ve heard of braces, right? Maybe you shouldn’t just start saying Aizawa-sensei had kids then abandoned them? Right in front of him? Because braces exist?”

Todoroki shook his head. “I’m not casting any judgements. In fact, I have reason to believe these circumstances were out of Aizawa-sensei’s control.”

Todoroki drew another line from ‘Shinsou’ and wrote ‘Yamada’ at the top of it, and ‘Voice quirk’ in the middle of the line. He then drew a line between ‘Aizawa’ and ‘Yamada’ and wrote ‘Close Relationship’ underneath it.

“I have reason to believe that at one time, Aizawa-sensei and Yamada-sensei wanted to have a child together. They contacted a surrogate,” Todoroki explains, writing ‘Mother’ under Zawa and Yama’s relationship line, then drawing a line from that word to ‘Shinsou.’ “Who carried Shinsou to term in secret after Aizawa-sensei was unable to pay for the services due to being an underground hero, as his salary is the lowest in the industry.”

Todoroki drew a yen sign and crossed it out above ‘Aizawa.’

“A surrogate wouldn’t be able to combine genetic information that way, Todoroki,” Momo said with a raised hand. “I think we’ve gone over this-”

“She had a quirk that allowed her to,” Todoroki answered without looking back. “However, this woman was also tied to the criminal underworld, and gave Shinsou to the 8 Precepts of Death. And after Aizawa-sensei’s career progressed and he became more widely known, she was able to use her quirk to conceive Eri without Aizawa-sensei’s knowledge, in hopes of creating a rival to one day take him down. Eri was given away as well, and not discovered until the raid on the 8 Precepts.”

Todoroki finished the line between ‘Woman’ and ‘Eri,’ then drew a line between ‘Eri’ and ‘Shinsou’ before he put the chalk down, turning to face the class.

“This brings us to the present. Eri and Shinsou were unconsciously aware that they are siblings, which explains the relationship between them, and the relationship between them and Aizawa-sensei.”

Eri looked between Twenny and Zawa, wondering if Todoroki was right. Twenny’s mom did give him away, just like her mom did. Maybe their moms *were* the same mom, and Zawa really was their dad. Maybe Twenny was scared of Zawa because he knew that somehow, and was really just

mad at Zawa for not being their dad for a long time.

Todoroki made a lot of sense.

Bakugo slammed his hands on his desk, making Eri jump. "OR, this is all some half-baked bullshit and you're all fucking idiots for buying this! The twerp has red eyes and the corpse has weird teeth! That's all you fucking got! You gonna say I'm Sensei's bastard child next?!"

Todoroki tilted his head to the side like he was thinking about it. "You *are* very defensive about this theory, and you did instigate the fight-"

"I know that a lot of Todoroki's theories have been found to be untrue," Iida says, flapping his hands around to try to get Bakugo to calm down. "But this one may explain something that has been previously unexplained. However, I don't believe it would be appropriate to pry into Aizawa-sensei's personal life, so we should try to forget the information that has-"

"What?! Iida!" Ochako says, turning around in her desk. "Is Todoroki right about this?!"

"It isn't appropriate for us to-"

"Dude, you have to tell us!" Kirishima yelled, smiling really big.

Class A started yelling over each other and crowding Iida into a corner. Eri felt bad for him, but she really wanted to know too.

"Return to your seats," Zawa said in his Teacher Voice, making everyone frown as they sat back down. "Iida, explain to the class why you think Todoroki's theory is credible."

Iida jumped like he didn't expect Zawa to tell him that, but with everyone looking at him and Zawa telling him to, he had to. "If Eri and Shinsou are both wards, they wouldn't be allowed to live together. The policies surrounding wardships strictly prohibit any cohabitation. In fact, only wards from unrelated investigations are allowed one hour of supervised interaction if the appropriate forms are filed and approved. Aizawa-sensei above any other hero would adhere to those policies. However, if Eri or Shinsou were his biological child-"

"Enough," Zawa interrupted, frowning. He looked at the chalkboard again, for a long time. Long enough that Eri stopped wondering if it was true, but started wondering whether it was her or Twenny that had Zawa as a dad. "Iida is right about wardship housing policies, though that isn't covered until your third year. However, neither I nor Present Mic have children."

The heroes were quiet while Zawa erased the board, and Eri tried not to get too upset. It would have been really nice if Zawa was her dad.

Izuku raised his hand, waiting for Zawa to turn around and call on him. But Zawa was cleaning the board really slowly, like he didn't want to have to call on Izuku. "Sensei, um. If Iida is right about the wardship policies, then why-"

"Iida is correct," Zawa answered, his Teacher Voice sounding a little more tired than usual. "Allowances were made above my paygrade."

Zawa erased the yen sign.

"Free periods are a privilege, so I suggest that you use it for self-study," Zawa said, turning around to face the class with his angriest Teacher Voice. "If you don't, I'm more than happy to assign a 20 page report on the topic of pay disparity in the hero industry."

The heroes all found books to read, but Eri didn't want to read hers.

When Zawa took her home from the hospital, he told her she was living with him as a 'ward.' Wards got to live with heroes to keep them safe, and she knew Twenny really needed to be a ward to keep him safe.

But Twenny wasn't supposed to live with them. Zawa said it was allowed, but it didn't sound like he was as sure as Iida was when he said it wasn't.

If Twenny wasn't supposed to live with them, was someone going to take him away? If Eri wasn't good, would that make them take Twenny away? Would Twenny have to go back to the bad place?

Twenny looked like he was worried about that too.

Be Good

Chapter Summary

Aizawa and Yamada knew a bit about what to expect from their wards, but when Eri seems to struggle, they reach out to the expert. Meanwhile, 27 tries to adjust his plans for the new information come to light.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None!

I'm putting up a double chapter as thanks for reaching 2000 hits! Thank you guys so much for reading and enjoying!

Hizashi could only hold him, he knows any assurances he could come up with would go unheard right now. Shouta just breathes, he doesn't want to talk yet, doesn't trust himself with words. He goes limp in Hizashi's embrace, head tucked into his shoulder.

It had been a *very* bad day.

The fight with Bakugo. The knife they didn't know about. The tension Shinsou carried with him the entire day, somehow worse than the way he had been in the interrogation room.

And Eri, despondent little Eri, had started calling Shouta 'Aizawa' again.

Hizashi knew it hurt. Becoming 'Yamada' again hurt. It hurt to hear Eri revert back to her quiet, polite way of speaking, dropping her nicknames and flashes of emotion in her tone. The way she tried to sound too mature when she spoke, flinching when she mumbled a word as though she expected to be corrected far more harshly than Shinsou ever would.

He knew it hurt Shouta more. He had been Zawa longer than he had been Yama.

They knew there would be backtracking. Regression. But it hurt to think they caused this, that keeping Shinsou home for one more day could have prevented it in some way, or delayed it. That they had failed as heroes, as caretakers.

But they were here now. The wards were asleep, and the walls could drop. They could hold each other, let the guilt seep out, and try to fix it tomorrow.

"I need to talk to Nemuri," Shouta whispers, pulling away just slightly. "If she has any advice...."

Hizashi nods, tracing circles over Shouta's shoulders. "It's not your fault."

Shouta presses his forehead against him, hiding his face. "I have to fix it."

He knows Shouta would struggle to say that if he could see his face, even with him. He knew Eri had only lived with them for a month, knew that was hardly enough time to justify the way they had begun to feel about her. The way Shouta felt a bit more keenly, but no less readily than Hizashi.

If Shinsou's eyes stopped lighting up when he signed to him....

It was something so small. They had known Shinsou for *days*, not weeks, and Hizashi knows he should be more concerned. Knows this feeling could be stemming from an unhealthy place, from poisoned ground. Trying to save that middle schooler that was convinced he was a villain because of what happened when he was born, instead of the kid who had been through so much *worse*. The kid who was afraid of something worse than Chisaki.

"I've got a few hours before work. I'll be here if anything happens," Hizashi reassures, and wishes he had taken another day off from his hero duties. He was offered that time, but he didn't really consider how much more difficult the transition would be for Shinsou than Eri. He didn't even think that Shinsou would be attached to him this early, especially not more attached to him than Shouta.

Shouta nods, and gives him a barely-there kiss before he leaves for Midnight's dorm. To get answers, to get a strategy.

Shouta without a strategy was a painful sight to see.

*

"Oh? Does your husband know what you're doing here, Shou-chan?" Midnight purred, leaning against the door.

She must have gotten the hint by the way he invited himself inside, as she closed the door and walked to the kitchen to mix up some instant coffee. He didn't even have the energy to complain about that offensive choice in drink.

"Yamada didn't tell me why Shinsou isn't in my art class anymore," Nemuri said, half complaint, half inquiry. Originally, they wanted to see if Shinsou could handle being away from Eri for a short period of time, and Nemuri's art class seemed well suited to distract him. But after the reaction he had to waking up without Eri there, that plan was quickly changed. Though, there were other reasons.

"Something is wrong with his hand. He avoids using it," Aizawa answers, settling into his usual place on her couch, and Nemuri hums thoughtfully. "Eri regressed. I'm 'Aizawa' now."

He forces his fist to relax, but the tension just travels up to his jaw. It was selfish of him, selfish to let it hurt. Eri had to be hurting more. Hurting *because* of him. Because he failed her.

"It happens. A lot," Nemuri chides, handing him a mug one of her wards had made. The son of a mob boss who could cry poison tears, if he remembered correctly. "When did it start?"

"After school, when we got home," Aizawa takes a sip, and ignores the taste. "She was quiet during the walk, and hasn't left Shinsou's side since lunch."

Nemuri takes the armchair catty corner to the couch, legs tucked underneath her. "A lot of changes have taken place in a very short amount of time. That's scary enough, but according to the rumor mill, it was a very stressful day. Safety is in past behaviors, and proven people."

He thought he was one of them. A person Eri could trust.

"She'll try again, Aizawa. And after that, she'll remember that it's safe. And after that, she'll retreat back into her shell," Nemuri takes a drink, and sighs. "It's hard. It feels like an insult to your entire career, to have a child doubt you. But it's never really about *you*, it's about what they've learned, what was proven to keep them safe years before they even met you. One day, she'll regress from something else, but you will still be 'Zawa.' "

Aizawa rubs his thumb over the handle of the mug, the edges where it was rough and less glazed. "It would have been better if Shinsou was assigned to you. Eri could still have that anchor." *I have no idea how to help him . I've already messed up this badly.*

Nemuri hums her dissatisfaction, giving him a half-hearted glare. "You're right! If he was my ward, I'd have him talking on the first day! With all of my years of experience, he would be fully recovered by now! Really, you're doing *everything* wrong!"

He knows she's joking, but he doesn't feel like she's wrong.

Nemuri softens, staring at her own mug. From the little girl that she reassigned to Joke. The one ward she couldn't talk about for years afterwards, blaming herself when the investigating officer should have known better. The reason Aizawa stared at the mugshots of the 8 Precepts members for hours, trying to find them in his own face. "Shinsou is a hard one. I don't envy you at all."

Aizawa doesn't want to say it. Some illogical thing rises in him at the thought, telling him he's admitting to being a villain, in some way, by admitting he's seen as one. "He sees me as Chisaki. He does anything that resembles an order when I speak to him. Tomorrow, he's going to have a tattoo removed," Aizawa pauses, realizing he's holding the mug so tightly his knuckles are turning white. "I don't know how to convince him that I'm not giving him another brand."

Nemuri leans her head against the back of the chair, turning her mug in her hands. "That's a hard one. Trying to convince a child that they own their own body, but with Shinsou...."

Shinsou hasn't had enough time to even fathom that. Aizawa hasn't given him enough time.

"It was his choice, right?" Nemuri asks, stripping too much accusation from her tone to make him doubt the question was anything but.

"He got it when he was fused with Chisaki and another member of the 8 Precepts," Aizawa answers. "He was going to burn it off if I didn't catch him."

Nemuri keeps his expression blank, but her breath catches for a moment. "He's not ready to face the brands, then. That's another trauma entirely. One too many."

"Five that I know of," Aizawa says, then more softly. "Hundreds that I don't."

"Only he does," Nemuri muses, an indirect attempt to reassure. "Let him think about what he wants. I wouldn't...." Nemuri sighs, closing her eyes for a moment. "I didn't even look with Yukoi. It might have helped."

Yukoi was reassigned a week later. Nemuri thinks that removing the brand without replacing it was too new, too challenging. The wait for the new one too much to bear.

"Shou, I do love you, and I know you're trying your best," Nemuri says, staring at him with a soft gaze that turns harder. "But you need to treat Shinsou like Eri, even if he's far more deadly."

Aizawa wanted to know, but he didn't expect to hear this. "In what way?"

"You go on duty when you're with him. You watch for him to reach for the knife, check his feet for a fighting stance," Nemuri glances at the capture scarf Aizawa hasn't taken off in days. "Shinsou might not have noticed that, but he can see the difference between you and Yamada. Yamada shares things with him, even if it's just a smile or a bit of nervousness. Yamada is vulnerable, and you never are. Except with Eri."

Aizawa was trained against it. He struggled, even with Eri, to do it. Let himself smile. Let himself relax. Let her play with his hair. Telling her things that he liked, things that he never shared so easily with others.

Eri made it easier. He told himself he had to do these things, to model them for her. And it got easier as it worked, as she did start to talk to him more, to tell him the things she liked too.

He didn't notice his guard rising with Shinsou, but Nemuri was right. He hadn't shared anything with him, half out of avoiding him to keep from causing him stress, but the other half was training. Recognizing the way Shinsou carried himself, remembering the video of him fighting off his attackers in that cell. The brutal injuries he had caused when he was in that interrogation room. Aizawa was recognizing a threat instead of the child beneath it.

"It's hard, I know," Nemuri sighs, propping her head on her hand. "The first time I was able to turn my back to a ward who pulled out a knife, I got stabbed. It took a long time to try again, but the second time, I didn't. Maybe because they knew how much I hate getting stabbed."

Aizawa almost hopes Shinsou would do that. That kind of fear was familiar, and far less than the stock-still terror Aizawa inspired now. "You should meet him this weekend. Observe the situation."

Nemuri gives him a Cheshire grin. "Well, if you insist, but Emi is coming in Friday night. I'll just have to invite her too, so she won't be *lonely*."

"Fine," Aizawa answers, taking another sip of his rancid drink.

Nemuri waits for a protest, or at least a stipulation, but Aizawa has none to offer. This situation is far beyond him, and he knows that. "You've got it bad, Shouta," Nemuri teases. "The 'Zawa' withdrawals are making you desperate."

"She has experience with mute cases," Aizawa answers, making Nemuri glance away. "And she's far more tolerable with a distraction."

Nemuri chuckles, pressing a finger to her lip. "Oh, *isn't she?* Delightfully one-track minded."

Aizawa ignores the innuendo, finding himself more settled now.

Sharing things. Expressing vulnerabilities.

Chisaki wouldn't have done that.

27 angles his feet towards the desk, straining to get his footing before his arms give out, or the ceiling tiles begin to crack. It's harder getting out of an air duct than in, but that was always the case, he should have remembered that.

He stands on the desk and lets his arms fall to his sides, rubbing the overexerted muscles. The ventilation system led to a lot of rooms, including Eri's, but the vents were too small in the living room, bathroom, and kitchen to use as access points. He wouldn't be able to use the air ducts as an escape measure, but if he gathered some rope or made some, they could use the window in Eri's room.

He picked up the vent cover and took a screw out of his pocket, to put the room back to rights. He had gathered as much information as he could, yet he still had several hours before he was supposed to be awake. His old friend, sleeplessness, still remained.

The front door had opened and closed a few hours ago. Someone exiting. An hour later, that person returning. An hour ago, someone leaving again.

He didn't know who remained, Yamada or his owner, but they were in the living room now. Awake, by the occasional sound of footsteps to the kitchen. Keeping watch.

From the right corner of the couch, only the first half of the hallway was visible, which would be beneficial if not for the nightlights positioned down the length of the hallway. If he opened the door, the light at the end of the hall would cast a shadow for the watchman on the couch to see.

Why did he ever think those lights were for Eri's sake?

At least Eri was beginning to realize it. There was a part of him that wished it wasn't so, that the reality beneath was the same soft, confusing thing it was on the surface. Twenny wanted to tell her no, that it would be okay, that Eri could keep dreaming of a world where beds and books and food were given away for free.

27 couldn't. The only reassurance he could give her was that her job was simple, 'Don't make them angry.'

27 had other jobs. Don't make them angry, learn their tells, find the weaknesses, learn the game. Play the game. Lose at it, keep Eri safe. Keep Eri happy.

She'd learn to be happy again. It was hard to accept the reality after dreaming for so long, but it was time. His place here was fragile, and if he lost the game badly enough, he had to make sure she would be safe.

27 heard footsteps as he finished replacing the last screw. From the couch, down the hall. To the office or bedroom, he needs to count the difference tomorrow, should have before. A door closes. He waits.

10 minutes.

20 minutes.

They might be asleep. He hadn't given them any indication he was awake. Eri was sleeping in her own bed. Fitfully, when he checked on her, but he already knew they didn't have cameras to watch them.

Not yet. Even Chisaki waited a year before he installed one, though it had plenty of blindspots.

30 minutes. Should he risk it? If there was a camera placed on the couch now, the watchman could be surveilling it now. Luring him into a trap.

37 minutes. He hears the whimpering. Eri is having a night terror, he doesn't have much time before she starts screaming. Not enough to use the ventilation system. If she screams, she'll make them angry. The watchman must have wanted to find something out of place, and he can't let it be Eri.

27 opens the door, only as much as he needs, and makes his way into Eri's room, resolving to make sure a few nightlights go missing in the future.

Eri whimpers and thrashes on the bed, not yet caught in the stillness that explodes into a scream. 27 kneels beside her bed, pushing the sheer curtain away, and waits until she turns towards him to press his hand over her tiny mouth.

Her eyes spring open and she screams against his palm, thankfully muffled. He could have forced her jaw shut, it would have been easy to do, but he couldn't. Not to Eri.

27 whispers assurances, as quiet as he can. "It's okay. It's a bad dream. It's okay."

Eri stills, eyes panicked and watery, but when he pulls her into his arms she tucks her face against his shoulder hard, hard enough to muffle the sobbing. She remembered her job. "Z-Zawa m-mad. H-he ate h-hi-im."

27's chest tightens. He can't comfort her the way she needed, couldn't take her to his owner to remember the man's face. He might not even be the watchman, but if he was....

Eri takes her deep breathes, guided by the circles he draws on her back and the quiet hums he makes. She's trying to be good, trying so hard to be quiet. " *Za-awa* ," she sobs, and his chest aches as she starts crying harder.

He's asking too much. Eri wasn't meant for this, and he had never wanted it for her. It was hard enough in that cold, concrete room, but for her to stay cold in this warm and soft place they had found was just too much.

The door opens.

27 is frozen in place. Dog knows to push Eri away, Twenny knows he can't, not after all she's been through today. He can smell the bleach, hand in his hair, '*Are you trying to get her sick, Dog? Oh, if Chisaki caught you, it wouldn't just be a bath.*'

Eri keeps him tethered in the fog, still shaking but aware enough to recognize his owner's voice when it finally comes. "Eri, are you okay?"

Eri tightens her hold against it, *trying* so hard, but a sob wracks through her and she runs, throwing herself into his owner's arms. "Don't b-be m-ma-ad, 'm so-o-orry! I'm so-orry!"

His owner's arms wrap around her, red pajamas and white hair dissolving into shadow, and 27 just watches. The white scarf is gone and 27 left his knife in the room, the fight would be a little more even if it has to happen. A fight is his only guess for a good distraction, he doesn't know the man's tics yet, doesn't know how to hide Eri from his attention when she does something wrong. "I'm not mad."

"B-be go-ood, gonna be go-ood," Eri sobs, pushing away just go pull herself back. "D-don't ta-ake Twenny! Please! Do-o-on't!"

Eri wails, pain and terror that works its way deeper into his chest without words to dilute it. His owner's arms tighten around her, and he glances at 27 before returning his focus to Eri, curling a hand over the back of her head. "Eri, I'm not going to take Shinsou away. Did... what Iida say scare you?"

Eri starts to calm, still struggling to even out her breaths, but she holds her breath and nods, every tiny muscle in her body held tight as she waits.

"Eri, I..." His owner pauses, turning his face to the side. "I wouldn't let that happen. Shinsou was assigned to Yamada as a ward. So you two could live together. The people that Iida said would take him are the same people who want Shinsou to be here. They wouldn't want you to miss him."

Eri wipes away her tears, still sniffing, then looks up at his owner. "Y-you won't take him to the b-bad place? O-or the ch-chair?"

27 had to look away, knowing his face would betray him. She dreamed about him being taken to The Chair. Remembered the one horror he could never protect her from, the one she knew best.

He knew that kind of dream. He had woken up screaming from it himself, clutching her tightly when he remembered how to breathe, only to run his hands over her arms, afraid to find a lump squirming beneath her skin.

"Eri, I would *never* let that happen. I would never," his owner sucks in a breath, possibly to steady himself from that flash of anger in his voice. "I would never hurt you. Either of you. It's my job to keep you safe, as a hero and as your guardian."

Eri calms, though 27 knows she's still trembling without having to look. "Can...I call you 'Zawa...' and it won't make you mad?"

Something moves, a rustle of fabric from either of them, but for a moment 27 forgets that it couldn't be the scarf, that it wasn't reaching out to wrap around Eri's neck. 27 turns back to look, and catches that odd, soft smile on his owner's face. "I like being called 'Zawa.' Even more than my hero name."

Eri presses her face into his chest, her toes curling into the carpet, probably embarrassed. "I like calling you that."

27 barely hides the clench of his jaw. The exchange, trading things that they liked. Eri didn't know she was handing him the tools for her own punishment. This one wasn't dangerous, but the way Eri answered tells him it was practiced often enough. She had or would give away something they could take.

"Can Twenny sleep in my room?" Eri asks, and 27 flinches. She handed him something, something easily taken away. They had separate rooms for a reason, and the nights she could ignore that were wearing thin. They would put their foot down eventually, they would *make* her stay in her own room in a way far crueler than bribery and reading bedtime stories.

"If he wants to," his owner answers, glancing at the pink curtain surrounding her bed. "I don't mind at all." His owner is a very good liar, and he can't blame Eri for being fooled. If 27 didn't know better, he might also trust his words, even if they made no sense.

Eri only had to look at him with her eyes still watery from tears left unshed for 27 to stand and pull

the comforter farther back. She runs to get on the bed, as though she knows his owner might change his mind. At least she knew that much.

27 pulls the covers over her and sits, finding himself unable to lay down with his owner's eyes still watching. It could be a test, half-failed already, but not fully. A beating, but not a bleach bath.

"Good night, Zawa," Eri calls as she yawns, tucking a calico cat plushie under her chin.

"Good night," his owner answers, closing the door behind him. 27 lays down, wondering if Eri was learning the game a little faster than he expected.

She squirms closer to him, yawning. "Me n' Zawa will keep you safe, Twenny."

"Yeah," 27 answers, running a hand over her hair. "I'll keep you safe too."

Let's Chat

Chapter Summary

Yamada gives 27 a surveillance detail, and unlocks a new way to gather information from his phone.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Mild dissociation spell

27 doesn't sleep. He watches Eri slumber, thankfully undisturbed from nightmares. He counts her plushies hung on the wall, 37 he can see but there are more he can't. He runs through all the JSL signs he knows, recalling any English words that partner with them.

Yamada returns to the dorm an hour before he enters to wake Eri up, already dressed in his hero costume. He opens the door too suddenly for 27 to feign sleep, but doesn't seem to notice. It's probably beneath him to punish 27 for not sleeping when he was told to. "Good morning, listeners! Time to get ready for school!"

Eri grumbles until she rolls into 27's thigh, springing up as she realizes his presence. "Twenny doesn't want to, Yama! Don't make him!"

Yamada winces, teeth flashing for a moment, before he leans against the doorframe, looking at 27. "I know yesterday was pretty rough, kiddo. It really wasn't supposed to be. I really wish you could stay home, but...."

27 shook his head. *'I'm fine. E-R-I worried.'*

Yamada smiled, though it was strained. "Still! If anything happens or you want to come hang out with me for a while, just shoot me a text and I'll be there! We can get it all set up at breakfast!"

The rest of the morning sank into routine, Eri picking out her clothes then 27's, choosing a black hoodie that at first glance was similar to his uniform at The Miasma, until 27 noticed the cat ears poking out of the hood. It was kind of adorable, and 27 wondered if Eri had something similar.

It turned out she did, a tiny white hoodie that she had changed into, wanting to match. Yamada combed her hair into pig tails as Eri poured 27 a bowl of cereal, and 27 watched Yamada work, trying to figure out how he was able to pull her white tresses into shape without hurting her.

"Alright! Can I see your phone for a bit? I'll just put my number in and give it right back," Yamada asked, possibly noticing the way 27's hand tightened possessively over the device.

He didn't want to hand it over. It was not only incredibly useful, but it was also the most expensive thing he had ever possessed. It made him feel a bit more normal, a bit less like Dog, owning something that Rikiya and Chisaki had.

But he couldn't refuse Present Mic.

The right hand hits the hardest, and the blonde hair hanging limp around the hero's shoulders was starting to look like a different shade the more he wavered. Bug wouldn't have let him hesitate this long, and he should count himself lucky that Present Mic hadn't gotten angry already. He held the phone out for the hero to take, hoping that if he was angry, he would hold the grudge until Eri was out of the room.

"Oh, it's the same model as mine! That's good, these things are confusing for an old geezer like me," Yamada says, sitting close to 27 as he held the screen out for him to watch. "The messaging app is- oh. That's right, we haven't gotten a SIM card yet."

27 watched as Yamada closed the app that displayed the warning about the missing SIM card, pulling up another that listed several games and other apps.

"Let's get you set up on LNE for now, and maybe Snapchat too. LNE is easier to use, but Snapchat is also super fun to play around with. That's the one with the cat filter!" Yamada rambled, pulling up LNE as soon as the icon loaded on the screen. "Alright, I'll just plug in your name here, my email for right now, verify it after this and.... then.... Presto! Here's our chat, when you open up this screen, just tap my name here and you can send me a message!"

Yamada handed 27 back the phone, which started to buzz and ding as more chats labelled 'Do you know' with various names popped up.

"Looks like some students wanted to chat with you too! Now I can have you spy on them and tell me when they're on their phones in class!" Yamada laughed in a dramatically villainous way, twirling the ends of his mustache.

27 would have ignored the other messages if Yamada didn't assign him to a surveillance detail. He opened the first 'Do you know' and saw it was for Mirio. Another message popped up asking for his username for the chat.

27 frowned. When he typed in his new name, another dialogue popped up asking if he was sure. He wasn't, it seemed like the app didn't want him to use that name.

27 had never picked his own name, and he had too many to choose from. 27, Dog, Twenny, Shinsou, Listener, and then some that his clients from The Miasma had given him. Quizzler, Hypno, Mind Stealer, Mind Flayer. Names given to him to cover up the fact that he was a Number, that he was rented out for a night. All of them seemed a bit cheap to him.

He turned the phone to Eri, who read the name at the top and beamed. "You're friends with Mirio on the phone!"

"The phone doesn't like 'Shinsou Hitoshi,' " 27 explained, his new name feeling strange as he spoke it for the first time. "I don't know another name to pick."

Eri took the phone and started typing with practiced hands as Yamada looked over from the stove. "Oh, you can still use your name, Shinsou! LNE just encourages you to make a new one since most people use inside jokes as user handles."

Yamada rubbed the back of his neck nervously as he turned back to making coffee, and 27

wondered what name he had picked for him in their chat. Even if Yamada called him 'Shinsou,' maybe he wanted to give him another name, but wasn't allowed to speak it after the police had named him. Maybe it was a name as tawdry and dramatic as the ones his clients had given him.

Eri handed back the phone, which he noticed already had a few messages on the screen. "You can change it if you don't like it," Eri said, fidgeting in her seat. "But Mirio likes it! He promises he won't tell!"

27 scrolled to the top of the messages and started reading.

Eri's Plushie Dealer: Hi Shinsou! This is Togata Mirio! I hope you like the phone!

Eri's Mom: hi mirio!!! this is eri, i picked twennys name!!! aizawa said twenny is my secret nickname for twenny, like zawa is for him, so i didnt pick that one but you can use my other secret nickname. it matches with your phone nam but if twenny doesnt like it the phone says he can change it right?? i hope he likes it

Eri's Plushie Dealer: !!! Hi Eri!!! Awww I like the name you picked! It's so cute! But maybe I should change my name, I don't want Shinsou to think I'm a criminal or anything.

Eri's Mom: no! i like your name!

Eri's Mom: were eating cereal. what are you eating for breakfast?

Eri's Plushie Dealer: /// I'm glad you like it! I'm eating Eggos! They're my favorite!

Eri's Plushie Dealer: Maybe if I get this job I applied for, I can get you a phone too! Then we can talk all the time! And I can know what you're eating for breakfast!

Eri's Mom: yeah!!!! and the phone wont care i dont have a whole name because i have to pick one anyway!!! heres twenny!

Eri's Plushie Dealer: Hi Shinsou!!! I promise I'm not a bad influence on Eri, it's just a joke I thought was funny at the time!!!

27 pushed down the embarrassment he felt reading his username. He had a job to do, to gather information on the students for Yamada, to be his inside man. Perhaps Yamada would want to know what job Mirio was trying to get.

Eri's Mom: It's fine. You'd make a horrible dealer. Can't pull off the intimidation part. Job.

Eri's Plushie Dealer: lol Probably! I had to fight class 1-A to get them to listen to me during my big speech to them! If only I could imitate Aizawa-sensei better!

Eri's Plushie Dealer: Oh, and I applied for a construction job! Even if I can't be a hero, I still have the muscles to do this job! I might have more options if I transferred into GenStudies to graduate, but Principal Nezu was really against it. He's going to put me on an academic hold at the end of the semester until I get my quirk back.

27 closed the chat application, though he knew he still had a job to do. It would have to wait until the guilt swirling inside him calmed.

Eri liked this hero, whether he was a good one or not. She asked him to fix Mirio, and he could. He could take control of Eri, control her quirk where she couldn't. It was 27 that decided Mirio's fate

now.

27 decided whether he would be a hero or not.

Did Mirio know that? Was he keeping close to Eri for his own sake, and trying to bribe 27 with the phone to sway him? What would happen when he realized his plans hadn't worked? How would he force 27 to control Eri to regain his quirk?

27 felt the hum from the phone's vibration through the table, and tucked it into his pocket to mute the sound. The guilt had dissipated, becoming something else, something that turned his stomach all the same.

There were too many players in the game now. Too many angles and 27 didn't have a plan for any of them.

The buzzing kept getting louder as the morning went on.

*

The day passed by more smoothly than it had yesterday. The students seemed to ignore him, except for a few waves that he could easily look away from and plead ignorance to. The only moment of panic during homeroom was when the pink girl stood up, slamming her hands on the desk as she glanced at 27 with a strange, thin lipped smile, then turned to the red haired boy behind her and nodded violently, jumping up and down as she did. The boy stood up, screaming "REALLY?!" and 27 worried they were going to attack, before his owner ordered them to sit down.

Surprisingly, that was the only time Class A interacted with him. 27 thought their interest would hold until the weekend, but the explanation came during 1-B's English class.

Monoma kept staring at him. Anytime 27 looked, he caught the blonde looking back at him, and though he turned away, he would be back to staring immediately. As soon as the class was dismissed, Monoma sprang from his desk and attempted another leap, but Kendo was faster, catching his waist in the crook of her arm. "Monoma! I already told you-"

"Well, maybe I was going to apologize before you rudely interrupted me!" The blonde protested, straining against her arm as he pointlessly reached towards 27. "Class A reacted in their usual barbarous way, but I should have known that before I told them! *Someone* should take responsibility for yesterday, but I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for Class A to do so!"

Kendo sighed, shoving Monoma in front of her with ease. "Shinsou has been through enough already. Save it for Monday, alright?"

Monoma sighed, as though Kendo had asked him to do the impossible, and looked over Kendo's shoulder to catch 27's stare. "You're right, he does look terrible. You should increase your water intake, Shinsou. You look a little dehydrated from all the stress."

27 raised his eyebrow. ' *You look crazy.* '

Monoma copied ' *crazy* ' with a baffled look on his face. "Is there something in my hair? Or are you saying - Present Mic-sensei!"

"Oh, that's kind of a loose sign to interpret," Present Mic answered, lying through his teeth. "You should think about learning a little sign language for yourself, though! It's very useful in stealth and rescue operations! Such a shame UA hasn't offered a course for it yet."

Monoma was still repeating the sign as he left, following Kendo. As soon as they were out of earshot, Present Mic laughed.

"That's one way to inspire them to learn," the hero chuckled. "I think Shou is going to sleep through his free period, and maybe you two should too. I can make him give up the sleeping bag if you want, Shinsou."

'I'm fine.' 27 lied, as his legs ached just from standing. *'Need water. I guess.'*

Yamada laughed, far more than necessary, and walked them to the staff room.

His owner was asleep already, sitting under his desk with a yellow sleeping bag cocooned around him. 27 assured Yamada that he didn't want the sleeping bag several times before the man left, promising to come back and take it if 27 changed his mind.

When 27 turned around, he saw Eri already passed out, laying across his owner's legs. Realizing she probably needed the rest more than her math lessons, 27 pulled out the phone and sat down in a chair positioned to watch the door and the two nappers.

He ignored the first two chats, though both had messages waiting, and pulled up the next 'Do you know.' It was Midoriya Izuku.

27 ran a hand through his hair, frowning at the phone. He needed to pick the codename himself this time, since Eri would pick something embarrassing. If he knew what Izuku had already picked, he could choose something to match. Something that would make sense. But he wasn't given that information.

An inside joke. He didn't have anything like that with Izuku, he only saw him for a handful of hours, and the only conversation they had was about the Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats.

Maybe Izuku picked a name based off that show. His favorite character was Tiger, he might have chosen Tiger as his username. But going by Mandalay....

27 typed in the name and waited for the phone to load.

Deku: Hi Shinsou! This is Midoriya, the weird guy that was bothering you yesterday. Sorry about that! It was nice watching KKP with you!

Deku: Or, I hope it was. I didn't really know about your quirk being on it, I'm sorry about that.

Deku: Your quirk is really cool though! Sempai told me more about it, I hope that's okay! Please stop me if I start rambling about it, I know that's kind of annoying

Deku: I'm really glad that you get to live with Eri again! She was really worried about you while you

Deku: Sorry I meant to backspace not send! I'm just really glad you're with her again! She talked about you a lot, and you seem like a really nice person!

27 closed the chat and moved on to the next one, hoping that somehow, it would tell him how to change his username.

This chat was different. Instead of one person, there were three names grouped together, Midoriya Izuku, Uraraka Ochako, and Iida Tenya. Three people to judge his choice in a username.

He closed the chat again and leaned away. He had been given so many names and yet he couldn't pick a single one. He knew the one he picked for himself was stupid, but he couldn't figure out how to change it. None of the things he tapped on had a clear option for it.

He pulled up the Deku chat again. Izuku had already seen something embarrassing from him.

Brainwashio: This app is confusing. I can't change my name. I don't know why you're calling yourself useless either.

Deku: You've never used LNE bef

Deku: I MEANT TO BACKSPACE

Deku: Sorry, it's kind of confusing for me too since I got a new phone! The keyboard layout is off.

Deku: You can tap on your name to change it though!

Brainwashio: Your name is still Useless. I don't know what that's from.

Deku: Oh! It's my hero name! I know that's kind of weird, but since my name is 'Izuku,' I used to be called 'Deku' before I came to UA. Instead of trying to forget about that, I decided to change the meaning of the name for myself and take pride in it! For me, 'Deku' doesn't mean 'Useless,' it means 'You can do it!'

Brainwashio: This username works then. You're on your phone in class, though.

27 isn't sure if he really was called 'Brainwashio' by kids trying to bully him, but it seems likely enough. It's not like he has a hero or villain name to use.

He wonders if Present Mic was only interested in students that were on their phones in his class when another message comes in.

Deku: You sound a little bit like Iida! But it's okay! Midnight-sensei lets us have free time after we do any quizzes. Art History is one of my better subjects, so I have a lot of free time.

Deku: Not that I'm bragging, though! Everyone does well in this class, so I'm definitely not at the top or anything!

Brainwashio: There's another chat with you, a girl, and the weak president.

Deku: Ochako and Iida! They're good friends of mine, and I just thoug

Deku: TT.TT I hate this phone.

Deku: You don't have to respond if you don't want to, especially since Iida made one with everyone in Class A for you. That one is kind of a mess right now, though, so sorry in advance!

Brainwashio: The naming conventions in those two

Brainwashio: I don't know them.

Deku: It's okay to pick any name you want! The Class A one is...chaotic. Kaminari and Ashido keep changing everyone's names, even though Iida asked them not to, so you wouldn't be confused. But in the IzuOchaIida chat, we're using video game characters!

Brainwashio: I don't know any.

Deku: I could pi

27 waited for another message, but none came. Izuku must have not meant to send that message. Again.

27 scrolled through the remaining chats. Another group chat with 20 other names, which must be the Class A chat. A chat for Izuku and Mirio. A chat for Monoma. A chat for someone named Koda Koji.

A chat for Bakugo Katsuki.

27 assigned a username for that chat, but Bakugo hadn't sent him a message. His eyes were becoming strained from staring at the screen too long, and 27 closed the app, deciding to keep watch for the rest of the period.

Lunch, then Class 3-A. He should probably check the messages from Mirio before then, so he wouldn't try to talk to him during the class, perhaps even using Eri as a means to further pressure him into restoring his quirk. English after that. Homeroom.

The job.

27 found himself staring at his owner as he slept, wondering what the job could entail. He hadn't been evaluated yet, nor trained. Eri didn't seem to be involved, as Yamada had told her she would be spending time with Mirio after school.

What was his job supposed to be? Was it somehow related to his owner's hero work?

His owner's eyelids fluttered, as though he had sensed 27's stare, and he looked away, hoping that he wouldn't wake. A loud snore reassured him.

Lunch. 3-A. English. Homeroom. Job.

He wasn't sure which one worried him more.

*

It wasn't lunch. Though Yamada seemed disappointed that 27 hadn't opened their chat, he only asked once before swiftly changing the conversation. Eri was still groggy enough not to notice that 27 only ate her rice ball and a few steamed vegetables.

3-A also went surprisingly well. Though he hadn't checked the messages yet, Mirio seemed more nervous about being in the same classroom than 27 was. He kept scratching the back of his head anytime he glanced at 27 while he spoke to Eri about their upcoming playdate, but didn't say a word to 27 himself. The only member of 3-A who did talk to him, surprisingly, was Tamaki, who handed him a water bottle and muttered that drinking more water helps when he doesn't sleep

enough. The tentacle-summoner then bolted as though he still believed those rumors about 27's knife quirk.

English was actually fun. Yamada seemed to have forgotten 27's surveillance assignment completely, instead of being disappointed that he didn't have much to report. After doing a few more circling exercises, 27 decided to try to translate his report so far in English using his left hand to write, thinking that could compensate for having found out so little. The result was messy, and nearly incomprehensible, but Yamada smiled so much that it looked like it hurt him.

“ ‘Deku on phone in Mid-y-it's clas...’ Midnight's class? Oh! I don't mean to- you're doing a great job, it's really amazing you know this much already!” Yamada's hands fluttered around before he grabbed a piece of chalk. “ ‘Midnight’ is spelled like this, the ‘gh’ combo is pretty tricky, a lot of my second years still get stuck on it. But the possessive ‘s’ is something that even the third years- Oh, I'm so proud! And this is ‘class,’ which means class, as in a group of students in the same year, or a lecture on a subject, or any kind of grouping that has its own kind of specialization. Like, a 'submarine class' doesn't mean submarines go to a lecture, but they're a group defined by something they have in common, but different than other submarines. Does that make sense?”

27 stared at the word, committing the correct spelling to memory, and nodded.

Yamada started rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. “Ugh! My explanations are so bad on the spot like this! You deserve better, Shinsou! I need to sit down and actually make a study plan for us. Actually, we need to test your general studies too, but... Ugh, okay,” Yamada looked up at him, his eyes irritated from the thorough scrubbing. Unless he had been crying?

27 turned back to the chalkboard. ‘Mirio has a,’ and he paused.

He knew he learned that word. It was a short one. He remembers being surprised that something so small could stand for all the things that a job entailed. The blood rushing in his ears, the feeling of Bug's quirk under his skin, the unnatural way that warehouses and docks were so large, so much larger than any space had a right to be, swallowing him up and leaving him with the fear of ‘ *Don't mess this up, don't fail, if you fail you die Bug will kill you if you mess this up* -

“Shinsou? Are we doing alright, buddy?” Yamada asks, far closer than he was before, hands hovering over 27.

‘ *Away* .’

He didn't mean to do that.

But he did it. He signed it. Yamada's eyes were focused on him and he signed it, in front of the worst possible person at the worst possible time. He watched Yamada's eyes move, move to watch his hand, he *knew* that sign.

He knows he's broken. Yamada *knows* .

“Hey, Shinsou, it's okay, I didn't...” Yamada takes a step back, running his hand over his preposterous hair. “I might have laid it on a little thick earlier, I don't want you to feel nervous about not knowing something. You're learning, you know? You can always make mistakes with me, I'm not going to be mad! What you know so far is amazing, you know! Just, uh...”

Yamada glances at 27's hand, *he's going to ask-*

“So, ‘Mirio has’ something! Do you know the sign for it? Maybe a ‘cold’ or ‘girlfriend’?” Yamada signs, too jerkily. 27 doesn't think he can remember those signs, but he turns to the board and

hopes that remembering this stupid little word is enough to compensate for it, and distract Yamada from asking him what 'Away' means.

'Job.' 27 writes. Three little letters, and he fell out of his head over them.

"Mirio has a job! Okay, that's-" Present Mic stops himself, staring at the board. "I didn't know about that. Do you- is it okay if I look at your chat? If it's not, it's okay, I'm just..."

27 hands over the phone. He knows it's not his at this point, with how often it can be taken away. But something else makes it easier to give it back to Present Mic. Maybe he shouldn't have told him about Mirio's job, but maybe it was good that he did. Maybe Mirio wasn't supposed to have a job, he could be on hold from an injury and not just for losing his quirk.

Yamada scrolled through the phone, his eyes working this way and that as he read, hand curling over his chin. At the end, he sucks in a breath, handing the phone back to 27, his voice turning unnaturally serious. "I'm glad you told me, that's-"

"Don't be mad at Mirio!" Eri demanded, shaking her head. "Tell him I don't want a phone! I didn't know he wasn't supposed to have a job!"

"Whoa, whoa, little listeners! I'm making it out to be something that it's not. I'm sorry! I'm not mad and he's not doing anything bad!" Present Mic tries to reassure, waving his hands at both Eri and 27. "I'm just worried about Togata. He's a good kid, a really good kid, and I worry about him a lot and... I don't want him to give up on something that will hurt him down the line, you know?"

Eri's eyes only became more panicked at Yamada's words. "He's gonna get hurt at his job?!"

"No! No, sorry, I just," Yamada's hands fell to his side, and he stared at the wall as though he couldn't figure out what to say. "Having another job is fine! I work as a radio host and I'm still a hero, but a lot of people don't think like that. I don't want Togata to think of it that way either. I... I really just don't want him to be sad, and not tell anyone. Because that's a pretty rough place to be, you know?"

Yamada's attempts to reassure Eri weren't working. 27 watched her face fall, her lip wobbling dangerously close to a sob, when the door opens and Mirio steps in. "Hey guy-"

"Mirio I'm sorry! I'm gonna fix it, so don't be sad!" Eri yells, bolting out of her seat to throw herself against Mirio's legs. He leans down to pick her up, fixing her with a puzzled look.

"I'm not sad, Eri! I got two chocolate milks from the vending machine today! How can I be sad after that?" 27 notices that Mirio only glances at the chalkboard. The words written aren't a surprise to him, and 27 knows that he knows what they mean. He had been listening.

"I'm gonna fix you, Mirio, so don't get a job," Eri begs, wiping at her tears. "I'm gonna try really hard! And do it all by myself so Twenny doesn't get sad either!"

Mirio's smile softens, and he leans forward to catch Eri's gaze. "Hey, it's okay. I'm not giving up on being a hero, Eri, so don't worry about that! In fact, this job is going to help me be a better hero."

Mirio turns to Present Mic, though his smile becomes a little more strained, and he doesn't seem to ever make eye contact.

"I was actually inspired by your job as a radio host! I was listening to Get Your Hands Up! when I realized that learning all about sound equipment probably helps you as a hero, since it accentuates

your voice quirk. And then I wondered what could help me utilize my quirk,” Mirio says, tilting his head with his hand tucked under his chin. “I figured, if I knew more about how buildings are designed and built, I could phase through walls quicker to get to where I need to be!”

He’s not a good liar. Even that smile is fading the more he talks.

“Let’s say there’s a hostage situation in a huge, 80 story tower, and all we know is that the villain is standing close to an air vent because the sound of the air whooshing was heard over the phone when he made his demands. With what I know now, I’d be pretty stumped. There’s still hundreds of places with an air vent in that building, maybe thousands. But if I learned more about building codes, I might be able to narrow it down. If it’s winter, it’s a heating vent, and then if it’s su-”

“Th...” 27 grits his teeth and glares, but doesn’t allow himself to stew in his own disappointment. Still broken, still unable to talk. Even for something this simple, a simple little fact that still boils in the back of his throat, screaming for him to just *say* it.

He turns to the chalkboard, hardly noticing how badly his hand shakes. ‘They’re the same vent. Don’t ’

Fuck , was he really going to write something that lame? Wasn’t there anything else he could write instead? *Anything?*

‘ give up.’

27 didn’t want to turn around. He wanted to throw his head *through* the chalkboard.

Why did he even *care*? This hero could be manipulating him, manipulating Eri. This could all just be the culmination of his plan, his game, and 27 *knows* better. All that he really knows about Mirio is that Eri and Yamada like him.

27 doesn’t even like him. He’s far too perceptive, far too connected, and that damned smile hides *everything* that 27 needs to know about him.

He doesn’t know why, but he couldn’t stand to see it fading anymore.

When 27 does turn around, that smile is gone. Shock is written all over Mirio’s face, his jaw hanging open, his eyes wide and focused on the board as though it holds the secret to life, not just chicken-scratch and an overused line from a boring cartoon.

Then, Mirio grits his teeth, gasping before he starts scrubbing the back of his hand over his eyes, but the tears still fall regardless.

27 *fell for it* .

He fell right into it, he doesn’t even have time to be impressed with how flawless Mirio’s strategy was. Now that this overgrown hero is blubbing all over himself, there’s no way that 27 could deny what Eri wanted him to do.

Eri was going to start crying, and he’d have to control her, and he’d hate himself the entire time, but now that he was crying Present Mic would force him to-

“I won’t!” Mirio shouts, hand curling into a triumphant fist even though the tears are still falling down his face. The smile returns all the same, even brighter than it ever had been, as though enthusiasm could make up for the slip. “I won’t give up, Shinsou!”

27 glances back at the board. Has this guy really never heard that line? He was way too fired up over something so uninspiring.

“Jeez, I got you guys all worried over me, what an awful hero. Sir...” Mirio stops himself, gritting his teeth before he laughs, an airy chuckle too full of bitterness. “I really need to get ahold of myself! The next time you talk to me, I’m going to make sure it’s not to comfort me!”

‘*Trying to call you stupid*,’ 27 signs, his eyebrow raised incredulously. Mirio had placed far too much value in 27’s attempt to speak, something that shouldn’t be awe-inspiring at all. It should just be normal. He should just be able to tell him he was stupid *normally* .

“I know ‘you’ and ‘stupid!’ ” Mirio cheered, as though he could make up for his moment of sorrow with enthusiasm. “So if you’re trying to call me stupid, I agree! I completely forgot why I wanted to be a hero in the first place. So that people like you can smile, Shinsou! And not worry, especially not about me!”

A girl with brown hair peeks through the doorway, staring at Mirio, which causes Present Mic to run to the door, shouting down the hall, “CLASS IS CANCELLED! YOU’RE WELCOME!”

A round of applause and cheering causes Mirio to hide his face behind his hand, muttering about embarrassing himself in front of other young heroes. Eri pats his head, trying to reassure him.

Present Mic claps a hand down on Mirio’s shoulder, his face turned grim. “Okay! So we’re going to have a chat, about a lot of things, but definitely how much money Shou and I owe you! The fees from babysitting Eri are one thing, but then you add interest and the cost-”

“Mic-sensei! You’ve got it wrong! I don’t need-” Mirio tries to protest, but he hadn’t noticed the fire in Present Mic’s eyes. He wasn’t going to be deterred.

“NOPE! You’re too good, Togata, you’ve been too good to us and we’ve taken advantage of you! I can empty out my savings over the weekend, and anything else we still owe- well, you know where we live, we can work out a payment plan- but if you need a place to stay-”

“Sensei, please it’s-”

“NO! I won’t take no for an answer! I wear the pants in this relationship, and if I say you’re moving in with us, Shouta is just going to have to deal with it!” Present Mic stops, perhaps thinking better of that threat, and sighs. “Look, let’s get Shinsou and Eri dropped off and have a nice, long, overdue chat, alright?”

Mirio agrees, warily. “But I’m not taking any money-”

“YOU ARE! I can’t BELIEVE we’ve never paid you, Togata!”

27 follows close behind Present Mic. Though he doesn’t want to, he might have to restrain him from throttling Mirio if the hero kept denying payment. 27 would pay for it, dearly. He still didn’t know the punishments, but laying hands on someone so close to his owner might get him killed.

It might not just be Eri still held in Mirio’s arms that makes him ready to risk it.

Cat Fight

Chapter Summary

27 learns the real reason that he was taken to UA, and Aizawa gets answers from Officer Sansa.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Vague mention of attempted suicide, Dissociation

SPOILER FOR EXPLANATION

Sansa mentions that Shinsou tried to bite his tongue off while he was in the interrogation room, and that he was stopped. Shinsou's perspective isn't given, nor is the scene described in graphic detail. If you want to skip, you can stop reading after "We tried, Eraser," and begin again at "Well, maybe Naomasa."

Aizawa wondered why Togata was taking so long to bring Eri and Shinsou to Gym Gamma, until he sees Hizashi has also tagged along, his hand clapped tight around Togata's shoulder.

That much is enough for Aizawa to know the situation, but Hizashi still tells him anyway. "Oh good! Toshinori is here! I'm going to steal Eri's date for a little bit, do you think he can keep an eye on our dear listeners?" ' *He broke down.* '

"There's no cookies for him to poison, so I'm sure it'll be fine." Aizawa tucks his hair behind his ear, tapping once. Hizashi could sign with Shinsou at his back, but Aizawa was in his direct line of sight, and Shinsou didn't need to know any more about Togata's situation than he already did.

But the kid wasn't looking at Aizawa at all. His gaze was locked on the students, who were practicing quirk control, *hopefully* still solo under Toshinori's supervision.

Shinsou's expression betrayed nothing, but a subtle shift of his feet confirmed Aizawa's worries. Aizawa sent a pointed glance at Eri, then back to Hizashi. "You're supposed to be in class right now. Unless you finally took my advice and had 1-C expelled."

"Shou! I wouldn't do that! I would definitely cancel class and become the most beloved teacher on staff, though!" ' *Will try.* '

"Being well-liked as a teacher is a sign of not doing your job well," Aizawa chided, risking a subtle nod. "But you've never taken my advice before, and you won't start now. I'll work out who has babysitting duty with Toshinori. With any luck, he'll take over training and we can leave."

"You can't call me a bad teacher and then try to skip yourself! But I'll see you at home, little listeners!" Hizashi said, waving to Shinsou and Eri as he guided Togata out.

"The heroes are training! You've never seen them train before, right Twenny?" Eri asked, pointing to the arena. "You gotta watch out for Izuku, though! Zawa says he breaks his arms way too much, so you gotta yell at him if he looks like he's gonna break them again."

Shinsou was still watching, an eyebrow rising for a second before it was schooled back into place. "You're probably better at yelling at him, so I'll leave that up to you."

Aizawa approached Toshinori, keeping watch on Shinsou from the corner of his eye. The retired hero hardly noticed his approach, humming while he considered what he saw below. "Toshinori."

A mild sputter of blood answered him, and Toshinori covered his mouth as he turned. "Yes?"

"Togata had something come up. He was going to keep an eye on Eri and Shinsou, but would you mind-"

"Oh, of course!" Toshinori interrupts, realizing that the wards' presence. "Though, I thought Eri kept herself occupied during these training exercises. Perhaps I hadn't been paying much attention."

Shinsou's stance adjusts again, and this time he leans back a bit, a muted dodge from a student's blow. Aizawa frowns. "Keep Shinsou from watching. This sight is too familiar for him."

Toshinori nods grimly, but a friendlier version of his signature grin replaces that serious expression as he walks towards the wards. Aizawa takes his place to lean against the railing, watching the training below though his attention is solely focused behind him. "It's nice to see you two again. I hope the students have been behaving themselves, though I know they're quite overwhelming at times."

"Bakugo got in a fight with Twenny, and Todoroki thinks Twenny is Zawa's kid. But they haven't been mean today! Maybe they're being good because it's Friday!" Eri rambled, excited but not entirely comfortable with Toshinori's presence.

"They do know that they have to behave on Fridays, or else face young Aizawa's wrath at the dorm over the weekend," Toshinori chuckles, and Aizawa fights not to grin to himself. "I was wondering if you two would help an old man like me learn something I truly should have made time for before now, if you would like to."

"Yeah! We're really good helpers, right Twenny?" Eri asks, tugging on a piece of clothing to get Shinsou's attention.

"Yeah."

Toshinori needed to hurry up. The answer was calm, but Shinsou was never that short with Eri. He might already be too close to falling away. "You see, I was hoping to learn a bit more sign language, but young Yamada is very busy. Since young Shinsou here has been picking it up so

well, perhaps he could show me how to say a few words.”

Aizawa winced. He knew he should have given them an activity or a few ideas, but he had no idea that Toshinori was going to come up with that. How did he expect Shinsou to teach him without saying the meaning of each sign?

“I know some! And I can ask Twenny to show me more, so Twenny doesn’t have to talk to you. Right, Twenny?” Eri asked, a bit worried that she still had to fight for Shinsou’s attention.

Aizawa leaned back and caught the sight of Shinsou stepping back as though coming out of the fog, guilt flashing in a frown and wide eyes as he turned to look down at Eri. “Yeah, that’s fine. If that... That should be okay.”

A statement where a question was. He was adapting his way of speaking, but something in the way his alarm dropped away from his tone told Aizawa this wasn’t new. New to Eri, but Shinsou had learned to speak this way to others. The struggle was in doing it with Eri, in this new situation. In a place he was safe. “Thank you, my boy! I truly appreciate it! Now, I believe there’s a spot right over there that’s far enough away from young Bakugo’s explosives for us to hear each other. If I know the boy, and I do, he’s only warming up right now.”

On cue, Bakugo fired his grenade at the wall, glaring at it afterwards. He had been working with the Support Department to find a balance between the multiple rounds that multiple collection canisters provided, without losing too much firepower. Dividing his sweat into thirds seemed to be too much in his opinion, though Aizawa thought it was perfectly adequate.

Jirou was also finding fault with her costume improvements, though admittedly, it was still in the prototype phase. Moving the speaker ports to her shoulders did allow her to use her quirk faster, but she was having trouble remembering exactly where those ports were without looking. The cable for the aux extender didn’t look like it was secured or hidden either. He would have to check in with the Support Department to make sure that was taken care of in the end-result.

Aizawa was able to focus on his class for a while, making notes but seeing nothing that required his intervention. When Asui’s maneuvering put her a bit too close to ‘Bakugo’s area,’ Kirishima warned her before Bakugo could start having a fit.

Aizawa was too busy watching Bakugo as he turned to grouse at Kirishima over some perceived insult that he didn’t notice the newcomer until his name was called. “Eraserhead! Don’t tell me you threw him in there with all those quirks going off.”

Sansa. *Shit.*

Sansa hadn’t noticed Shinsou’s presence tucked into a corner of the walkway, but Shinsou had noticed his. His body was frozen, eyes terror wide and locked on the police officer. Fear written on his face more plainly than Aizawa had ever seen it. Had ever inspired.

“Toshinori, take over here,” Aizawa growled, taking Sansa’s shoulder to guide him outside. It didn’t matter if Shinsou watched the training and lost himself in a fight long-ended, because he had never looked as afraid as he was of the sight of the police officer.

Sansa had better hope it was just the uniform.

“What are you doing here?” Aizawa demanded, fixing the officer with narrowed eyes.

Sansa’s ears tipped forward, crossing his arms. “You didn’t read Naomasa’s email? He realized he didn’t tell you before you hung up, but due to Shinsou’s case, you need a police escort to go off

campus. I was the lucky winner today.”

“I should have been called back, an email isn’t for time-sensitive information. I would have been able to warn him that you were coming,” Aizawa fights not to mirror Sansa’s posture, fights to strip the anger from his tone. “You can see how that would be important, considering the circumstances of Shinsou’s case.”

Sansa’s ears flicked back, catching the insult and accusation as intended. Then, he sighed, lowering his head as he shook it. “Yeah, Naomasa wasn’t exaggerating. You really can’t get like this, Eraser. This case is too-”

“I’m a bit more concerned about my ward’s wellbeing than the case, Sansa,” Eraserhead interrupts, forced to drag the question out into the open. “Is there a reason why you were picked that I’m not aware of?”

Sansa stared him down, futilely, before he laughed, quick and exasperated. “Yeah, actually. Naomasa sat down and watched a month of security footage to figure out which one of us would scare him the least. It was me. I wasn’t there as much.”

“During the interrogation, or when he was force fed?” Aizawa hopes the question catches him off-guard enough to slip up. He knows he was there for the interrogation.

Sansa goes rigid, the fur on the back of his neck fluffing up. Aizawa has never seen him that angry, and he’s seen Sansa in every color over the years they’ve worked together. But the anger falls away, leaving something far more open and raw. “No, I wasn’t there for the force feeding. Only a few times, when Naomasa thought it might help the kid stay...”

Sansa trails off, shaking his head in frustration, a less useful guard.

“Do you know how long we begged him to eat? We all took turns, cooking, buying take-out, eating some of it in front of him to prove it was safe. We begged him to eat every time, but there was nothing we could *do*, Eraser. We didn’t have Eri.”

Aizawa feels the doubt begin to creep, but doesn’t show it. He wants Sansa to keep going.

“Naomasa thinks that you think it was part of the investigation. It *wasn’t*, it was just a precinct full of people who were just trying to keep this kid alive. People who dedicated their lives to protecting others, watching this kid waste away in front of us. We *tried*, Eraser. Tried to get him to eat, to stop trying to bite off his own tongue-”

“What do you mean by that?” Aizawa interrupts, stepping forward with a glare. “That wasn’t in the files I was given. If Shinsou is a-”

“Well, maybe Naomasa gave you shitty files because the guy hadn’t left the station in a week!” Sansa nearly slips into a yowl, but Aizawa would believe him even if he didn’t.

He remembered how exhausted the detective had looked that day at the station. He remembered wondering how bad this case could be to grow so many lines on the young detectives face, wondered how long it had been since Naomasa last saw his wife.

"You have no idea how hard he had to push back to keep Mind Slice out of it! If you didn’t take him in, Kenma would be using his quirk on Shinsou right now.”

Mind Slice. To think of using that man’s quirk on a traumatized child....

Sansa shakes his head. “You’ve worked with us for years, Eraser. You’ve worked with *me* , and if you think I wanted any of that, to do that to that kid....”

Aizawa breathes. He knows enough now, enough to believe Sansa. But to re-evaluate the situation, he needs more. “Did you use a muzzle?”

It was standard procedure. Aizawa had only seen it used a few times, just to secure someone for transport to a hospital where they could be sedated and treated. The rubber mouth guard was just to protect someone from their most desperate moments, but for Shinsou, it was likely kept on for days, the hospital already a dangerous place for him. Sansa looks away and nods, scowling. “I was the one to take it off. He... tried to hold on to it.”

Aizawa isn’t shocked to know that.

“I let him. I waited, tried to get him to play cards with me. After we played a few rounds, he started having a spell, and I could take it off of him. I don’t know if that was better than just ripping it off the first time, but I was just trying not to hurt him. That’s all any of us ever did,” Sansa fixes him with a stare, reeling back from the vulnerability that Aizawa had maneuvered him into. “The whole station is waiting to hear from me. It’s Naomasa’s day off and I know he’s parked right in front to hear it first. We want to know that he’s okay.”

Aizawa doesn’t know if that word applies to Shinsou, or if it ever really would. “He eats if Eri gives it to him. He slept the first two nights. He doesn’t eat or sleep enough, but-”

“It’s a miracle he does, you have no idea. He didn’t even *move* , Eraser, he...” Sansa interrupts, shaking his head as he looks back at Gym Gamma. “Hanajima is going to cry when she hears that.”

Hanajima never cries. She’s seen too much to be able to anymore, but Sansa’s own suspicious sniff makes Aizawa rethink that.

“We should go over the files together, make sure you have everything. Did you get the update on the mother?” Sansa asks, ears perking up.

“I haven’t checked my email,” Aizawa states, hand moving to his phone before he realizes Sansa will tell him. He’s eager to know.

“Interpol is playing ball with us now. With what Eri said, we actually have evidence of human trafficking charges, which always makes our international friends work a little harder. The mother might know something, and if she knows enough, then...” Sansa spreads out his arms for a moment, shaking his head. “Shinsou won’t have to talk.”

“Is there a plan after that?” Aizawa asks, realizing he has never thought that far ahead. “Infiltrate deeper, or take them out?”

“It depends on what we find out. I say take them out, keep them from taking any more victims. Let Shinsou sleep at night,” Sansa’s head tilts, ear flicking. “Or are you asking what happens after that?”

He was. “I wasn’t.”

Sansa grins all the same. “It makes a lot more sense now. Naomasa should have known better, especially since Eri came along.”

Aizawa fixes him with an exhausted glare. “I don’t know what you’re implying. I was concerned with his methods, and considering everything that went wrong with this case, I had reason to be a

bit short."

The grin softens into something less teasing, but even more accusatory. "It's going to take a while before all this is over, but if you're already this protective of him in a week, I'm going to bet you'll be filling out the adoption papers by Christmas."

"He is a ward under my care," Aizawa states. "I'm only as protective as I need to be to do my job."

Sansa just shrugs and doesn't push.

"I still have a training session to supervise. Stay in Shinsou's line of sight, but don't interact with him, just talk to Toshinori. Let him observe you," Aizawa both orders and asks, considering the best strategy. "Eri will probably want to talk to you as well, but keep in mind that Shinsou is protective of her. If he feels you're a threat to her, he'll attack."

"You say that like it's a threat to me," Sansa says, one ear flicked back. "I know how to deescalate, Eraser, but the kid is skin and bones."

"He has my knife." Sansa should probably be aware of that.

" *Why does he have a knife?* " Sansa asks shrilly.

"He stole it, and I let him keep it. I suspect he has extensive weapons training, based off of a conversation he had with Eri--"

"Yeah, Eraser? You gave the kid *a knife*?" Sansa repeats, still stuck in disbelief. "You know you can't do that, right? We've had enough instances where heroes get stabbed by their wards, and if you become one of them--"

"He won't," Aizawa cuts off, fighting the tension that builds. Sansa should know that he won't, that he's been trained not to. "If he tries to, I can stop him. But if he does, it's a sign of progress."

Sansa stops, silent for a moment. "Right, but... Damn."

"I'm consulting with more experienced heroes in that regard," Aizawa says, barely glancing at Sansa. "If you don't mind, I do have a class to get back to."

"Yeah, got it. Watch out for knives, thanks for that," Sansa complains, following behind.

Aizawa sees it first. He knows the moment it turns ugly, and pulls himself over the railing to get there in time, knowing that even if he could shout, words would take too long to carry.

He isn't fast enough.

*

27 knows he's being obvious, but that works better, because Toshinori is *far* too soft. He doesn't even remember why he thought the man was a threat in the first place, he's completely oblivious to the point that 27 had to drop the subtleties.

"Your right hand has to be on top, and the circle goes this way," 27 demonstrates to Eri, as she flips her clasped hands over to the correct position.

“And this means ‘friend!’ I’m going to call Mirio my friend using just my hands,” Eri decides, oblivious to the way Toshinori’s face falls when he sees 27 staring back at the training arena.

“I’m glad you have such a great friend, Eri,” 27 says with a sigh.

He decides to go for the jugular, and hope that Toshinori doesn’t start crying. These heroes have been making a habit of doing that today.

“I wish I was better at making friends. I just...don’t know anything about them. And it’s not like I can ask, or even talk to them.”

27 doesn’t have to work too hard to make himself sound pathetic, not when he’s speaking half-truths.

He bites out a bitter laugh, scratching the back of his neck. “Maybe that’s better, though. Aizawa probably has a reason to tell them to stay away from me. Not because of my quirk.... I hope. I hope he knows I wouldn’t use it, but.... The fight with Bakugo really did make me seem like some kind of villain.”

He picks at his sleeve, wanting to make sure Eri hasn’t gone quiet because she’s about to cry. He knows it’s unfair to have her be witness to this manipulation, but the information just out of his sight beyond the far railing too important.

“Maybe that’s why he didn’t want me to watch them train.” He fakes a startle after he finishes muttering that truth, looking at Eri in alarm. She’s not crying, but her eyebrows are furrowed between sadness and a bit of irritation. He doesn’t let that sting. “Sorry, Eri. I know he doesn’t think like that. Aizawa is a really nice hero, and you like him a lot. I just hope that-”

“Eraserhead! Don’t tell me you threw him in there with all those quirks going off!”

The cat came to collect him. They were going to take him from Eri, why did he pick that fight with Bakugo why didn’t he get enough information for Present Mic why was he trying to manipulate All Might they could take him back and *take and take and take*

“Toshinori, take over here.”

He wasn’t supposed to know they messed up and he knows and

“Twenny,” Eri whines, clinging to his arm. “Toshi, don’t let them take Twenny! I’ll be good, don’t let them take him back!”

Fog around his brain his hands aren’t his hands anymore he can’t feel anything they’ll put the ring in his mouth and

“It’s fine, Miss Eri! Officer Sansa must be here for young Shinsou’s appointment, I’m sure that’s all there is to it!” Toshinori says, confidently enough that 27 believes it.

The fog retreats. The appointment.

‘You may see him from time to time, but you won’t be transferred into his custody again.’

It wasn’t a job.

It was an interrogation.

He had been so concerned with the heroes that he had forgotten about the police completely. What

they wanted, what they would take from him.

He wouldn't have a job here. Not really.

His owner was supposed to make him comfortable, make him lower his guard. So that they could take more from him. So they could take what they wanted so badly, what he could never give them. Would *never* give them.

27 feels the grin pull, *they messed up*, and turns it to something more reassuring for Eri. "Don't worry, Eri. I forgot all about that, so I got kind of worried when I saw the police officer. But he's just here for that appointment today."

Eri tugs on his hood, trying to pull the cat ears over his head. She probably still believes that cats protect against bad things, even though she's been proven wrong enough times. She pouts, pulling her own hood on. It still makes her look adorable. "You don't have to go to the doctor, Twenny. I'm gonna tell Zawa you can't!"

27 raises an eyebrow. "It's not a doctor's appointment. I'm not hurt."

"But it's an appointment, and appointments are for doctors," Eri says, tilting her head. One of the ears folds over while the other stays up. 27 fights not to stare at it.

"It's an appointment to talk to the police officer. Aizawa said I had to do that sometimes. Since I can't talk to them, they didn't get the answers they wanted when I was staying at the police station. I guess they're hoping that I'll get better if I'm staying with you, so they probably want to check if I'm better yet," 27 explains, glancing around to see that Toshinori moved to the railing at some point, his hand held up to his chin as he watches the heroes.

"But you can talk to me," Eri says, shuffling closer to his side. "They could tell me the questions and you can tell me the answers, then they won't bother you anymore."

27 tries to judge the distance between themselves and Toshinori. It seems far enough to risk it if he whispers. "They want to know about the bad place. I can't tell them about it. And if I do...." *they'll take me away from you*. "Something bad will happen."

Eri is smarter than he realizes, even though he tries to keep her from figuring it out. She clings onto his arm as though they're trying to drag him away now. "I won't let them," she swears, with a determination she's probably picked up from Mirio.

"Don't worry about it," 27 reassures, leaning closer to her to pat her head. "I just have to not talk to them. And I'm really good at that."

Eri doesn't like his joke, tucking her head against his arm. "If I cry, Zawa will yell at them and make them go away."

27 smiles, flipping one of her cat ears between his fingers. "You don't have to, though. I don't want you to cry, even if it's to get me out of trouble. I can cry just fine."

"When Zawa comes back, you should cry and make him let you stay with Mirio and me! We're gonna play a phone game and catch lots of cute things! And I get to name them!" Eri suggests, and the offer is pretty tempting.

"I can play the phone game another time. It might make Aizawa upset if I cry every time, so I've got to go a few times," 27 explains. His owner seemed too self-assured to doubt his ability to make 27 talk. It would break down, slowly, perhaps even dangerously, but that was fine.

27 knew the game. At last.

His owner wanted to make him talk. Yamada was there to bring down his guard. Eri to distract him and comfort him all the same. The heroes surrounding him wanted to entice him into forming friendships, desperately, to glean information from him to feed to the police.

It all tied back to The Miasma. It always did. He should have realized it sooner, but now he knew.

“Young Shinsou,” Toshinori called, the air of nervousness the man always seemed to carry falling away like a veil. Almost like he knew what 27 was thinking, that he had figured it out too. “I have an idea, if you’re amenable to it.”

27 finds that he doesn’t have to force a grateful smile when he hears the idea, nodding his agreement. He turns to Eri, his one concern with this plan. ‘*Don’t look,*’ he signs, and though she’s still wary, she pulls her hood over her face to say she’ll obey.

27 allows himself to grin as he follows Toshinori down the steps. He knew the game, and this played into it perfectly.

*

“You have no idea how great it is to be matched with someone in my own weight class,” Weird Elbows says with a grin, though Sparky overhears and glares.

Canned Joint didn’t need to be insulting. 27 rolls his eyes, settling close to the edge of the marked off ring, giving himself the distance to observe. His quirk had something to do with the cylinders in his elbows, perhaps he could bend them like a ball joint. 27 looks over the costume, catching on the recognizable shape of the helmet. If he was stupid enough to have tape-

“So, All Might-sensei said we can use our quirks for mobility as long as both of us agree to it. I can shoot tape out of my elbows, and I’m getting pretty good at swinging around with it,” Stupid Tape says, tapping his weird joints. “So, you could use your quirk-”

27 nods, settling into a stance. Low, because he’s going to come in high.

“Sweet!” Scotch says, settling into his own stance. Facing a little to the left of 27, arms raised up for a block, knees bent to an absurd degree.

Two white lines shoot out. Middle? Only a foot away?

27 watches the boy rappel himself forward, knees still bent too far even as he glides along the ground, his back tipped far too temptingly. 27 grinds his teeth and severs the tape with a flick of his knife, sending Scotty Tape onto his back in a puff of dust.

The kid sits up, rubbing the back of his head, confused before he sees the frustration on 27’s face, turning aside to scowl. “Yeah, I know it’s not the flashiest quirk in the world, but you don’t have to look so disappointed.”

27 rolls his eyes again, pointing up to the walkway above him, then signs ‘*Be serious.*’

Adhesive Boy looks up like he hadn’t noticed the walkway at all, then back down to 27 in surprise.

“Are you sure you’re not Aizawa-sensei’s kid?”

It doesn’t get much better when he tries the walkway. He lands right in the middle of 27’s reach, neither aiming to take him out on the landing nor confuse him by zipping into another maneuver to maintain the distance. With an elbow to the chest, Office Supply is on his back again.

They had to be joking.

President Engine takes quite a while to get into the fight, devolving into a long spiel about how he’s hesitant to fight someone without any protective gear. 27’s eyes glaze over far before the end of it, grateful that Turbo is nothing like Chisaki and won’t lash out if he doesn’t feign enough interest. But when the fight finally begins, Motor Leg uses his quirk the right way, and he’s heavy enough not to go down with a shove. However, Car Show hesitates quite a bit before he goes for an attack, and when 27 catches the right angle to lock his leg, he folds like a cheap table with just a tap on his shoulder.

They were heroes. They must have trained for years to earn the right to be here.

Floaty actually manages to make him smile. She’s scrappy as hell, and something about her reminds him enough of Whistler to jump back farther than her fist can reach, dodging a phantom baton. Then she goes in to flip him over her shoulder - the wrong move for his height, and it’s too slow, too loose, he kicks out her feet and spins her like a top onto the floor.

She did well enough to make him check to make sure she’s alright, crouching down on the balls of his feet to make sure she gets up. She slaps her hands against the floor in frustration, eyes screwed up tight. “I almost had you!”

She didn’t. If he didn’t counter her, all she would have wound up with was 27 leaned over her back, and if he was a heavier opponent, she would have gotten herself crushed against the mat when her legs gave out, just like what happened when 82 tried to flip 98 when she died in that ‘training accident.’

Bubble sits up, rubbing the back of her head. “I guess I really need to train harder to learn the moves Gunhead taught me. We’re the same age, and neither of our quirks are outright offensive, but I’m the one calling myself a hero.”

27’s hand rises before he can stop it, but he doesn’t make contact. It’s a close enough hover, and she stares at his hand with her familiarly wide eyes.

He’s been spending too much time with Eri. He doesn’t need to pat an underling’s head just because they’re sad.

Just because they’re children.

They kept saying they were the same age. The heroes, his owner, Yamada. It couldn’t be true. He could never have been as naive and untrained as they were.

“It’s alright, Uraraka. Shinsou has been training for years,” Tail Man says, walking over to the ring, his narrow eyes cutting to 27. “I could tell by the way you carry yourself. Your style is really mixed, which makes for a great learning experience for me.”

27 is pretty sure Karate Kid is drooling over the chance to fight him, and from what he’s seen so far, he can understand. He nods his agreement and takes the middle of his box, just outside the range of that tail.

Before Puffball even steps into the ring, 27 realizes it was a mistake.

The rules of the sparring session were simple, no quirks unless agreed upon, only for movement if they were, and the match concludes when someone lands on their back.

Judo Dude couldn't be flipped. His tail would stop him from falling.

He's not sure if that's why Kangaroo Boy is smiling like that when he settles into his own stance. It's eager, self-assured and *hungry* to throw 27 down.

27 couldn't let that happen. Nothing good ever happens from losing a match with an underling.

Prehensile Child likes his high kicks, and when 27 tests his weight against the block from his arm, he notices it. He can make those high kicks because he's using the tail to balance. His other attacks are precise, hard, practiced, but something about those high kicks is off. He could go much harder than he does with that tail behind him.

That tail is a problem. But Martial Monkey wasn't entirely lucky, because he's taken down that tail before.

27 takes a beating to get to it, his arms and ribs ache and throb with bruises he'll feel for days, but he gets close enough to try. He feints a chest-grapple, catching the smile on Pony Tail's face and meets it with his own, knowing by the way the blonde's hands are moving that he fell for it.

He pulls himself behind, over the tail but keeps an ankle in the small loop it's already made to catch Extended Vertebrae's weight as he stumbles instead of catching 27's elbow to deflect. 27 grabs the blonde's shoulder tight, kicks behind his knee, and he knows that timing is everything, if he messes up he could snap his own ankle.

Hari grabs him from behind, dragging him by the hair *bleach in the air the smell the burn the tub white tub steam rising You fought dirty, didn't you, Dog? Let's clean you up burning burning can't breathe water bleach burning*

Pain pain pain his mouth is on fire can't breathe fire burning burning Hari's eyes Hari watching him his smile the smell blood clouding the water bleach the smell the burning

"Twenny!"

Doctor's Appointment

Chapter Summary

27 sees a doctor, and has some open wounds treated afterwards.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None!

A possibly spoilery summary (In that, I'll be summarizing plot threads that will be brought up in this chapter, and you may be able to guess what is going to happen before it happens if you read it.) is provided below:

Previously on Wards of UA: In the last chapter, Shinsou fought Sero, Iida, Uraraka, and Ojiro in succession during a light sparring session arranged by Toshinori, who had done so with some manipulation on Shinsou's part. Shinsou also discovers that his purpose at UA is to be interrogated more subtly about The Miasma, through Aizawa, Yamada, and the hero students. Shinsou has seen Recovery Girl previously after being concussed after fighting Bakugo on the first day of school. Aizawa requested that Naomasa arrange an appointment with a tattoo expert to have the tattoo that Shinsou gained from being fused with Chisaki and Nemoto removed, though Shinsou was under the impression that it was a job, and enters the chapter under the impression that it is an interrogation at the police station. Aizawa has directed Class 1-A not to interact with Shinsou, as Shinsou would be unlikely to want to interact with them. Shinsou's right hand shakes and is uncoordinated after being 'Unmade' by Chisaki, which he tries to hide by using his left, though Aizawa has noticed. Shinsou's Miasma mask was removed after Chisaki bought him, and then he was tattooed shortly after while the wounds from the mask were still open.

Shinsou doesn't even look like he's breathing, but that distant look in his eye tells Aizawa that it's not because he's winded.

He was too late to stop the match, but fast enough to stop Ojiro from doing a field check. Aizawa doesn't want to know what would happen if someone broke Shinsou out of that trance with a touch after it was triggered in a fight.

He doesn't want to know what Shinsou sees right now either, instead of the ceiling he's staring at

with unblinking eyes.

Eri shoves through the ring of students, running towards Shinsou. Aizawa raises his arm to stop her from reaching the dazed teen, afraid that she could become his target for the fight still playing in his mind. Her fingers clench tight in his sleeves, and she calls out for Shinsou. "Twenny!"

He springs up with a ragged gasp, hand brushing over his mouth then hair, pausing when he realizes his hair moves. That it isn't tied up in knots and mats.

Aizawa has never been more grateful that Hizashi was able to cut it.

"So, the charges moved down from murder to witness tam-"

"Sansa," Aizawa hisses with a glare, turning back to Shinsou. "Are you injured?"

Shinsou is still too dazed to hear him, still panting too hard, scanning his surroundings jerkily.

"Ojiro probably ripped his fucking hair out, swinging him around like a fucking middle schooler in a cat fight," Bakugo snarls, half helpful and half antagonizing.

Ojiro looks up, finally finding an outlet for his panic, fists still clenching and unclenching at his sides. "The pin he was trying for would have broken my tail! I was trying to stop him!"

"Sprain it, or tear a few ligaments," Shinsou says. The unnervingly flat tone of his voice is more shocking than the fact that he speaks. "You wouldn't go down if I didn't."

Shock crosses Ojiro's face before it slips into anger. "You were trying to- we agreed to 'light sparring!' That means no injuries!"

"I'm close to 500, and you knew that. Do you wa- *hah* ," Shinsou stops, wincing as he lowered his head into his hands, pressing tight against his temples.

His quirk was causing him pain, and Aizawa suspected it wasn't just the sudden use of it. He knew enough about mental emitter quirks to know that the reaction he was having right now was a dangerous one.

"We're taking him to Recovery Girl. Ojir-"

"No, Eraser, wait," Sansa pleaded, catching the name Shinsou spoke, the number. "Hold off on that? For five minutes? He's talking, so just-"

"How much information will you get before he has a stroke?" Aizawa snaps. Eri's trembling making the shock on Sansa's face a hollow victory. He rests a hand on Eri's head, softening his tone for her. "We're taking Shinsou to Recovery Girl. He's going to be fine."

She nods, then walks over to Shinsou, who thankfully recognizes her presence, trying to hide the agony still twisted on his face. "M'fine. Don't worry," Shinsou tells her, though he whispers through gritted teeth.

She pulls his hood over his head, not because it will block out some of the light. Cats were one of her little superstitions, and Aizawa suspects that picking that hoodie out for Shinsou kept her from protesting more against taking him to school.

"Ojiro, you're coming as well. The rest of you are-"

"IS SHINsou okay?!" Present Mic yells, before he's cut off by Aizawa's quirk. Shinsou makes a

sound suspiciously similar to a sob. He waves a hand for Present Mic to come down from the walkway, and Present Mic nods before he starts sprinting towards the stairs.

“The rest of you are dismissed,” Aizawa orders, glancing around at the still shell-shocked students, and very pointedly not at Toshinori. He doesn’t trust himself enough to do so.

“Aizawa-sensei, should I carry-” Ojiro stops as Shinsou pulls himself up, unsteady on his feet.

Ojiro *should* carry Shinsou. He should have been able to do a field check before allowing him to sit up. He should be able to check his pupil size, ask how severe the pain is and where it’s localized. None of those things can happen in Shinsou’s case, and Aizawa can only hold out hope that Chiyo can check him over, even in this agitated state.

Yamada doesn’t keep the concern out of his expression, and Aizawa doubts he could if he tried. “Take Eri. I still have to sort things out with Sansa,” Aizawa tells him, glancing in Toshinori’s direction. He doesn’t feel guilty all for the ear bleeding assault he has brought on the Symbol of Peace.

*

Shinsou barely makes it to the main building, stumbling so often that he gets tired of glaring at Ojiro with every offer of aid. The pace to Recovery Girl’s office is so tortuously slow that Aizawa’s nerves sing in relief to see the sign above her door, finally able to stop fighting the urge to throw the teenager over his shoulder to get him there faster.

Chiyo takes one look at Shinsou and scowls. “When I told Yamada that he needed to be seen regularly, I did *not* mean daily, Eraserhead.”

“He tried to use his quirk, and now he has a migraine,” Aizawa answers, as Shinsou sits on the cot Chiyo directs him to. “Ojiro’s tail may also be sprained.”

“I think it’s just a pulled muscle, sen...” his student tries to protest, but Aizawa’s glower stops him. It’s one of the many reasons he appreciates Ojiro. “But I’m not sure, so it’s best to be evaluated.”

Aizawa nods, and walks Sansa just outside the door, allowing Chiyo the space to work.

“Reschedule the appointment.”

“It could just be a migraine, and he should be back on his feet in time,” the cat officer argues.

“He’s not in the right state of mind to make any decisions like that,” Aizawa answers. “And that’s *if* it’s only a migraine.”

Sansa isn’t pleased, but he nods and takes out his phone. Aizawa returns to the nurse’s room, telling himself that it’s only rational to be present to sign off on any treatment Chiyo needs to provide.

“Ojiro was correct, it’s just a light muscle injury. And Shinsou does have a migraine, so it’s best to let him rest here while the treatment starts to set in,” Chiyo informs him, but Aizawa knows her well enough to know what she really means to say when she glances at her personal office.

“Toshinori allowed the fight, didn’t he?” Aizawa asks Ojiro, who looks down guiltily despite his

attempts not to shame him.

“He said that it would be a lighter way to end the week. Shinsou seemed frustrated when he was going up against Sero and Uraraka, so I thought-”

“You were his *third* opponent?” Aizawa interrupts. He couldn’t have been away for that long.

“We weren’t given time limits, it was just a ‘Flip the Turtle’ kind of match. Sero wasn’t taking it seriously, he was trying to imitate some anime move. And Uraraka has only been training for less than a year, so she’s still hesitant when she goes for something more advanced. Oh, I forgot that he fought Iida too. The knee lock he did was a little risky, considering his mufflers were hot,” Ojiro reports, his tail swishing once to betray the excitement he must have felt to see a challenging opponent.

He knew he couldn’t blame Ojiro for that. With all of his years of martial arts training, his hand-to-hand combat matches were decidedly one-sided, and his peers used that to their own advantage. Shinsou was probably the first opponent that wouldn’t need a lesson at the end of the match to explain a hold or flip.

"I should have realized it then. That Shinsou is a bit reckless," Ojiro says, sinking back into guilt.

That isn't surprising. He was probably trained to view his body only slightly more valuable than his knife. To be disposable, if the situation called for it. However, " *Three* of your peers were taken down, even with their quirks?"

Ojiro knows that tone. He fears it. "Sensei, I'm sure they weren't taking it seriously-"

"Even if they weren't, and they should take every moment of training seriously, they were defeated too easily." Aizawa sees a lot of quirkless combat drills in their future. Ojiro sees it too, shoulders slumping at the thought of all the tutoring he'll be asked for.

It almost makes Aizawa ask, but he catches himself when he sees Sansa return.

"You should return to the dorms and rest. You're not in trouble this time, since this was allowed to go on with a teacher's approval," Aizawa reassures, and the relief on Ojiro's face almost makes him leave it at that. "But at some point, Class A needs to understand the meaning of *don't interact* ."

Ojiro apologizes, glancing at Shinsou as he leaves, clearly wanting to ask if he'll be alright. But fear wins out in the end, and he doesn't.

Chiyo jerks her head towards her office, which is too cramped for all three of them. Sansa assumes a guard position against the wall as Aizawa closes the door.

"I know you're new to wardships, Aizawa," Chiyo says as she sits in front of her computer. "But I've never been assigned to be the sole medical provider for a ward, and frankly, I'm not equipped for it."

"It's necessary," Aizawa states. *It shouldn't be.*

Chiyo takes his word for it, sighing. “I can't tell how badly he strained himself. With what little I was given by the police, his temperature runs abnormally hot, and fluctuates dangerously.”

"Is the lack of using his quirk making it worse?" Aizawa asks. That had been their biggest concern with Shinsou's muteness. After using his quirk so regularly, the shock of disuse would cause problems, and even if those problems became life-threatening, they had little recourse, given his

reaction to using his quirk on Eri.

"It's one of many possibilities. I'm not a quirk specialist, so I can't say one way or another," Chiyo answers. "I'm also not a nutritionist, but I've done my best to put together a few recommendations, after Yamada told me you weren't given anything."

Hizashi hadn't told him that, but he did notice more vegetables in their lunch than usual. He sees the first sentence on the page, bolded and in red, and frowns. "He likes coffee."

"I doubt his body could process the sugar in a full serving of fruit," Chiyo chides. "He can only take in so much, what he eats and drinks has to be nutritionally sound. He's dehydrated on top of that, and severely stressed."

"Unsurprisingly," Aizawa deadpans.

"His immune system is weakened due to that. You should take precautions to keep him from getting sick, such as a face mask or hand sanitizer," Chiyo advises, and Aizawa tries to hide the clench in his jaw. "You emailed me about his hand, but I haven't examined it."

"If it's not possible to do so without his knowledge, it would be best not to. Not yet," Aizawa says. *Not until he trusts us to know.*

Chiyo shakes her head. "There's enough scarring to suggest nerve damage, but I can't say for sure. Does he know enough sign to give me a little more of his medical history?"

Aizawa frowns, doubting Shinsou even knew it, or even had any medical history to give. "We can see."

When Aizawa opens the door, he doesn't expect to see Sansa standing right beside Shinsou's cot, taking off his gloves. "You know, I'm pretty sure I've shown you before, after you cheated at Uno."

Shinsou's eyes are still focused on Sansa's hands, the wideness not set in fear, but something else. Something that makes the kid seem far younger and more innocent than he ever had outside of sleep.

Sansa flexes his hands, revealing the reason he wore gloves in the first place. The pads of his fingers had soft, rounded bumps, not unlike a cat's. His toe beans. He hated showing them to people, and Aizawa probably hadn't helped with that. Sansa glares at him half-heartedly, whining, "Eraserhead, don't you have a cat that the kid could obsess over? I'm pretty sure that's why Naomasa picked you."

"Cats are a responsibility I can't afford, given my work schedule," Aizawa lies.

A few years ago, he and Hizashi had been adopted by a white longhaired hair stray that had taken their community food offerings as an invitation to move in with them. Hizashi figured that she must have been a house cat at one time, abandoned on the street after she became inconvenient, but she remembered enough to integrate herself seamlessly into their apartment. Happy to chase their socks around, knock cups and other odds and ends onto the floor in what Hizashi claimed were 'gravity tests.' She made a habit of kneading into Aizawa's ribs or chest after every patrol gone sour, adding her own little wounds to the ones he already earned that night. Not that he would protest, even if he could.

Socks passed away during winter break, after too many hard years had aged her too quickly. Hizashi was beginning to think of adopting another cat from their feral colony, specifically the

tabby runt that liked to curl up against their window every winter.

Then USJ happened. Then the dorms. Then Eri. Now Shinsou.

At least there wasn't room to argue about cat adoption. "Shinsou, Recovery Girl would like to ask you a few questions. Are you feeling well enough for that?"

The purple haired boy tilted his head minutely, but looked at Aizawa with a surprising blankness. He still didn't meet his eyes, but his shoulders were far more relaxed than usual. He nodded.

"Have you gotten headaches before, after you use your quirk too much?" Chiyo asks. "Is that a normal reaction?"

Shinsou's eyes widen a bit, lips parting before he retreats back into calm, but he pauses before he answers. He must not have remembered trying to use his quirk. *'4 people. Don't.'* He stops, rigidity workings its way back into his limbs. *'Not want. My fault. I am sorry.'*

"You were in an altered state after hitting your head. I know it wasn't intentional, and I'm not angry," Aizawa placates, though he doesn't expect his words to calm Shinsou down. It must be terrifying to find out you did something after the fact, with no memory of doing it. "Do you get headaches after you use your quirk on four people, or because you fought four students?"

'First.' Shinsou signs. Then draws a line from under his nose to his lip. *'Blood. Dangerous. Mind pain.'* His finger taps against his knee, trying to remember another sign. *'P-A-S-S-O-U-T.'*

"Do you need to end the control on each person, or do you control all of them at once?" Aizawa asks, unsure whether Chiyo actually needs to know that information, or if it's purely his own curiosity.

'All. Not end. Learning.' His signs become more fluid as he describes his quirk's capabilities, different from the slight shaking of his hands when he explained its risks. Unsurprisingly, since he had lived so long in an environment where his quirk's utility had been the only thing keeping him alive.

Aizawa nods. "He has headaches, nosebleeds, and could pass out controlling four people at once."

"Those could be symptoms of a brain hemorrhage," Chiyo notes, and Shinsou nods. "Did someone tell you that was a risk?"

Shinsou nods again, hands lifting to sign, but he stops himself and shrinks. He must have been told that at the Nomu Organization that had him previously. And he thinks even giving that away could be dangerous.

"Is there anything else causing you discomfort? Are you sleeping and eating well?"

Shinsou shakes his head then nods, a lie, but he does it resolutely enough to make Aizawa wonder if he really believed it. If what he had at UA truly was more than he had ever been allowed before.

"Those are all the questions I have for now, but I would like to see Shinsou in a week's time for another check-up. *Not* beforehand, please," Chiyo glares, and Aizawa can tell that she's disappointed in the comparison to Midoriya's frequent visits.

He could try to convince her that it was All Might's fault, but the words sing hollow now. He knew it was his own fault. Shinsou was a ward under his care, not Toshinori's. He was the one who failed to prevent this.

Aizawa expects Sansa to bid his farewell when they exit the building, but he doesn't. "So, the old man said he can take him in anytime, since it's such a small piece to remove," Sansa says, ignoring Aizawa's glare. "We *could* reschedule, but maybe we could also ask the kid what he wants to do."

Shinsou's head tilts at that, though he seems to be trying to ignore that they were talking about him in the first place, still staring across the campus landscape with his hands tucked into the front pocket of his hoodie.

Despite Aizawa's reservations, he does ask. "Shinsou, would you still like to have that tattoo removed today?"

The kid goes completely still, then turns his head to glance at Aizawa's face before his eyes dart to the side, his usual focus. He must have forgotten about the appointment entirely, understandably given the chaos the last few days had been. He nods, though he still doesn't relax.

"There isn't any rush, if you would rather--"

"The kid said yes, Eraserhead," Sansa interrupts, grinning. "I don't need a translation to know what a nod means."

Aizawa sighs, worried that this was still too much for Shinsou. The kid might have agreed, but whether he was in the right frame of mind to do so was unclear. But if Aizawa refused, that itself was as good as a brand.

For better or worse, Shinsou had made his decision, and Aizawa hoped it wouldn't waver.

*

The cat talked a lot. 27 forgot how long he could just ramble to himself, putting even Present Mic to shame. His owner didn't seem to like it, answering any questions with a grumble or cutting off an embarrassing story with a glare. 27 knew he should mirror that behavior, to reflect what his owner wanted to see.

But his owner wasn't really his owner anymore. Not the same way The Miasma owned him.

He was Chisaki now. The way he had begun to view Chisaki after he had been allowed outside, allowed to put plans into motion. The way their game twisted beneath the table, unknown to Chisaki until the last minute.

In the end, Chisaki lost. In the end, his owner would too, though he hadn't worked out how quite yet. With The Miasma at play, his options were thoroughly limited, and the only end that seemed inevitable was his own death at a fellow Number's hands.

But he could die still winning. And he could die without Chisaki's name carved into his skin. Without Nemoto's.

27 kept his hood pulled up and his body tucked away from the windows as best he could during the drive to the tattoo shop. If he had a mask....

He needed to get one. These frequent trips outside were dangerous, and anyone on the street could be an informant for The Miasma. His hair was one thing, but the scars on his face were as good as

his Number being displayed out in the open.

The tattoo shop was small, at least, and deserted. Dark, with a smell of ink so familiar he nearly touched his scars to see if they were still bleeding, freshly freed from the weight of the first mask.

The tattooist wasn't what he expected. An old, bald man with a hunched back and bared arms, glowering when they entered, but then directing an unreadable grin towards 27. A band of tigers tattooed on his upper arm began to move, chasing each other's tails. "So, we're taking something off today. Tried to cancel on me, but I was just too curious to see what it is. Take a seat right here, kid."

27 did as ordered, glancing at a tray that held a machine similar to the one Memory used to number him, before the old man kicked it away.

"Right, so let's see that arm." 27 began rolling up the sleeve, but stopped as the man clicked his teeth in disappointment. "No, that's not going to work. I need a little more room than that. Can we take the hoodie off?"

27 moved robotically to comply, not allowing how much he didn't want to be undressed affect him. It shouldn't affect him at all.

The old man stared at the scars, long enough for 27 to notice, then put his hand on 27's wrist, turning his arm to look at the 'Dog' tattoo. "It's not white ink, thank God. That's a pain to pull out, believe me."

"The tattoo is behind his elbow," his owner says, though he's staring at the wall with his back leaned against another, arms crossed over his chest. Curiously, he seemed to be avoiding the sight of his scars.

"What are we thinking about this one?" the old man asks, still staring at the kanji. "I don't know about you, but you look a lot more like a cat to me."

The man chuckles at his own joke, and 27 draws a box around the word with his finger. He hopes that it's enough for the old man to understand.

It isn't. "Not the whole thing? Or... Aren't one of you guys supposed to speak for him? Can you ask him what he means by that?"

His owner looks, his lips becoming a thin line. He's angry. 27 thought he was too much like Chisaki, too self-assured to care what 27 wanted to do at times, but he was wrong. He didn't want him to do that. "Shinsou wants the kanji removed. Leave the rest of it."

His owner glances towards the door before 27 can read his expression again. Wasn't he still angry about that?

Didn't he want the whole thing removed so he could put his own on?

27 knew that was what the visit was really for. His owner hadn't put his name on him yet, only giving him a new one. 'Shinsou Hitoshi' would require more room than 'Dog' or '27' did. Even if he chose the cat design, he would still want to cover up the place that his previous names had occupied.

Unfortunately for his owner, he would have to be specific about his intentions. 27 could afford to play dumb now, but he couldn't afford to let them take '27' so easily. Nor could he lose the ability to hide it.

“Alright, then. And the other one is right,” the old man pulls his arm to the side, revealing Nemoto’s tattoo. “Here. Patchy, that’s good. It’s a little old, but I think it’s not settled well. Odd, but that’s better. Is there anything else?”

27 points to the back of his neck, leaning forward so the old man can see what 27 thinks is the symbol of the 8 Precepts of Death. He’s only managed to catch parts of the black circle in the mirror, but he imagines nothing else would satisfy Chisaki’s need to claim him more thoroughly than The Miasma did. Or attempt to.

“That’s a big one, but we can definitely do that. What about this one?”

27 freezes when his finger presses against his shoulderblade. He didn’t know there was another.

Chisaki’s or Nemoto’s, he didn’t know, he couldn’t tell, he never *saw* . He never even saw that one, another mark on his flesh, another piece of him that wasn’t there anymore.

‘ *All.* ’ 27 signs, his hands shaking, fog creeping inside his skull but he refuses to let it swallow him. ‘ *All off.* ’

“What does that-”

“He wants all of them off,” his owner answers, still pointedly not looking when 27 tries to see his face. His voice is too neutral, it gives him nothing, but his face has tells, they’re just hard to see. “He only wants to keep the black band.”

“Got ya, alright then,” the old man agrees, settling down on a rolling stool. He snaps his rubber glove, which causes 27 to look at him, catching both the grin on his face and the sight of those running tigers on his arm. “So, my quirk is going to pull the ink out of your skin. It might sting or itch, but I need you to keep still for me. I’ll try to work fast since we’ve got a lot of work to do. If it starts to get too much, or you need a break,” he slaps his hand on the armrest of 27’s chair. “Just do that, and we’ll stop.”

27 nods. He doubts he will, though. He needs them taken off, even if it hurts. Even if it *burns* .

The man puts his hand close to the tattoo of the blue oni, but doesn’t touch it. Instead, his fingers curl, unnaturally strained, and 27 feels liquid begin to run down his skin. The old man stops, grabbing a paper towel to wipe away the liquid, then frowns. “Wait, is that cat Sharpie? I didn’t even notice, thought it was just faded....”

“It is,” his owner answers, as the old man pours clear liquid from another bottle onto a paper towel to wipe it over his skin.

“Well, Mr. Whiskers and his buddy are gone now. Let’s get to this one, then work down the back.”

27 doesn’t look at the kanji. Only when the man is done does he make sure that he didn’t take more than he should have.

That name is gone. ‘Dog’ is gone.

The worst of the 8 Precepts was being bled from his skin, leaving only The Miasma behind.

Silver Tongue

Chapter Summary

27 discovers why Ashido and Kirishima seemed so suspicious during homeroom, and Aizawa gets a small break in Shinsou's investigation.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Vague mention of the existence of sex trafficking at the end of the paragraph that begins in "It didn't happen often at The Miasma."

Recap of The Wards of UA: Shinsou was sold by his mother at the age of 4, and a missing child investigation was launched into his disappearance. Eri has taken to calling Shinsou "Mom" occasionally, which is a new development. Aizawa choked on his coffee the first time he overheard Eri call Shinsou that.

The dorm is thankfully quiet tonight, though Aizawa wishes they didn't have to be there. He wishes he could just let the wards return to the dorm to find some semblance of comfort in more familiar surroundings, but luckily, neither of them seem too affected by the day's events.

Eri and Shinsou are both sitting on the cot against the wall of the 'Safe Room,' as the teachers have named the dorm observation room. Aizawa glances up at the surveillance monitors every now and again, while he re-works his class calendar to include as many hand-to-hand combat sessions as he feasibly can. He knows he can't strain his students too much when every class they have pushes them to the limit, and he knows that this is a problem focused on in their second year.

But as good as Shinsou was, he shouldn't have won three matches against his students. They needed to try harder.

He glances up again, to the central monitor focused on Bakugo's dorm room. The door is wide open, and he sees Sero dart back inside with a video game controller. Technically, he should go down there to tell them that quiet hours still apply on the weekends, and they need to be in their own rooms either studying or sleeping, but he knows that *they know* he won't. It's too much effort for very little reward.

Eri is still trying to figure out the phone game that she plays with Togata, nestled in Shinsou's lap while she pouts at his phone. They had caught a few monsters when they first set it up, but now there weren't any more to be caught, unless they started walking around, which was the point of the game.

Shinsou still looked like he was seconds from falling asleep, though he had looked that way for hours now. Still fighting it, even with Eri's presence and the silence of the Safe Room.

Aizawa hoped that he would lose out before Hizashi returned in the morning and could take the two wards back to their own dorm. He knows that Shinsou barely slept in the interrogation room, that the first two nights his body needed sleep more than he could fight it, but he hopes it wasn't a fluke. The kid needed to unlearn the sleeping patterns that he had been used to at the 8 Precepts compound, perhaps even before that.

Eri leaned back and sighed, the phone falling out of her hands. Bored of watching a screen without monsters on it. She looked up at Shinsou, then Aizawa, and back again, a question she was working up the courage to ask plain on her face.

"Mom, can I get an apple from downstairs?"

Shinsou startled, staring at Aizawa's back, and Aizawa looked back at the central screen just in case the purple haired teen could tell he had been using the reflection of the screens to keep watch over them. Shinsou was waiting for a reaction, but Aizawa made sure not to give him one, not after the choking fit he was caught off-guard by yesterday morning. "You need to ask Aizawa that question, Eri."

"Zawa, can I get an apple? Tokoyami said I can have his apples if he has some, and I think he does," Eri asks.

"That's fine," Aizawa answers, turning to look at his charges, catching the way that Shinsou's lips twitched downward in a frown. "The students have cleared out of the common areas if you would like to go with her, Shinsou."

He nods agreement, following Eri as she stands up to walk to the door, holding onto his hand. Aizawa follows them on the camera feeds, to make sure there wouldn't be any incidents of his students rushing up to ask how Shinsou was after the match earlier today.

'Mom.' That was a new one.

Not at all unfounded, given their history, their dynamic, but Aizawa could tell that Shinsou wasn't comfortable with it. Aizawa wasn't either, to be honest, but he didn't want to confront what 'Mom' really stood for just yet. He knew he would eventually, if it didn't degrade naturally over time.

With any luck, Eri and Shinsou would find themselves in a place where that word didn't fit anymore. Where Shinsou was no longer Eri's primary protection against a dangerous and frightening world, and Eri was no longer the only person in Shinsou's world he truly cared about. Whether that dynamic would soften into a sibling relationship, or somewhere in between was completely unpredictable at this point.

But both their worlds were larger at UA, for better or worse.

Aizawa sees his personal phone light up before it begins to vibrate, and frowns when he reads the caller ID. "You're on duty. Don't tell me you're slacking off or injured."

"What, me? Slacking off? I would never! I just found myself in a quiet part of town and wanted to see how my little bean and favorite listener are doing, since I've barely gotten to see them all day!"

Slacker. "They're fine. Eri will probably fall asleep soon, hopefully Shinsou will too. The appointment went well."

Hizashi sighs in relief. “*That’s good, I really wish I could have gone too. So, I definitely chewed Toshinori out a bit too much, we’re going to have to send him a fruit basket or something. It turns out our little purple haired listener has a bit of a manipulative streak.*”

Aizawa cocks an eyebrow. “How so?”

“*After he taught him how to sign ‘friend,’ he went on a little spiel about how he wishes he could be friends with Class A, but you’re just so cruel and heartless, thinking he’s a villain, so you wouldn’t even let him watch them train. Sad puppy dog eyes and everything. Of course, Toshinori being Toshinori decided that the sparring matches were a good way for them to relate to each other, common skillsets and all, but jeez. Would you have been able to say no?*”

“Yes,” Aizawa hisses. “Because I know that Shinsou is a traumatized child, and he shouldn’t be given to his every whim. I told Toshinori not to let him watch, and I didn’t think I would have to get more specific than that.”

“*Well, Toshinori had the best of intentions, at least, so I do feel bad about yelling at him.*” Hizashi pauses, probably checking his surroundings again before he speaks. “*The talk with Togata went well enough. I don’t think he realized how unhealthy his thinking was before I sat down with him. He cried, we cried... He’s grieving now, though. Finally.*”

“I noticed,” Aizawa says. It wasn’t easy to see with how naturally he beamed at Eri, how little had changed in their own dynamic, but the weariness had finally set in to his shoulders. When Eri wasn’t looking, the smile was allowed to fall.

It would get easier to let it fall when it needed to. “*Did you have any idea that babysitters are so expensive?! We’ve really robbed the poor boy! Maybe he can stay with us over winter break- I mean, we have really robbed-*”

“Hizashi,” Aizawa interrupts, rubbing his eyes. They’ve talked about this. At length. “Disregarding how inappropriate that would be, we don’t have the space for it. And Togata has a father.”

A supportive, emotionally well-adjusted, non-neglectful father on top of that. To the point that Aizawa finds himself wondering why Togata chose to be a hero in the first place. “*Well, about that... It’s kind of an adjustment right now. Togata didn’t say enough for me to know one way or another, but I think it might be a bit hard for him to go home right now. They have the same quirk, and to know his father still has his.... He might just need an escape route.*”

Damn it. “We’ll talk about it.”

Hizashi knows that means yes. “*So, you’re alone right now, right?*”

Aizawa knows he is, but he still finds himself glancing at the door, knowing that tone Hizashi is using. “Yes.”

“*What are you wearing? Something se-*” A scream and crash in the distance cuts Hizashi off, and even though they’re only talking on the phone, Aizawa can almost see the twitch in his husband’s eyebrow.

Aizawa laughs, despite himself. “I’ll call you.”

“*Can’t even... I love you!*” Hizashi grouses, turning cheerier before he hangs up to actually do his job, now that he has to.

Aizawa puts his phone down, performing another cursory glance at the monitors before he freezes,

then sprints for the door with a swear.

When would Class 1-A understand the meaning of *don't interact with Shinsou* ?

*

“Apples are my favorite,” Eri says, watching 27 wash the one she picked from the crisper. “I like that we get to eat our favorite foods here. You should tell Yama your favorite food, Twenny, and he’ll make sure you get to eat it a lot.”

27 hums, noticing the clean knife on the dishrack, before he hands the apple off to Eri. “I thought your favorite food was fried chicken.”

Eri tips over to stand on one foot, looking up in confusion. “I like chicken, but it’s not my favorite. But we never got to eat chicken back when we were in the room.”

“You were too little to remember it,” 27 realizes, rubbing the back of his neck. “I got you some once, and you were really excited. You asked for ‘shicken’ a lot after that.”

Eri stares at her apple as 27 pulls another from the crisper. “I like that you don’t have to do stuff to get food here. You don’t have to get hurt anymore.”

27 puts his hand on her head, distracting her from her brooding. “I like that too, Eri.” He liked that she didn’t have to go to The Chair anymore.

He didn’t want her to know that he still had to do things to earn their keep here.

It was all on loan, at least. A loan he wouldn’t pay back. As long as he was careful, he could use that to his advantage. Pay for his books and food with mocked attempts to give them information, perhaps give them a few false leads if the situation called for it. He needed to find out what they knew first, to make sure his lies were believable.

27 begins slicing up the apple while Eri watches, nibbling on the one she has. “Twenny, you like oatmeal.”

27 can’t help but laugh a little. “No, actually I hate oatmeal.” He realizes what she meant after he says it, feeling guilty for thinking it was a silly assumption. “I liked that we didn’t have to leave the room on days that we had oatmeal. That made me really happy.”

She must not have made that connection before. He worries that she’s going to get upset with how much they’re talking about their time at the 8 Precepts, but instead she tilts her head, eyebrows furrowed in frustration. “I want to make your favorite food, Twenny. What, um...”

27 stops. This wasn’t just her usual babbling.

She was imitating him. Imitating the way he couldn’t ask questions. She had no reason to do that, she wouldn’t have to if he wasn’t so broken.

27 puts down the knife, turning to crouch down on her level, struggling to keep his tone even with how shattered he felt. “Eri, you don’t have to talk like that. I know it’s weird that I do it, but... You should talk like you always do. It makes me happy to hear you talk normally.”

Eri frowns at her apple. "It's really hard not to ask questions. I'm sorry you have to, Twenny."

"I'll get better," 27 lies, ruffling her hair. "So you don't have to be sad about it. It's just until I get better at controlling it."

He stands up and notices two shadows from the stairway, though their footsteps are too far away to hear, he can tell by their movements that they're trying to sneak up on them.

27 continues slicing the apple, having another reason to pick up the knife.

Pink Girl and Red Shark peek around the corner, grinning until they realize 27 has already noticed them. "Aw, jeez!" Acid Hands complains, pulling at her hair. "Now Aizawa-sensei is going to give us more stealth training!"

They definitely needed it. The lightbulb at the top of the stairs flickered at times, and he might not have noticed it going out, if they had thought of that. And they should have.

"Aizawa says you need a lot of training, Ashido," Eri says around a mouthful. "But you'll be a really great hero if you take it seriously!"

"What?! He did?! Aww, I love having Eri around! We get to know all about Aizawa-sensei's secret thoughts and feelings!" Ashido gushes, perhaps overlooking the insult to her work ethic.

"Are you making apple bunnies for Eri?" Hardening Quirk asks, following his fellow hero to the counter. "That's so manly!"

27 tries not to raise an eyebrow. He's beginning to think Rocky doesn't really know what 'manly' means, since he uses it so often.

"We can share," Eri offers, then gasps. "If you share, it'll be like in the movie, and maybe you'll remember going to school together, Kirishima!"

Red Rodeo runs a hand through his hair, suddenly struck by a bit of nerves. "Actually, it turns out you were right, Eri. We did go to school together."

27 freezes.

"You must be psychic, Eri! We didn't even know it, but Shinsou, Kirishima, and me all went to the same elementary school!" Pinkie Pie cheers, holding up her phone. "My mom even sent me some pictures! And there's a video of Shinsou at my birthday party! I didn't invite Kirishima though, because even back then I knew he was super lame."

"I wanna see!" Eri shouts, straining on her toes to look over the counter.

27 doesn't want to see. He doesn't want to see it at all. He doesn't want to know what he looked like before the mask, before The Miasma, before he was 27. Before he *was*.

But Eri did.

She feels weightless in his arms, staring at the phone. He doesn't know what she sees, but he knows what he does.

It's a boy. He looks remarkably like him. Purple hair, purple irises, bags under his eyes. That's where the similarities end.

That couldn't be him. It wasn't.

The boy smiles among a group of other children, lined up against a wall, wearing yellow hats and blue uniforms. He seems nervous, too awkward, close to the end of the line but the gap between the children on either side of him seems larger than it is with the others. The boy must not fit in well with his peers, though his grin suggests that he tries.

“That’s you! And you, Twenny!” It’s not him, but he doesn’t correct her. “Where’s Kirishima, though?”

“Oh, that one’s me! I started dying my hair when I decided to be a hero, to be more inspiring, ya know?” Kirishima says, pointing at a boy with black hair and a thin lipped smile. “Hah, I used to get nervous about showing my teeth, too.”

“Shinsou was one of my best friends!” Ashido lies, flipping the picture to one of her younger self hugging that purple haired boy. It seems like she never lost that careless enthusiasm, clinging to the boy even though he has to lean over the table between them to do it. The boy smiles for the camera, and just for the camera, unsure if Ashido is hugging him just for the camera as well. “We had matching hairstyles, so of course we had to be friends!”

The picture flips again, this time to a video. Children are milling around a living room, some of them gathering up discarded wrapping paper, others playing with toys scattered around. The boy holds a stuffed animal to his chest, and 27 doesn’t want to look, *doesn’t want to look*, doesn’t want to see if it has a blue ribbon.

“ *Shinny! Shinny! Look at Rupert!* ” Ashido chants, holding a patchwork teddy bear above her head. “ *He’s gonna be Mocha’s best friend, ‘cause we’re best friends! And bears and cats are always best friends!* ”

“ *Why’s his name Rupert?* ” the boy asks, scratching his head. “ *I named Mocha ‘cause that’s what his ear said, but Rupert doesn’t have a name on his ear.* ”

“ *‘Cause I had a bear named Rupert, but he got melty,* ” Ashido answers, hugging Rupert the Second to her chest. “ *But I love Rupert a lot! My mommy always fixes him when he gets melty!* ”

The boy frowns, still scratching his head. *He knows better than to-* “ *Why does he get melty?* ”

“ *Cause I-* ” Ashido stops, dropping Rupert as her arms go limp. The boy’s face falls, reaching out to touch Ashido’s shoulder, because sometimes that’s all it takes, but then a woman with purple hair curled into tight ringlets runs over to him, taking him by the shoulder.

He forgot her face looked like that. He thought she looked more like Bug.

“ *Hitoshi, you know better!* ” The boy knows, still frozen in fear. He buries his face in Mocha’s fur to hide his tears. “ *Mina, honey, are you okay?* ”

Ashido nods, reaching out her arms towards the boy, but the woman’s hand still on her shoulder holds her back. “ *Shinny, don’t cry. I’m okay! Slippies happen a lot, and you shouldn’t be sad about it!* ”

“ *Ui, it’s really fine,* ” the woman holding the camera says, laughing under her breath. “ *Why don’t we-* ”

“ *I’m sorry, Mika. I think we’re a little upset right now,* ” the purple haired woman says, taking the boy’s hand as she stands up. “ *It was a lovely party, but I think we need to head home.* ”

“ *Shinny! Don’t cry! You can stay!* ” Ashido pouts, stomping her feet. “ *Shinny, I love you so you*

have to stay! ”

“ Mina, you’ll see Shinsou at school tomorrow. You need to say goodbye like a big girl, and not throw a fit like a baby, ” the camera woman teases, goading the girl into behaving by making her want to prove her new age.

Ashido stomps her feet again, but wraps her arms around the boy’s shoulders. The boy knows not to react, not to say anything at all right now. *“ We’re gonna play with Rupert and Mocha tomorrow at school! So don’t be sad, okay? And don’t miss again, or I’ll be really sad and cry! ”*

The boy nods. He knows better than to talk right now. He should have learned not to say anything at all, but eventually, he did.

“Your mom was kind of a sourpuss,” Ashido says, as the video ends and the screen changes. “I mean, it’s not like you had a quirk like mine. I melted everything I got my hands on until I was 6 years old. Even poor Rupert had to have surgery almost every day.”

Missing.

The boy went missing after that. He was last seen walking home from school, wearing his uniform - yellow hat, blue smock, white tennis shoes. He had a Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats themed lunch box. There's a reward for information, a number to call. It's too bad they never found him.

He's probably dead by now.

"Twenny?" Eri says, pulling on a lock of his hair. "Why didn't the heroes find you when you were little?"

Ashido pulls away the phone, staring at it in horror. "Oh shit, I'm sorry! I forgot that was- Jeez, that must be really hard to look at."

"The heroes probably tried," 27 mutters, laughing bitterly. "They probably put my face on a milk carton, and I never saw it."

He wonders what his mother felt seeing it. What she felt looking at every missing child flyer, every news broadcast she was on. Was she laughing behind her tears?

"We, uh," Kirishima starts, pausing as he glances away. "We looked for you for a long time. The parents, teachers... Even the kids. We weren't allowed to walk home alone anymore. You probably shouldn't have either. Just..."

"What happened?" Ashido asks, unusually dour. "You were there one day, and gone the next. We never found out whether you ran away, or were kidnapped, or..."

27 turns back to the apple slices. He doesn't know what happened to that boy, but maybe he could lie about it to make them feel better. That sad face doesn't suit Ashi. "Villain school."

He cuts a bit too deeply for the bunny's ear. What a stupid lie. The heroes couldn't possibly believe it-

"Really?! No wonder we couldn't find you! No one ever heard about a villain school for kids!" Kirishima says, staring off in wonder. "Dude, it makes so much sense, though. Why wouldn't there be a villain school?"

"Did you have a uniform?" Ashido asks, fists curled close to her chest as she bounces in

excitement. "And school festivals? Were you the top of your class at villain school?"

27 keeps staring at the apples. Maybe if he doesn't look at their faces, his throat won't close up, and he can keep lying. Maybe he can speak only if he lies, if he whispers quietly enough that his broken mind doesn't recognize that he speaks. "I was failing. They were going to expel me if I didn't get sold to Chisaki."

27 feels the air being sucked out of the room, perhaps his words came out a bit too close to the truth. Ashido is frozen in place, such an unnatural position for her. Kirishima's eyes are wide with horror.

Was it that unusual to them? For someone to be sold?

It didn't happen often at The Miasma, but 27 had heard enough at the 8 Precepts to know it wasn't an unusual business. People would run up debts to the mafia, and businesses that operated like The Miasma would take over those debts in exchange for a person. Not always the debtor, sometimes it was a family member who had a useful quirk, or a daughter who was coming of age.

It wasn't even as though this was something limited to the criminal underworld. 27 read enough books and plays to know people had been owned and sold for centuries.

Why were they still looking at him like that? Why did Ashido look like she was going to cry?

"Shinsou," his owner called, at the bottom of the stairs. At least he had adequate stealth training, enough to surprise even 27. "Take Eri back to the room."

27 nodded, glancing at Ashido and Kirishima as he passed. They kept staring at him, Kirishima's jaw working around words that weren't uttered, as if he was imitating 27 too.

When he returned to the room, he realized he forgot the apple bunny snacks, but Eri must have taken his hesitation in putting her down as something else. She curled her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. "It's okay, Twenny. I say weird things to them too, and they look at me weird. Zawa says we just grew up different, in a bad way."

"It wasn't all bad," 27 says, half comforting and half musing to himself. "I think things would have been worse if I wasn't sold. I was really close to failing when I met you. If I didn't...."

Two more rounds with Bug. Then he would become less useful.

He would have failed on a mission. Been killed there, like 50, or taken to the Red Room to be finished off by Bug. He would have died without eating food that wasn't gruel, without bathing himself in warm water. Without knowing Eri.

"I'm glad I met you, Eri," 27 says.

He thinks there's another way of saying that, but he can't remember what it is.

*

"Sensei," Kirishima says, fists still knotted at his sides. "Why didn't they find him? Why did he have to..."

His words choke off, unable to say them. Without the right to say them.

He feels it like a throbbing wound in his pride, as a man, as a hero. He didn't know why he didn't before then, how he was able to forget. It seemed easy enough at the time.

His mom told him that he and Shinsou weren't really friends. In fact, Kirishima didn't even like him back then. They got into a fight at school after Shinsou started telling him facts about sharks, and asking if he had rows of teeth behind the ones in the front or if they'd grow in when he was older.

He was too young to believe his mother when she tried to tell him Shinsou was probably trying to be his friend. He decided he hated Shinsou after that.

Until he went missing.

Kirishima looked for Shinsou, half of it because the heroes that visited the school said they were looking, and he wanted to impress them. The other half was to apologize for being cruel. For not being his friend. For making him leave because he must have been lonely.

All of that faded into memory, and then faded further into nothingness. While Kirishima forgot about him and went to school, had friends, and worried about his cowardly personality, Shinsou was still missing.

Shinsou was being *sold* .

"What were you showing him on your phone?" Aizawa asks, watching as Ashido wiped away her tears and sniffled.

"Pictures, we..." Ashido's voice is strained as she tries to answer through the tears. "We went to school together. We were friends be-before...and I *forgot* about him while he..."

Aizawa rests his hands on their shoulders, and Kirishima flinches with the contact. He could have looked harder. He could have *at least* remembered him. "You weren't heroes. You were *children* ."

"I only looked at the playground!" Ashido wails, voicing the desperate pain Kirishima isn't brave enough to do more than feel. "And I started playing when I got bored! What if I could have found him?!"

"No one found him," Aizawa answers, more sternly. "Because the people who had him didn't want him to be found. Those people are being investigated now, by fully fledged heroes. Not four year olds."

Kirishima turns to Aizawa, determined. "Sensei, I want to-"

"*Fully* fledged heroes, meaning myself and Present Mic," Aizawa interrupts flatly. "If I find out that any of Class A is involving themselves in this investigation, they will be expelled."

It's easier to accept, knowing that Eraserhead is the one in charge of the investigation. Kirishima knows his teacher won't give up easily.

"Now," Aizawa says, turning to Ashido, "Since it's relevant to the investigation, I need you to send me all the pictures you have, and anything you can remember about Shinsou's disappearance, or his circumstances leading up to it. I'll be reaching out to both of your parents for what they remember as well."

“This video,” Ashido says, brushing her tears from her determined face, turning back to her phone. “It’s important. Shinsou’s mom was really strict, especially after he got his quirk. My mom thought she might have... done something.”

Kirishima’s mom didn’t. She told him Shinsou’s mom was so torn up about his disappearance, she drove herself crazy afterwards. His mom wished she still had her number, so Shinsou’s mother would know that her son was safe. “Where is Shinsou’s mom? If Shinsou is staying with you-”

“I can’t disclose that,” Aizawa answers, staring at the phone while Ashido hits play.

“Shinny! Shinny! Look at Rupert! He’s gonna be Mocha’s best friend...”

*

Shinsou is asleep, Eri passed out on his arm. They seemed to sleep that way out of habit, something that reminds Aizawa how confused Eri had been when she held up a pillow on her hospital bed. *‘These are soft.’* She couldn’t yet ask him what they were, only the furrow of her brow communicated her need for him to explain.

He hadn’t wanted to ask if she had ever had one before. He didn’t want to know if such a simple comfort had been withheld from her, an action that couldn’t be anything less than pure malice. Completely illogical.

‘You know better than that!’

Aizawa is glad that Shinsou is asleep. Those words still ring in his ears, the voice twisting and becoming something more familiar. More shrill at times, more exasperated at others. The same voice and the same words, at different points in time.

‘You know you can’t do that to your mother. You need to keep the eyepatch on, or else Mommy can’t see what she’s doing. It scares Mommy when you do that.’

He was watching TV, not looking at her. Illogical. Completely irrational.

‘Even when you’re sleeping, Shouta. I know it gets sweaty, but what if Mommy needs to check on you? You don’t want to scare Mommy, do you?’

His eyes would be closed while he slept. Delusional. Acting out of fear, not reason.

‘How can I trust you when you’re acting like that?! The look on your face, it’s- you hate me, don’t you Shouta?! You want to see me get hurt! That’s why you’re going to your grandfather’s, I can’t trust you at all! You won’t behave! Put your eyepatch back-’

Did Shinsou Ui buy a muzzle?

Aizawa closes his eyes, rubbing them with his fingers. This was unprofessional. This line of thinking had to stop.

There were similarities, but thinking about them served no purpose. It wouldn’t help with the investigation, it wouldn’t help Shinsou at all.

Shinsou Ui reacted poorly to her son’s quirk when it developed. She instructed him not to ask

questions. Shinsou scratched his head before he asked questions, perhaps due to an uncomfortable sensation where the quirk factor cells were growing, like many developing quirks caused.

A four year old couldn't be expected to ignore that uncomfortable feeling. Shinsou asked a question, one that didn't seem like anything other than natural curiosity. He reached out to Ashido after he did so, and became upset when he was caught. Not out of shock, but shame, too quick for this to be the first time he had been scolded.

It was hard to know for certain, with only a few seconds of footage, but something in Shinsou Ui's reaction read deeper than scorn, or anger. There was a moment when Ashido was saying goodbye that her jaw seemed to be shaking, her eyes seemed more distant.

Thinking of the similarities would serve no purpose.

Not when the differences were so vital.

Enter Ms. Joke!

Chapter Summary

27 meets a new yet familiar face, and Aizawa takes the opportunity to drill his students in quirkless combat in a very unique way.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Dissociation, Dehumanization

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa invited Ms. Joke and Midnight to observe the situation with Shinsou, utilizing both of their extensive wardship experiences while Ms. Joke is at UA visiting Midnight. 'Delete Face' is a brand of knock-off hero merch for Eraserhead. Class 1-A has observed Shinsou speaking after he fought Ojiro in a sparring match, Kirishima and Ashido heard him speak the night before when he spoke about 'Villain school', and Bakugo heard him speak while they were fighting in a bathroom on the first day of school. Bakugo was assigned a 100 page essay about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma after that fight, which is due at the end of the month or he will be expelled at the end of the term. Shinsou was named 'Dog' at the 8 Precepts, and Aizawa learned a little of what he went through while at the 8 Precepts by talking to Sir Nighteye after Sir Nighteye used Foresight on Shinsou prior to the raid.

Aizawa was full of regret.

Not because he's had five hours of sleep over the past two days.

Not because he didn't think to replenish his coffee stash in the Safe Room.

He regretted ever inviting Emi over, to what he thought was his dorm room, but what she interpreted as Class 1-A's dorm.

A dorm full of students who were going to be expelled if they didn't take those damn Delete Face shirts off.

"Eraserhead! Don't you always look beautiful in the morning? So dashing and handsome, oh! Please marry me now!" Emi cooed, sorting through a cardboard box to find a size large enough for Shoji. "Your students and my students already get along so well, we can just find a school somewhere between UA and Ketsubutsu and transfer them all there! We'll be one big, happy,

blended family!”

“Sensei, are we going to have a joint training session with Ketsubutsu?” Kaminari asks with a grin, pulling at the seams of his Delete Face shirt to show it off. “We should all wear these shirts to-”

“No,” Aizawa says flatly, realizing that Kaminari seemed to be impervious to the usual death glare. “Ms. Joke isn’t here for any official UA business. Nor would she ever be.”

Emi burst out laughing. “There’s that humor I love so much! Shouta, *please* ! I’m already yours, you didn’t have to go through the trouble of finding these two little cuties! The little girl has my hair and your eyes, and that strapping young man definitely has my sense of humor and your chin! Oh! What a perfect little family.”

While Emi holds her blushing cheeks, Aizawa notices Todoroki move his hand to his chin in thought.

Eri moved closer to the cardboard box on the floor, causing Shinsou to follow close behind, still staring at Emi to evaluate her threat level. “I have this shirt too! So does Twenny!”

“Of course you do, sweetheart! Eraserhead doesn’t have any proper merch, so these professional knock offs are the next best thing! And you’ve got to show that you appreciate the hero that takes such good care of you!” Emi gushed, wrapping her arms around Eri from behind, snuggling her closely.

Shinsou stiffened, but his hand remained at his side, instead of reaching for the knife Eraserhead knew was still tucked into his jeans. “Emi, if you don’t mind-”

“I mind!” Ms. Joke said with a pout. “I’m taking the kids and leaving you! Sayonara! May you never break my heart again!”

She held up the angry face for an impressive two seconds before bursting out laughing again.

“How could I be mad at that adorable face! Come along, my sweet children! Auntie Emi and Auntie Kayama have a lot of gifts for you at our super-duper fun-terrific dorm room! We have plans to spoil you rotten and never ever give you back!” Emi called, Eri already trailing at her heels while Shinsou stiffly followed.

Aizawa glared at the cardboard box, already making plans to destroy it, before he looked up to do a quick headcount.

17 expulsion forms. That seemed like too much work.

“Those of you who are wearing unlicensed hero merchandise, head to Gym Gamma. The rest of you are *lucky* .”

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27 didn’t know what to think of this ‘Ms. Joke.’

She was manic, and easily distractible. Though she spent most of her attention on Eri, 27 could feel her gaze wander to him at times. Not in a recognizably threatening way, not in a way he could read easily. It was just a glance, and then she’d be distracted again.

She seemed to be ignoring him for the most part, to play games with Eri, while Midnight watched from the sidelines and occasionally joined in. Eri seemed confused by her too at first, but was

slowly warming up to match that same manic energy, even smiling at times when she did well at their games.

Right now, Emi was trying to teach Eri how to juggle with red foam balls that she had pulled out from behind Eri's ear. Eri was trying, but her hand-eye coordination still wasn't properly developed. 27 should have worked on that more, should have found some way to make or steal toys for her when they were at the 8 Precepts. Children were supposed to play to build that kind of coordination, but he never provided that for her, and now she was behind-

A ball landed on his head, then rolled off into his lap. "Whoops! I messed up!" Emi said, scratching the side of her head. "This juggling act is pretty hard, ain't it Eri?"

"Yeah, but you're really good at it, Emi!" Eri argued, trying to comfort the older woman. "Twenny, do you wanna try? I wanna see if you can juggle too!"

27 took the balls from Eri's hands, starting out with three. 50 taught him how to juggle knives, during one of the training sessions they had. 27 had been upset over something he couldn't even remember now, either he had been forgotten during mealtime a few days in a row, or he had gotten on Bug or Memory's bad side.

Maybe he hadn't seen 50 in a while, and was worried that he would never see her again.

After they ran through their usual drills, 50 had taken out a few throwing knives, and started juggling them for him. He had been mesmerized, and wanted badly to learn how to do it himself. His hands twitching by his sides, desperate to reach for the knives, and eyes wide to not miss a second of the trick.

50 gathered them in her hands and smiled at him. ' *Want to try?* '

He could only nod. He never told her how amazing she was to be able to do that. He never thanked her for showing him how to do those tricks, or how to use his knives. He never thanked her for being the only person at The Miasma that smiled at him like that.

' *You're doing great!* '

"Wow! You're doing great!"

27 missed the catch, ball falling to the floor with a muted bounce. He looks at his hands and realizes that there's five foam balls, plus the one on the ground. He doesn't remember picking the others up.

"Whoops! Sorry to startle ya! I was just enjoying the show, and you know it's a good show when you just can't help yourself!" Emi says, and for a moment, she doesn't look like Emi at all.

Is that what 50 looked like before he started forgetting?

He remembers her green hair. Her scarred arms. The scar on her wrist where he accidentally cut her during training, the one she said she didn't mind having.

Pieces of 50 had started to drift away from him, no matter how hard he clung to them. He doesn't remember the shape of her eyebrows. He doesn't remember whether she had pierced ears, or if that was Memory somehow mixing in. If she had one scar across her lips or two. Whether she really had the same burn mark on her leg that he did.

Would 50 have looked more like Emi if she never took her brother's debt?

“Twenny, it’s okay! You did really good! I like watching you do tricks and juggle!” Eri says, placing her hands on his knee to lean closer to him. “So don’t be sad!”

“I’m not sad, Eri,” 27 answers, absentmindedly tracing his number, the connection he still had to 50. She never even left him with a scar to remember her by. “I was just thinking of something and got distracted.”

“Now that was some real clownery, son! I have to say, I’m impressed! You deserve a T-shirt! A prize! What’ll it be, buckaroo?” Emi asked, winking at him with her fingers wagging like twin pistols.

“Do...” 27 stops, the words catching in his throat.

Why did it keep happening? Why was he able to speak so easily sometimes and not others?

Why did he blurt out a question in the first place? These were two heroes, they were part of the group that was watching him, why would he antagonize them when it didn’t play into his strategy at all?

“Gotcha, I know what you’re thinking!” Emi said with a snap of her fingers, dashing down the hallway to one of the bedrooms. “I packed it especially for you! I know you’re a connoisseur of this sorta thing, so I want to know if you approve! If not, I’ve got a date with a man in a back alley who owes me a refund!”

She ran back with a bundle of white cloth in her fist, that she unfurled in front of her with a flourish.

“TA-DA!”

27 couldn’t help the smile creeping over his lips, though he tried to hide it with his hand. It was exactly what he was asking for, and he should be a little more unnerved that she knew that.

“So, do ya like it? Do ya do ya do ya?!”

27 nodded, taking the shirt in hand. Maybe he’d work up the courage to change into it, just to see the look on Present Mic’s face.

*

"Why..." Shitty Hair pants, struggling to keep pace with Bakugo. Dumb fuck needed to work on his cardio instead of obsessing over bulking up. "Why...are you here...bro? You're safe... from the madness."

'The Madness' takes another victim, Deku screeches before he hits the sparring mat, and Shitsei starts looking around for an extra that isn't keeping pace with the laps they're supposed to be running.

He might be seeing shit, but it looks like Ojiro deliberately slows down.

"Got business with Sensei," Bakugo explains, while Aoyama gets called to the center of the Hell Blender to face Aizawa in a quirkless match. "You talk to that purple haired fuck yet?"

"Shinsou, yeah," Kirishima answers, oddly defensive. "Last night."

"Got business with him too," Bakugo growls, passing Sato again. "Ojiro knock his fucking head on straight or what? Fucker doesn't even look at the chat, don't know why he's fucking in it-"

"Bro," Shitty Hair starts slowing down, and Bakugo forces himself to match the pace. "You worried about Shinsou? Even after the-"

"FUCK OFF! I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THAT CREEP!" Bakugo snarls, but the dumb shit surgically attached to his hip just grins that dumb fuck smile.

"Aw, Bakubro! I know you care, in your own super manly way- wait! Come on!" Bakugo is done with his shit. He can get splattered on the mat by Sensei for all he cared. "He talked to me and Ashido! Like, normal talk! Kind of."

Finally, he was going to be useful. "Did you fight him?"

"What? No! He was making apple bunnies for Eri, you can't just-"

"Was he doing that creepy fucking cuddle thing with the brat?" Aoyama starts swearing in French, like he thinks no one else knows what he's saying. It's honestly fucking poetry.

"Uh, holding her? Like you do with a cute kid like Eri? Yeah, he was," Kirishima looks to the middle of the blender again, shaking his head. "You wanna go to my room after this? Some stuff came up and... I dunno, could use your Baku-brain for it."

"Talk now, I got shit to do after this bullshit," Bakugo barked. "And keep the fucking pace! You're gonna be a shit hero if you get winded this fucking easy! Fucking sack of bricks."

Shitty Hair just grins.

*

Aizawa was not a young man anymore. He was tired long before his students seemed suitably winded, and he dismissed all but one of them.

Ojiro seemed to think he was being held back for some delayed punishment for the sparring session he had with Shinsou, rigidly watching as Aizawa took a slightly longer water break than he would have otherwise. That much was punishment enough.

The tension flowed out of him when he was called onto the mat, tail flicking between excitement and nerves.

Their styles were well balanced against each other. Ojiro could be swift where he needed to be, but the kid could hit hard where it counted. Aizawa learned to dodge first, second, and third, before he sized up an opening worthy of the risk, and to finish the fight right there.

Ojiro was good, but he was still learning. The boyish grin on his face every time he peeled himself off the mat told Aizawa he knew that, and wasn't bothered by it in the slightest.

"Your blocks are too rigid. You need to learn to adjust in proportion to your opponent's weight," Aizawa tells him, as he tries to ignore Ojiro's tail, now in a full wag. "I'm not as slow as Sato or

Shoji, so as soon as you counter me, you need to go right into your next move.”

“Yes, Sensei!”

Aizawa’s ankle stings the next round, but Ojiro learns quickly. “Train with Uraraka more often. Your sessions with Hagakure don’t seem to be helping you.”

Ojiro startles, the beginning of a blush working up to his ears, different from the flush from exertion. “Yes, Sensei. I know they both could use some more-”

“Not for them,” Aizawa cuts off. “You only train seriously with your heavier classmates, and as I already said, it affects your technique. Avoiding Uraraka because she takes advantage of your skillset doesn’t benefit you in the long run. Either work out a more balanced way to spar, or refer her to me, and I will be the one to remind her that you are a student, not a member of staff.”

Ojiro looks horrified to imagine that confrontation, though it would honestly play out like this one. “I’ll talk to her, Sensei! It was probably my own fault for not being direct with her, or the others.”

Aizawa nods, estimating that he probably has just enough time to collect his wards from Nemuri and Emi before he passes out from exhaustion. Even if he no longer has patrols, sparring with Ojiro after 16 matches with his students was beyond his limit.

“Sensei, I’m not sure if I should ask, but,” his student glances to the side. “Is Shinsou alright? He spoke after hitting his head-”

“He was cleared by Recovery Girl without any serious injuries,” Aizawa answers. “You didn’t cause any permanent damage.”

“I know, but,” Ojiro says, turning to him for a moment before looking away again. “Perhaps I’m not asking how he is physically.”

Aizawa paused, considering his answer. His students didn’t deserve a lie that didn’t serve them, but they also didn’t need to know the details of Shinsou’s case. Though he could repeat himself over and over, his students were latching on to Shinsou in their own, protective way. A way he would be proud to see - his students taking the idea of the Hero’s Mantle seriously enough to want to protect both of the wards of UA, while some fully fledged heroes would only pose with one of them long enough to secure a bump in rank.

But Shinsou’s mental health wasn’t a class project, Bakugo being an unfortunate exception, though Bakugo could relate far more than the rest of the class. They only needed to know the bare minimum, which he should have covered more explicitly than telling them that Shinsou was unlikely to talk to them.

“Shinsou is selectively mute, but he wasn’t prior to the rescue,” Aizawa answers, lifting his hair from his neck as he wished he had a hair tie to keep it up. “In certain situations, he seems to be able to speak. You triggered one of those situations.”

Ojiro shuffles his feet nervously, something deeper than guilt surfacing. “Sensei, when I grabbed his hair... Shinsou made this noise.”

Aizawa stares at his student. He needs to know for the investigation, and to dig out whatever unsettled Ojiro so thoroughly. But the naked pain and twist of confusion on his student’s face makes him want to cover it back up and hope that Ojiro forgets it in time.

“It sounded like...a dog. A bark.”

Aizawa struggles not to betray the horror he feels, for Ojiro to witness that, for Shinsou to *do* that.

There were wounds that were too deep for Shinsou to hide when he began to dissociate. Aizawa had noticed them, catalogued them into his reports, discussed them with Hizashi late at night. Naomasa's paperwork noted that there were times after the force feeding that Shinsou would make a whining sound, similar to an animal in pain. His eyes still unfocused, body still shaking. That unnatural sound unnerving enough to be conveyed in Naomasa's usually terse reports.

But Aizawa knew that Shinsou had been *trained* to do that, Chisaki doing far more than naming him after an animal, to attempt to *make* him one. "Ojiro," Aizawa says, though he has no idea what he could possibly say to comfort his student right now. "That is something I cannot discuss with you due to the circumstances of Shinsou's case." *It would be better if you could learn to forget these things now, rather than after you graduate.*

Ojiro nods, pulling a mask of determination on after he winces at the memory one last time. "Thank you for your time, Sensei."

Aizawa takes a moment to just stare at the empty gym while Ojiro leaves, wanting to avoid any more questions that could come up from one of his students.

When he opens the door, he's faced with that exact scenario in the worst way. "He's not fucking mute."

Aizawa does not have the patience left for Bakugo, stepping around the teen as though he's just an unfortunate obstacle in his path, rather than a nightmare of determination and terrifying intelligence when he wants to be.

"I read all the shit I could find on that selective mutism bullshit, and it doesn't fucking line up," Bakugo growls, stalking after him. "Even with voice quirks being fucking weird when they're mute, he talks too damn much when he shouldn't. He talked to me during the fight, he talked to Ojiro, he fucking spewed some bullshit last night about some villain school, and now dumbass Kaminari thinks we should find that school and do an exchange program or some shit--"

"What is your point?" Aizawa grates, finding that ignoring the problem is more exhausting than it's worth.

"It's his quirk that's fucked," Bakugo answers. Aizawa closes his eyes for a moment, regretting that he allowed himself to forget that Bakugo was too perceptive to be involved in any aspect of Shinsou's case. That he aimed the student's terrifying focus on it unwittingly when he assigned the Trauma Project. "If he was mute, he'd only talk when he's comfortable or some shit. And he wasn't fucking comfortable with me trying to beat the shit out of him."

"He was," Aizawa muses aloud, something that clicked into place after the shock passed, now knowing why Bakugo had been so insistent that Shinsou wasn't mute after the fight. He hadn't been speaking to Ojiro, locked in another place and time. His conversation with Ashido and Kirishima either due to Eri's presence, the shock of seeing himself from a more normal time, or both. But speaking during a fight was easy to explain. "A hostile situation like that is far more familiar to Shinsou."

He was comfortable in a fight. It was something he could understand, interactions far more easily understood than peaceful cohabitation at the dorm, or the students of UA's friendly gestures. The only thing more familiar to Shinsou than being with Eri was being in a fight for his life.

Bakugo hesitates, and for a moment, Aizawa can believe that this situation has blown over. That

perhaps his student will simply complete the project as Aizawa had hoped he would, delving into a deeper understanding of his own trauma rather than focusing on Shinsou's.

"I want to talk to him," Bakugo states, a request surprising in how devoid of swears it is. "For that bullshit project."

His pause only makes the explanation less believable. Aizawa sighs. "Don't. Interact-"

"Bullshit," Bakugo interrupts. "He needs that social interaction bullshit from the rest of the extras, that's why you brought him to UA. I don't give a shit about that, I just want to prove that I'm right. He's not mute, it's his quirk that's fucked up."

Aizawa stops and turns, Bakugo unwavering under his stare, chin still jutted out in self-assurance. He truly believes it. "If Shinsou agrees to speak to you, I will allow it for the purposes of your project. If he explicitly agrees verbally, or through sign language."

Bakugo turns to the side with a hiss, but Aizawa doesn't miss how his eyes narrowed at the words 'sign language.' He knows that Bakugo knew very little sign, and suspected it was still a denial of the risks associated with his quirk that he refused to learn more. It was a battle to make sure his student included ear plugs in his hero costume requests to the Support Department, and he knew Bakugo didn't always wear them.

One of these days, Present Mic would have to sit down with Bakugo and explain that childish denial wouldn't protect him from the realities of his chosen career. That Bakugo would be lucky to retire with some hearing ability left, if he hadn't started to lose it already, given how often the teenager shouted. That he would be fully deaf before he graduated if he didn't take serious precautions now.

"Fine! The creep is at your place, right?" Bakugo asks, and Aizawa feels the exhaustion double, nearly ready to buckle to the ground and convince himself that Nemuri could keep the wards for a few more hours while he took a nap on the campus grounds.

"Monday. Do not interact with Shinsou until then," Aizawa grates out, barely able to keep his eyes open as he drags himself towards the teacher's dorms. He's too tired to be properly relieved that Bakugo storms off towards the student dorms, growling a few choice words but otherwise agreeable to his stipulation.

*

Aizawa knew that he couldn't compare to the years of wardship experiences that Kayama and Emi had. He wasn't a prideful man, he was a rational one. The math simply worked in their favor.

But he still didn't expect to see Eri smiling as she ran into his legs, screaming his nickname so loudly that for a moment, she looked like a normal 5 year old girl, and nothing like the child still haunted by her experiences even at the best of times.

Even Shinsou seemed surprisingly relaxed, glancing at him just long enough to do his usual pat-down, before turning back to the television to watch some show about a cat behaviorist. Sushi was curled in a ball in his lap tightly enough for him to know that the cat had made himself comfortable there hours ago. That was surprising, as Sushi had begun to get a little crotchety in his old age, and didn't typically warm up to strangers so quickly. Perhaps the cat had sensed Shinsou was a kindred

spirit in that way.

Perhaps Emi or the cat had been able to give Shinsou something that Aizawa didn't know how to give, and his chest ached at the thought.

“Aw! Can't we keep them? Please please please?!” Emi begged, hands pressed together in front of her face. “They're little *angels*, Shouta! Look at them! Don't you think Eri needs a little halo and wings? I do! I think you need to dress her more appropriately for how angelic this sweet little girl is!”

Eri posed, fingers pointing to her smile, more strained and attempted under the scrutiny or slight embarrassment, but it was still nearly too much to bear. Aizawa knew there was going to be a costume from Emi on their doorstep in the future, and he hoped that Hizashi would be able to stand the sight of it.

“And darling Shinsou! Sushi is just in love! I'm in love! I'm going to keep him!” Emi declared, crossing her arms as she pouted in determination. “Shinsou is just too sweet to tell you, but I'm going to tell you that he deserves to be with me, so I can give him all the cats in the world! It's nothing less than what he deserves, I tell you!”

Aizawa almost agrees, to call her bluff and hope it isn't a bluff, but he sees the way Shinsou's hand freezes and pulls away from Sushi, laid back on the couch. Emi's words could be taken in a different context, one that Shinsou is intimately aware of. Not the playful kind of exchange that Emi meant, but an exchange of ownership. “There's a cat cafe nearby. We should visit it at some point.”

Shinsou glances at him out of the corner of his eye, but Aizawa is distracted by Eri pressing her face against his legs, hands clutching tighter onto his pants. “But cats are scary,” she whines, and Aizawa looks up to Emi for a very necessary explanation.

Emi tilts her head, smiling nervously. “Sushi wasn't in the best mood today. He got a little spooked at first, but we did get to pet him when he settled down, right Eri?”

Eri nodded, turning to stare at Sushi as she pressed herself closer to Aizawa out of fear. “But I don't want to scare the cafe cats! That's mean!”

Before Aizawa can explain, Shinsou speaks first. “Cafe cats are socialized to not get scared, Eri,” the purple haired teenager says, pointing at the television. “Remember that episode? Cafe cats are really friendly, and they don't get bothered by loud noises or strangers. They know that good things happen when they're working, so they don't get scared.” Shinsou rests his hand on Sushi's back, stroking with short movements that stop when the cat rolls over to present his stomach, a temptation Aizawa has earned many scratches from taking. “Sushi just hasn't been around a lot of kids, so he got scared. He didn't mean it, though. I know he'd like you if you spent a lot of time with him.”

“I think you should,” Kayama says, smiling as she watches Shinsou interact with her cat, sitting at the low table in the middle of the room that has at least three coloring books and two board games splayed chaotically on top. “My door is always open for a Sushi date. The poor old man probably gets lonely, so it would be doing me a favor.”

Aizawa is still shocked that Shinsou asked a question and didn't panic, didn't even seem to realize that he had asked it. “I'll ask beforehand, so you're not interrupted from any other type of date.”

Kayama gives him a Cheshire grin, but she always behaves herself in front of a ward. “I think

Yamada came back an hour ago, but he might have been too busy working on lunch to drop by. We've only had a few snacks today." The subtle wag of her finger as she glances towards Shinsou tells Aizawa that he didn't eat at all.

"We should see what he's making then," Aizawa says, ignoring the growl from his own stomach as he tries to maneuver the wards into returning to their own dorm, though he knows the fun they've had with Emi and Kayama makes the departure harder.

"Aw! But I'm going to miss them!" Emi whines, crouching down to hug Eri close. "Can't I just put Eri in my pocket and carry her around with me everywhere?"

Eri giggles at the mental image, turning around to squeeze Emi in a hug that makes her groan as though the 5 year old could actually press the air out of her lungs. "Emi, you're silly! But I like you!"

Emi looks up with a desperate pout, actually seeming to tear up with those words. "I like you too, Eri! I like you a lot! I'm definitely going to steal you again! It's going to be Emi and Eri, just like it was meant to be!"

"Eri and Emi! Emi and Eri!" Eri chants, as Shinsou gingerly guides Sushi to curl up on the couch, stroking his head in an attempt to keep him settled.

Eri is brave enough to walk over to Kayama and give her a hug as well, which Kayama returns while she sends a sly look to Aizawa, one that threatens to steal the wards away more often in the future. She even gives Sushi a shy little pet, jumping back when he stretches towards her, and she runs back to the safety of Aizawa's legs.

Neither Aizawa nor Shinsou expect Emi to step in front of Shinsou as he moves to follow Eri, tucking her arms around his waist. Aizawa stiffens as he watches Shinsou's flinch, his arms jerking upwards but stuck in the air rather than throwing the hero off of him. "I'm going to miss you too, buddy!" Emi says, muffled as her face is pressed against Shinsou's hoodie.

There's clear panic on Shinsou's face, to the point that Aizawa is ready to walk over and pull Emi away himself, but he's frozen as he watches it slip away. He watches Shinsou's eyes start to close, resting back into that blank and neutral calm, his arms lowering, fingers twitching for a moment before he surprises Aizawa completely.

He puts his arms around Emi, wrapped around her shoulders, then closes his eyes and relaxes, tension flowing out of him with an audible exhale. Aizawa can hear Emi's hand moving in circles against the fabric of Shinsou's hoodie, tracing the pattern soothingly over his back. His shoulders slump in response, leaning further into the hug. His lips betray a twist of pain before the moment ends, and he straightens up, slipping the blank mask back on but for the wideness still set in his eyes, not quite panic but something close.

Emi just beams at him, pulling away and allowing the teenager to follow Eri back to their dorm, which appeared to have been opened by Hizashi judging by the sound of Eri's excited recounting of the day's events.

Aizawa looks to Kayama and Emi for their own retelling, and he's surprised to see Emi's fingers tighten around her arm as she refuses to meet his eyes, frowning. "You've got a hard one on your hands, Eraserhead," Emi mutters, unnervingly devoid of her usual cheer.

"You seemed to make a difference," Aizawa notes, wondering what Emi had seen apart from the vast improvements in the wards behaviors that could have caused the concern now apparent on her

face.

"Now, now! I won't let the two of you be grumpy Guses!" Kayama complains, leaning over to pull a canvas bag closer to herself from where it was leaning against the TV stand. "This is the one, right?"

Emi nods, taking the book that Midnight hands to her from the bag, and presents it to Aizawa with a flourish. "TA-DA! The key to understanding Shinsou, written in a book easy for you to understand!"

'Loving Your Feral Cat' was the title, though Aizawa read it several times over, sure that his sleep-deprived brain was misreading it. "I've had a feral cat before. Shinsou is nothing like-

“ ‘There are very few truly feral cats in Japan,’” Emi reads, finding the page she wanted quickly enough for Aizawa to know she has read this book several times over. “ ‘You may assume your cat’s skittishness must be an aspect of their personality, because a cat’s emotions can be hard to perceive to the untrained eye. But in truth, your cat lives in terror of a world strange and unfamiliar, unable to understand that there are things that seem threatening, like yourself, that are not. Your cat has never learned that your hand is held out to comfort, or that your presence means no harm.’”

If Shinsou had learned those things, it was long forgotten beneath years of living the way he had. “Why did you hug him if you knew that?” Aizawa asks, far more interested to know if there was a way Shinsou could stand a less aggressive form of touch and not react poorly.

“It was a challenge line,” Emi answers, and the cat behaviorist says the same term in the pause that she takes to close the book. “And it was a lot of work to get to that point. I don’t think he’s ready for you to try it quite yet, but the book will explain it much better than I can.”

Aizawa takes the book, frowning as he remembers his conversation with Ojiro. Even if their intentions could not be more different, Aizawa was loathe to see Shinsou compared to an animal. He was loathe to do anything like Chisaki had.

But that wasn’t a rational response. He asked for Emi and Kayama’s advice, and they had given it in the form of this book. If there was anything useful to be learned from it, he would simply have to read it and see.

“Now, if you don’t mind,” Midnight said, leaning forward to play with the neckline of her sweater. “I didn’t exactly invite Emi over for a PG rated weekend.”

“Babe,” Emi whines, holding her blushing cheeks. “You can’t say those kind of things to my future husband. He must think I’m a loose woman.”

Midnight chuckle, her tone of voice growing more sensual. “Oh, I can tell him exactly how-“

Aizawa shuts the door behind him before he has to hear any more of their flirting, unwilling to become a victim to their twisted idea of foreplay.

Not when he was sober, and married.

Now! That's What I Call Music

Chapter Summary

27 receives a laptop, but ends up spending more time on his phone. Yamada finds himself dragging his feet to host his radio show, until Aizawa inspires him to do something he hasn't done in nearly a decade.

Trigger Warnings: Mild Dissociation

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the deluge of updates, guys! But tomorrow is my birthday, and all I really want is to read some comments. And this is was my favorite chapter to write, so I hope it's enjoyable for you guys!

P.S. - I wonder what would happen if you take that "herotube" link and change it to "youtube" :)

Previously on The Wards of UA: Naomasa wants to give Shinsou a laptop with a keylogger to see if he will use it to look up information about the Nomu Organization. Shinsou fought Bakugo on the first day of school, resulting in Bakugo being assigned a 100 page essay on the topic of trauma related disorders. Shinsou later fought Sero, Iida, Uraraka, and Ojiro in a sanctioned sparring match, and Ojiro's match ended when Ojiro grabbed Shinsou's hair, resulting in a dissociative episode where he spoke and attempted to use his quirk, which ended in a severe migraine. Ashido and Kirishima learned that Shinsou went to elementary school with him before he was sold to The Miasma.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Even if it had scarcely been a day since the last time they had been in the same room together, Yamada had missed his husband and their wards fiercely. He enjoyed hearing about everything he had missed from Eri, and was so enraptured by her recap of the Checkers match where she soundly defeated Midnight that he almost missed Shinsou eating all of his lunch, something that had become a rarity over the past few days.

Unfortunately for him, Shouta was only able to remain conscious as long as it took to eat his serving, dragging himself to the couch afterwards to collapse into a well earned nap. He was quickly joined by Eri, who never missed an opportunity to nap with Shouta, and seemed a bit wiped out by all the fun besides.

That left Yamada with the unpleasant task of presenting Shinsou with the new laptop he picked up from Naomasa, without betraying anything that could make the teenager suspicious of it.

“The phone is pretty handy to have, but I like using a laptop for more intensive stuff, like doing any research or watching videos,” Yamada explains, turning the computer on as Shinsou watches as his side. “I can show you a few HeroTube channels that teach JSL - Oh! We should definitely set up an account on that, so they’re easier to find.”

‘*Lot of A-C-C-O-U-N-T-S.*’ Shinsou signs with a half frown, the closest thing to a complaint Yamada thinks he’s ever communicated.

Yamada laughs sheepishly. “Yeah, it’s the digital age. Social media is a hard thing to keep track of. I make it look easy, but between three different accounts on every media platform in existence, sometimes I just want to throw my phone off a cliff and hide under a rock for a few days.”

Shinsou frowned, his hand placed over his pocket where he kept his phone. Perhaps the HeroTube account should wait until the teenager wouldn’t see it as a responsibility.

“So, I’m not sure how familiar you are with the Internet, but it’s a pretty neat thing,” Yamada says, pulling up the browser as he convinces himself that this deception is necessary. He knew it was for Shinsou’s own best interest, but he disliked lying to Shinsou, suspecting that he had earned a bit more trust from the teen than any other adult in his life. “Let’s say I forgot where my radio station is. I can just type the name or anything I remember about it into this little bar right here, hit send, and looky there! Now I’ve got the address, the website, and if I look at the ‘Images,’ I can even see my promo pictures!”

Even the cheesiness of his advertisements couldn’t dampen Shinsou’s apparent curiosity. His eyes were widened, leaning a bit closer to the screen. Before the guilt could become clear in Yamada’s face, regretting that he hadn’t left the laptop for Shouta who had a far better poker face, Shinsou’s hands raised up to sign. ‘*Today Music.*’

Yamada groaned, leaning back against the chair. “Do you have any nicknames for Midnight or Ms. Joke at least? I can’t be your favorite person to pick on.”

‘*I do*,’ Shinsou answered, then tapped on the screen, pointing to the picture of his latest billboard mock-up. ‘*Today. Music.*’

“Oh!” Yamada cried, slapping a hand over his mouth. “That’s right! My radio show is tonight, and I never told you about it! Every week I go on the air and play music for my listeners. Some nights I interview other heroes, or I have a little Q and A session, or give out advice for people who call in. And some nights I have to cancel, and Byte Sound takes over for me.”

Yamada wonders if he should text his sidekick now so that the wards could stay home rather than being dragged to the dorms with Shouta again. Eri never seemed to mind, in fact she looked forward to the dorm nights. On those nights she received all the attention she wanted from the hero students that were always ready to make her snacks or organize a movie marathon in the common area. But Shinsou was a very different story. He hadn’t even been at UA a full week, and had been through enough stressful events to deserve staying home for a month.

“I could stay in tonight, though. Byte already has the playlist made up, and I don’t have anyone scheduled to call...” Yamada tapered off, pulling out his phone to confirm his worries. “Shoot, Hawkes.”

Hawkes had been a *nightmare* to schedule. After months of back and forth and hundreds of

noncommittals, Present Mic had finally caved and involved Tokoyami to pressure the Number 3 hero to give him a real date and time, and he finally promised he would call in tonight after 10.

Interviews were the one thing that Byte Sound refused to do. Though she was fully deaf, her quirk allowed her to hear the electronic pulses that passed through the station's equipment, often faster than the human ear could process. She technically *could* do an interview and use their more professional text to speech program to ask questions or comment, but she hated being on the air, adamant that she just didn't have the personality to carry a show.

Shinsou must have noticed his worry, signing, '*It's fine. I don't know. Hero. D-O-R-M.*'

"Yeah, you guys are supposed to go to the Class 1-A dorms tonight. Shouta has to be there on the weekends," Yamada answered, not quite pleased that Shinsou had learned how to avoid asking questions in sign language as well. "But Shouta always tunes in to my show! You should tell me what song you want to hear, and I'll make sure to play it just for you, with a shout out and everything!"

Hopefully Shinsou's song request would be a bit easier to work in than Eri's. He never failed to deliver on any song she picked out for him to play, but the station manager hadn't been pleased by the amount of complaints his audiophile fan base had filed after the second week of Baby Shark. He hadn't made the situation any better by going on a mini-rant on Twitter about how people who take the term 'good music' to disavow others who enjoy any form of music that pleases them are idiots who don't understand that art can never be quantifiably good.

It might have been easier to just tell them that an adorable 5 year old girl had struggled for weeks to tell him what her favorite song was, and the first night he played it was the first time he made her smile. But Shouta was extremely against the idea. With the popularity of his radio show, the media would speculate what his relationship to this 5 year old girl could be, bringing dangerous and undue attention to their ward if she was ever discovered in the media frenzy. He would never want to bring Eri into the spotlight, with her quirk being dangerous in the wrong hands and her life being stressful and bizarre enough without paparazzi on her heels, but on a more selfish level, he didn't want to answer the questions that would inevitably come up.

Who was Eri to him? In truth, his answer wasn't a professional one. Eri wasn't just a ward to him, and he knew that she wasn't just a ward to Shouta. There was a line that wasn't meant to be crossed in wardship cases, one that Kayama had warned them to keep for both their sakes. There was a level of attachment that was to be expected, and another that would only cause heartache when the wardship was dissolved.

He hadn't brought it up to Shouta yet. Each time he thinks to, he remembers that it's only been a month, that he really shouldn't be thinking this way so soon. But he wants to make sure that if the wardship was dissolved, that Eri would stay with them.

That he could call her his daughter out loud, instead of trying to keep himself from even calling her his daughter in his head.

Shinsou seemed to be getting more frustrated as he tried to come up with a song, hands rising to sign only to drop back to his sides with a frown. Yamada decided to change the subject for him, despite how eager he was to know what kind of music Shinsou liked. "You don't have to pick tonight, though! But if any of my tunes catch your fancy, be sure to let me know! I need to make sure my music still appeals to the youth, after all. But, let's get back to this laptop business. This is how you get to HeroTube, oh wonderful wealth of cat videos that it is."

Shinsou might have tried to hide it, but Yamada had lived with enough avid cat fans to spot one a

mile away. After showing him the JSL channel and an English one, he started pulling up cat video after cat video, pleased to earn that wide-eyed look of adoration and even a few ‘ *Cute* ’s after he taught him that sign.

Before he knew it, the clock was telling him that he needed to wake up Shouta to make sure he didn’t sleep through his dorm shift, leaving Class 1-A unsupervised to wreak untold amounts of havoc. “You guys still have a few hours before you have to go back to the dorm, but I need to make sure Shou wakes up before I leave.”

Shinsou seemed to waver for a moment, staring at the laptop with what he hoped was a Google-able question that could help with the investigation, but instead he followed Yamada to the living room.

Yamada noticed that Shinsou seemed to trail after him quite a bit as he fixed Eri a small snack and woke Shouta up repeatedly. It made him wonder if Shinsou had missed him as much as Yamada knew he would miss him tonight. Several times, Yamada pulled out his phone, determined to call Byte Sound to take over for just one night, and deal with the fallout tomorrow.

But in the end, he found himself struggling not to ruffle the teenager’s hair or pull him into a hug as he tells his little family goodbye, knowing those actions would only pull the worry from Shinsou’s face in the worst way.

‘ *Goodbye, Loud Noise,* ’ helps with his separation anxiety just a little.

*

27 tried not to let the separation affect him.

He could see Eri on the monitors. He knew the fastest route to the common area, and now that he knew the hero students’ quirks and combat abilities for the most part, he had several strategies to take them down if anything untoward happened while he wasn’t there.

His owner assured him that Eri would be safe, that she watched movies with the heroes on a weekly basis. That he was free to join them at any time. 27 must have allowed some amount of anxiety show to receive that kind of permission, and he assured his owner that he knew, and it was fine.

It didn’t feel fine at all. It felt like he was being strapped to the table in the Red Room, just waiting for Bug to begin. Like Chisaki was taking off his gloves.

He stared at the monitor, checking their positions again. Craven Raven was the closest to the stairway, perched on a stool in the kitchen area with Body Horror. Both were pretty tough front-liners, with the ability to extend their range of attack to an absurd degree, but Nevermore was vulnerable while his quirk was extended from his body. 27 could rush him, and depending on whether he could control a level of permeability in his quirk, possibly entangle Flesh Growth with it.

Ashido was next, sitting on the recliner with Bolt and Tongue Whip on either side. Her acid hands would be easy to use against the other two, and judging by Pikachu’s ability to incapacitate himself, he would have to be careful not to set off that bomb and instead use it against the others.

That weird strength quirk that seemed to be muttering to himself during training seemed like a good target for Shock Therapy. Incapacitate the unknown, reduce the risk of surprises.

27 didn't have a strength quirk, but he wouldn't need it to throw Bubble around. Icy Hot had a powerful quirk that didn't fit his current environment, hopefully he was as restrained in combat as he seemed to be socially. Izuku was the closest to Eri, the most threatening presence. He had a powerful strength and speed enhancement quirk, but seemed to only use his legs for attacking, in a way that wasn't natural nor practiced nearly enough to give 27 any problems.

27 glanced back at the phone when he saw his owner's head moving, to make sure that he didn't suspect that he was also watching the video feed. He made himself look busy on the phone, scrolling idly through the unread messages to avoid any more odd attempts at conversation from his owner.

It was weird that he had attempted it at all. 27 was so caught off-guard when his owner asked if he liked cats that he couldn't come up with a better response than ' *No.* ' It was clearly a lie, one of the worst 27 had ever told, but he panicked too quickly to come up with a better one.

But something must have caught his owner's attention on the screen, and he returned to staring at it, leaving 27 in peace for a little longer.

27 accidentally tapped on the Class A chat, the request for his username staring accusingly back at him. He should at least go through his unread messages, to see if any valuable information had been sent to him there before he looked through this one.

Eri's Plushie Dealer: But don't worry about it! I'm really excited to learn more about buildings, it kind of goes with my quirk, you know?

Eri's Plushie Dealer: I almost got trapped in a boiler room during the raid, lol. I probably wouldn't have been as impressive as a hero with scorch marks all over my face. You would have been like, 'Who is this lame guy trying to save?'

Eri's Plushie Dealer: But really, I don't want you to feel bad at all. It's a good learning experience!

Eri's Plushie Dealer: Did you get enough sleep last night? Neji wants to get her bedding during lunch so you could take a nap during our class. You can definitely do that if you want! Aizawa-sensei might have fooled you, but he takes plenty of naps during class, he's just on his best behavior right now. :p

Eri's Plushie Dealer: I'm sorry for making you upset, Shinsou. I'm really glad you told Present Mic, and I want you to know that I'm not mad at all.

Eri's Plushie Dealer: I'm still crying thinking of how much you believe in me though!!! I'll never forget your words of encouragement!

27 worried at his lip, trying to decide whether he should message the hero so he would stop working himself up about the situation, or if the hero would eventually stop bothering him if he didn't.

He was too close to Eri for that to happen.

Eri's Mom: It's fine. I don't know how you haven't heard that before. It was pretty lame.

Eri's Mom: I don't know if this school teaches heroes about building infrastructure, but that seems like something they should.

He started typing a message about how he learned how to navigate ventilation systems as one of his first lessons at The Miasma. Bug took advantage of his small size and his easy ability to scare by running him through a maze of vents while she hit the outside with a steel pipe, telling him that if he screamed, she was going to send her bugs in after him. But he couldn't let Mirio know that, he couldn't let any little piece of The Miasma slip away from him so easily.

Izuku had finally messaged him back, though.

Deku: Li

Deku: It's okay if you don't like it, and I don't mean to be offensive or anything, so please don't take it that way

Deku: But Link is a very cool video game character that I think suits you! He's a hero who is reincarnated during times of trouble to save a princess named Zelda in most games

Deku: And I kind of think that suits you and Eri

Deku: Link is also mu

Deku: Link doesn't have dialogue in most games, and some fans think he uses sign language to communicate!

Deku: I have a few of my favorite Zelda games in my dorm, if you ever wanted to play?

Brainwashio: You picked a character that can't speak. I might be sensitive about that.

27 bit the inside of his cheek, trying not to grin. This Izuku guy seemed way too easy to fluster, and would probably panic when faced with the thought of truly hurting 27's feelings.

He would definitely be useful in the future.

Next was Bakugo's chat.

You're a lying little bitch: Fuck you little piece of shit I know you fucking saw this

You're a lying little bitch: You pretending you don't know how this shit works either? Dumb fuck

You're a lying little bitch: Shitsei gave me a goddamn impossible ass project because of your smart mouth so you better fucking help me with this shit.

You're a lying little bitch: AND LOOK AT THE FUCKING GROUP CHAT

You're a lying little bitch: I'M FUCKING OVER EVERYONE MOONING OVER YOUR ASS

You're a lying little bitch changed their name to Ojiro should've broken your neck

Ojiro should've broken your neck: I'm FUCKING ON TO YOU. Monday. Forget that mute ass bullshit and tell Shitsei you want to study with me or I will KICK YOUR SHIT IN

I broke your nose: :)

I broke your nose changed their name to If Eri ever swears I will kill you and no one will find the body

If Eri ever swears I will kill you and no one will ever find the body: You make a lot of demands for someone who has nothing to offer me.

Now he knew that Bakugo truly was his favorite type of opponent - temperamental, low IQ, and relied heavily on their physical quirk. He should probably use this chat to find out exactly which buttons to push to make him tip over the edge, where he would be so blinded by rage that even his quirk's power wouldn't save him.

The chat for Izuku and Mirio seemed superfluous, and he had no need to involve himself with Class B yet, making him pass over Monoma's. He set his username to 'Link' in the chat for Kirby, Metal Knight, and Deku Sprout, then closed it as it only had their introductions.

Koda Koji interested him, though. Was this someone who wasn't a UA student? Could they even be an informant for The Miasma that had tracked him down?

Koda: Hello! I hope it isn't odd to create a chat when we haven't spoken yet. I just wanted to let you know that I know JSL, so if the rest of Class A ever gives you any problems, you can sign to me, and I'll ask them to stop.

Koda: Momo is learning too, though! Midoriya also mentioned wanting to learn, so maybe Class A can form a study group. :)

A member of Class A. 27 had no idea which one.

27: I don't know a lot of sign yet. Still learning.

Before he sent his next message, a flash of movement caught his eye. The fleshy strength quirk was on his phone.

Koda: That's okay! I'm probably not as good as Present Mic, but I could also teach you, if you wanted.

Weird Strength Quirk turned his phone over, but left it in his lap, like he was waiting for a message. Interesting.

27: You're watching the movie. I don't know your quirk.

The Unknown picked up his phone and glanced around the room, as if he was looking for someone. Not so Unknown anymore.

Koda: Are you here too? I can move if you want to sit closer to Eri!

Koda: My quirk is being able to talk to animals! Sometimes I can control them with just my voice. Other times, I have to convince them, but I always try to be polite! It's not the most outright heroic quirk, but I believe I can use it to help others!

This one seemed even more unnervingly pure hearted than Izuku. 27 couldn't even hate him for it.

Maybe he should open that Yamada chat, but an odd, irritating feeling told him not to. That it might be a good idea to see how long he could ignore the chat before Yamada got angry and demanded to

know why he wasn't using the app correctly.

At this point, he probably should try to force Yamada's hand. He still didn't know the punishments. But Class A might have that information already, with any luck they might have given it away for free.

Izuku was right, this chat must be chaotic. It made the app destroy itself twice, the screen freezing then returning to the background when he tried to open the chat. On the third and final time he was going to attempt it, it loaded the messages.

And there were a lot of messages. It took a long time for him to scroll up to the top, and when he saw their first messages, he froze.

They had sent him information about their quirks. Their names, their hero names. Most of them even sent pictures of themselves so that he knew which one had which name. They casually explained how their quirks worked, what weaknesses they had. Some of them admitted that they weren't as well trained in certain areas, especially hand-to-hand combat. They ranked themselves in accordance to grades and combat abilities.

All of that dangerous information was just *given* to him. And he had risked the wrath of his owner, his tenuous connection with Toshinori, and his own life just to get a glimpse of it.

But if he had just *opened the chat*, he would have had that information that morning.

Biting back against his own frustration, 27 scrolled through the rest of the messages. Some of them appeared to be in code, and Kaminari seemed to only use that code to communicate. They asked him a lot of questions, ranging from the mundane like whether he liked chocolate milk, to more risky things like what his quirk was, or how long he knew Eri. Some of those invasive questions were shut down by the others, and several parties apologized on the questioner's behalf. Eventually, the messages about him tapered off, and the discussion descended into chaos. Ashido and Kaminari changed the usernames of others and each other, discussions about schoolwork and movies and games took place. President Ingenuity tried to move those discussions to another chat where only the hero students were members, but several students protested that they liked this one better, for some reason.

Then, the sparring match with Ojiro happened, and the focus on him flared back to life.

Energize me Capitan: Shinsou @ Ojiro: I like you better when you don't touch my hair

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: SHUT THE FUCK UP DUMBASS. YOU FRY YOUR MEAGRE FUCKING BRAINCELLS ENOUGH TIMES IN A WEEK TO SPOT HEAD TRAUMA. FUCKING IDIOT

Omae wa mou Shindeiru changed NANI???'s name to Broccoli Shit

Omae wa mou Shindeiru changed Energize me Capitan's name to NANI???

Ya Good Boiii: Oof, Kaminari has been Marked for Death™. Been nice knowing ya buddy.

Red Robin YUM: f

What them cords dooo: f

Ya Good Boiii: f

YAAS Alien Kween: @Ojiro spill the fucking tea on how Shinsou is doing or I will do horrible, horrible things @you

Easy Bake: @everyone I'm sure that everything will be fine. Iida confirmed that he texted Aizawa-sensei to request an update on Shinsou's health.

Sweet Honey Sugar Life: So, does anyone know what the police officer meant by witness tampering?

NANI???: That means Ojiro will be arrested for his crimes against Shinsou's hair.

Do The Robot: I would like to remind you all that Shinsou can see these messages, and this is not the designated chat for these discussions. - Iida Tenya

The Cure'd Bird: Alas, I believe that message has arrived past the hour of its need, Iida. Now that the words have been spake, a madness shall descend upon us all, until relief finds us in knowing what we question.

Kakashi: A bit much, Tokoyami.

The Cure'd Bird: I have a reputation to uphold, Shoji.

Ya Good Boiii: But Sato has a point? The 8 Precepts are in jail, why do the police need Shinsou as a witness?

Frog Princess: Aizawa-sensei would not approve of us asking. You know he's very protective of Shinsou, and it's probably for a good reason.

Do The Robot: Eri's case is actually very atypical for a wardship designation. A wardship is usually for cases in which an at-risk minor who does not have the proper protection afforded to them from their parents or guardians is determined to require the protection of a hero during the course of a criminal investigation they are a key component to. The hero they are placed with is determined by their ability to restrain the ward if the ward uses their quirk against the hero, as well as whether the hero has security clearance, wardship certifications, and how well the investigation plays to their specialization. With Aizawa-sensei's quirk, it's quite remarkable that he hasn't had a wardship until now.

Frog Princess: Iida.

Do The Robot: WRONG CHAT I CANNOT APOLOGIZE ENOUGH

Floatalicious Def: Has anyone heard from Ojiro??? Aizawa-sensei hasn't texted Iida back.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: HOW ABOUT I FUCKING SEND ONE OF YOU SHITS TO RECOVERY GIRL SO YOU CAN ASK FOR THE CORPSE YOURSELF

Ya Good Boiii: I volunteer whoever ate my Fritos as tribute

Ya Good Boiii: I was SAVING THEM

What them cords dooo: I volunteer Kaminari as tribute. He probably ate them anyway.

Strawberry Cream Dream: I volunteer Bakugo as tribute

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: EAT SHIT AND DIE

Fidget Spinner Tail: Shinsou is fine. He had a migraine. I still volunteer myself as tribute.

C Me Dance: Nooooo! You didn't mean it! It was just an accident!

YAAS Alien Kween: More, or I'm waxing your tail tonight.

Ya Good Boiii: Uhhhh @Ashido you good?

Red Robin YUM: @Sero long story, come over.

Fidget Spinner Tail: Aizawa-sensei said he tried to use his quirk? But Recovery Girl said he would be fine with just rest. He was laying down when I left. The police officer followed us to Recovery Girl's office. Also, we're going to have a lot of quirkless combat drills. Sensei is very disappointed in us.

YAAS Alien Kween changed Fidget Spinner Tail's name to Baby Jail

YAAS Alien Kween: u r warned. Do NOT touch my boy.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: @DEKU I KNOW YOU FUCKING KNOW WHAT QUIRK HE HAS. WHAT THE FUCK WAS CORPSE TRYING TO DO

Broccoli Shit changed their name to Broccoli Boiii

Broccoli Boiii: I'm not telling anyone. Aizawa-sensei didn't tell us, and he must have a reason for that. I was told by accident.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: @FROGBITCH SHITTY HAIR WILL TELL ME WHEN HE'S DONE WITH FUCKED UP ELBOWS SO YOU BETTER JUST FUCKING TELL ME NOW

Frog Princess: Those of us who participated in the raid were told exactly what Aizawa-sensei told the class. Shinsou has a voice activated emitter quirk. That is all that we need to know. You don't need to be afraid of him considering that he rarely speaks, Bakugo.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: I'M NOT FUCKING SCARED OF THAT TWIGGY LITTLE SHIT YOU DUMB FUCK

Nothing else seemed important in the messages that followed.

But he had gained a lot of information. Izuku knew what his quirk was, but luckily, he was the only one, at least at this point. The heroes were suspicious of the police officer. Kirishima and Ashido had made their past connection to him blatantly obvious.

Their usernames absolutely *sucked*.

27 was going to close the chat until he could find a way to get the information he wanted from it, but then he saw a new message pop up.

YAAS Alien Kween: I see u.

YAAS Alien Kween: Say something or I will leak compromising pictures involving you, me, and a lot of non-toxic finger paint.

At least that was a good threat. He had hope for this one.

27: Watch the movie or be on your phone somewhere else. You're distracting Eri.

27: That was a lot more distracting.

Ashido stopped flailing on the video monitors, her cheers having already drawn attention from everyone else in the room. She turned back to her phone, bouncing in her seat excitedly.

YAAS Alien Kween: THE CRYPTID HAS BEEN FOUND

YAAS Alien Kween: WHERE ARE U???

27: Elsewhere.

Ya Good Boiii: Vague af.

Strawberry Cream Dream: You're in the safe room, aren't you? Eri says hi.

27: Tell her I said hi back.

Strawberry Cream Dream: She said she wants you to be friends with us so we can all watch movies together, and you would really like this movie.

What them cords dooo: Should we be concerned you're in a safe room rn? Is there a villain attack or something?

Broccoli Boiii: The Safe Room is just the video surveillance room that the teachers on shift stay in to avoid us. Kacchan and I were sent there once. It has live video feed from all over the dorm, and a cot for Eri to sleep on during Aizawa-sensei's shifts.

Red Robin YUM: Where's the camera??? Can you see me?

Red Shark was easy to spot, with all the attention he was drawing to himself as he waved and spun around in circles in the hallway.

27: I can see you. I could tell you where the cameras are, but not for free.

YAAS Alien Kween: COME DOOWWWN I WANNA HANG OUT WITH UUUUU

27: No.

Hon Hon Baguette: mon petite violette, you are quite brusque. Would you like to share a cheese sample to put your worries to rest?

27: Non.

C Me Dance: AH HH WE HAVE SO MANY QUESTIONS! I'm writing a program to pick out all the messages where we asked you something so it's easier to answer rather than scrolling through all that mess.

Easy Bake: I was just about to do it by hand. You are a life-saver, Tooru.

C Me Dance: #PythonPWNZ

Pika CHUUUU :* : Fiiiirst! How did you get those scars?

He sees Amphibian Girl lash Power Outage with her tongue, glaring at him. It made him feel a little better to know they weren't likely to ask that question soon.

Floatalicious Def: KAMINARI

YAAS Alien Kween: Tsu gottem

Strawberry Cream Dream: That was very rude.

27: I only have one question, and I don't give information away for free. I'll only answer one question in return.

Pika CHUUUU :* : Sorry. That was not very cash money of me.

27: I don't know what any of your coded messages mean, Sparky.

Easy Bake: You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and we will happily answer any that you have!

The Cure'd Bird: Kaminari is grinning madly with delights untold.

The Cure'd Bird: You have made a grave mistake, Shinsou.

What them cords dooo: KAMINARI DON'T YOU FUCKING DO IT

Pika CHUUU : changed their name to Meme Master*

Meme Master: Allow me to teach you the ways, grasshopper

Meme Master: Pls click this link. <https://www.herotube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ>

Ya Good Boiii: SHINSOU DON'T DO IT STAY PURE

What them cords dooo: Rickrolling? Really?

C Me Dance: DONE! :)

C Me Dance: 22MB file attached. Tap to download.

27: One of you pick the question.

Floatalicious Def: WHO GETS TO PICK??? HOW CAN WE DECIDE THAT?!?!

Easy Bake: We can do a tally system! @everyone Send your vote to me through PM

Floatalicious Def: IT'S SO HARD TO DECIDE.

27: Fine. Two questions for one answer.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: You're fucking enjoying this bullshit, you smug fuck.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru changed 27's name to NANI?!

YAAS Alien Kween: TAKE IT BACK BAKUGO

NANI?! changed their name to 27

27: :)

Meme Master: SO BRAVE

Ya Good Boiii: Balance is restored. We can't have two Marked for Death(TM)

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: WANNA FUCKING BET

Broccoli Boiii: Kacchan. Pls.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: IDAF DUMB BITCH CAN FUCKING FIGHT ME AND NEXT TIME I WILL BEAT HIS SHIT IN

27: :-)

Ya Good Boiii: Oh god not that face

Meme Master: Bakugo needs a vibe check. What's the sitch, my good dudes?

Red Robin YUM: Not good.

Ya Good Boiii: He's screeching.

27: :--)

Ya Good Boiii: WHERE'S THE RESULTS WE NEED TO END THIS

Easy Bake: Koda and Iida are left, I'm going to Iida's room now. He might be asleep.

NANI??? : Just voted! Sorry Momo!

Floatalicious Def changed NANI???'s name to Goodest Boiii

Broccoli Boiii: Kacchan how could you???? I'm sorry Koda I didn't notice!!!

Do the Robot: I have also voted! - Iida Tenya

Easy Bake: Question 1: Who do you like the best out of Class A?

Easy Bake: Question 2: Why did you pick '27' as your user handle?

Easy Bake: But remember, you don't have to answer either question if you don't want to! We can skip and move down the list!

27: Skip 1.

YAAS Alien Kween: IT'S ME THOOOO

Easy Bake: Question 3 - I'm skipping and very disappointed in those who would try to cheat on our finals. Question 4: What is your relationship to Aizawa-sensei?

27: Skip 4.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: FUCK YOU. STOP DRAGGING THIS SHIT OUT.

Easy Bake: Question 5: How long have you known Eri?

Floatalicious Def: Awwww I wanna know cute Eri stories too! Did you know her when she was a baby????

27: 1 - My username is a name I've used more often than the others.

27: 2 - More than 3 years. She wasn't a baby, but she was about 2.5 years old. She had some verbal delays, but her other milestones added up to around that age.

Ya Good Boiii: Does Shinsou have a mommy blog?

Broccoli Boiii: SERO

Ya Good Boiii: I'm just saying!!! That sounds like something from a mommy blog!

27: As a cute story, she was really attached to the first book she learned to read. She refused to go to sleep without it. She also used to be very insistent on picking her own dress in the morning, even though they were all the same. There was a ritual to it. And she really liked Mimic's puppet. There were a few times she tried to hug it.

Floatalicious Def: these Eri stories have watered my crops. #blessed

Meme Master changed 27's name to Teen Mom

Broccoli Boiii: KAMINARI >:(

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: STOP HIDING SHIT DEKU. IF YOU'VE GOT A FUCKING PROBLEM JUST SAY IT

YAAS Alien Kween: Shinsou talks so much abt Eri its soooooo adorable

YAAS Alien Kween: I WANNA KNOW MORE ERI STORIES

Strawberry Cream Dream: Eri is right here?

Ya Good Boiii: I don't like the way you said that, Todoroki.

Broccoli Boiii: She is! Todoroki is just confused why we can't ask Eri, but it's because Shinsou remembers more about Eri's early childhood than she does.

Strawberry Cream Dream: Understandable, have a nice day.

Do the Robot: Oh no.

Floatalicious Def: TODOROKI WHO DID THIS TO YOU???

Meme Master: :))))))

Meme Master changed Strawberry Cream Dream's name to Welcome to Chili's

The Cure'd Bird: He grows stronger with each victim he takes.

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: CORPSE FACE ASK YOUR FUCKING QUESTION AND FUCK OFF

Teen Mom: :---)

Ya Good Boiii: shinsou PLEASE HE'S TRYING TO FIND YOU RUN

Kakashi: Shinsou this is not a good idea. For any of us.

Red Robin YUM: Shinbro Bakubro kinda hates that face. IDK why it brings out the Bakurage but it does.

Broccoli Boiii: AVENGERS ASSEMBLE TO DEFEND THE SAFE ROOM

Floatalicious Def: OTWWWW CMON IRON MAN

Teen Mom: 1 - He won't be able to find me. 2 - Aizawa is here, and I doubt Blasty can do anything in front of him. 3 - I can and will destroy him given the opportunity.

Sugar Daddy: I heard the scream. Shinsou he's close. On the 5th floor.

Kakashi: Is this flirting?

Ya Good Boiii: @Shoji Probably? But let's keep that to ourselves and let them work it out, okay buddy?

Red Robin YUM: no??? This is not flirting!!

YAAS Alien Kween: u seem a lil defensive kiri... whys that? ;)

Omae wa mou Shindeiru: IDGAF ABOUT SHITSEI IF YOU DON'T FUCKING ASK YOUR QUESTION I'M BEATING IT OUT OF YOU

Red Robin YUM: BAKUNO

Teen Mom: That's a very uninspired threat. Try harder.

Baby Jail: I'm outside the safe room making sure Bakugo doesn't actually get in, because Aizawa-sensei will take it out on all of us.

YAAS Alien Kween changed Baby Jail's name to Best Boiii

Ya Good Boiii: I love a good redemption story.

Broccoli Boiii: A new boiii!!!

Goodest Boiii: Welcome to the Boiis Ojiiro!!!

Teen Mom: List the punishments used here, by Aizawa or Yamada in particular, preferably by severity.

The messages suddenly stopped.

27 waited. He closed and reopened the app, thinking it must have frozen again, but nothing happened. A quick scan of the monitors showed that most of the heroes were looking at their phones, though Crimson Foul and Puff Ball were trying to restrain Fulmination in the stairway, and Commander Diesel was shouting at them while wearing a nightcap and plaid pajamas.

The others should be answering him. He had given them plenty of information. He had given them far too much, now that he looks back and reads what he had said about his name. He should have skipped that question, he shouldn't have answered it. Few organizations used numbers as code names, if they put together that his number meant he was a Number, then they may be able to find The Miasma.

Then he would be useless to his owner. He would be taken away from Eri.

27 startled at the sound of the door opening, to see Eri poke her head in with a smile dancing in her eyes. "Are you still talking to the heroes, Twenny?"

27 rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at his owner, who seemed to be reading a book. Perhaps he hadn't noticed the commotion on the cameras. "They stopped answering. I might have said something weird again."

Eri shut the door behind her, then crawled into his lap to play with the strings of his hoodie. "That's okay, Twenny! They were really happy you were talking to them! Even though you were making Bakugo mad, but Todo really liked that."

"You like Todoroki again," 27 assumed, noticing that Chili had been awarded an nickname, and Eri nodded.

"He doesn't know a lot of movies either, even though he's a hero, so you don't have to be embarrassed about not knowing movies. And you don't have to be embarrassed about your scars, 'cause Todo has a big scar too, and no one bothers him about it," Eri says, looking up with her pleading red eyes to try to convince him to at least be friends with this hero.

27 frowned, pressing his finger to the sunken groove on his cheek before he catches himself, pulling away. "They don't bother me."

Eri picks at her skirt, frowning at her white leggings. "I don't like mine, either," she admits in a small, wavering voice.

27 pulls her close to his chest, wrapping his arms around her. "I know. I'm sorry," he whispers, biting at the inside of his cheek as he considers whether his opinion would make her feel any better. "I think the swirling ones are cute, though."

Eri cocks her head, then pulls at his sleeve to poke at his Bug scars. "These are cuter. They're like little sidewalks."

"Hmm," is all 27 can manage to say in answer, coming out a bit more strained than he meant it to. He hates when she does this. Especially when her fingernails are a little too long, like they are right now. She doesn't even realize that she's scratching him as she drags her finger up and down his arm.

He doesn't usually hate it this much, though. His teeth start to hurt from how hard he's clenching his jaw, and he can smell blood in the air at times, thick and coppery. She never makes him feel like this, at worst it's an unpleasant buzz in his skull but right now he feels like he's drowning. He can't let her know, this is one of the few things she likes, and he can't make her feel sad again.

He's terrified and wounded by the numbness setting into his hands when he hears her gasp.

"That word is gone!" Eri says, pulling his sleeve back as if that kanji had been moved higher up his arm somehow. "How'd that word go away?"

"It got taken off," 27 answers, finding he can breathe a little easier now that she's distracted. "The big circle on my back too."

Eri stands up to pull his shirt back to see, running her hands over the skin as though it's just hiding beneath the surface. "He won't get mad?" Eri whispers with a slight tremble in her legs.

"Nope," 27 answers, grinning as he thinks about this victory over Chisaki. He wishes he could face the mobster down and show him the spaces that he thought he used to own. He can only imagine the look on his face. "I don't care if he does. He doesn't scare me."

Eri wraps her arms around his neck, hanging off of him like a necklace. "I'm glad, Twenny! Nobody's gonna call you that name anymore, and nobody's gonna hurt you."

He hugs her back, smiling despite knowing how wrong she was. "I'm glad too."

Eri glanced over at his owner, and recognized the website he had pulled up on one of the screens.

"YAMA'S SHOW!" she screamed, relaxing her hold to slap her hands on either side of his face.

"Twenny, Yama's show is gonna start! He's gonna play a song for me too! He's gonna play Baby Shark just for me!"

"Oh," 27 says, smiling just for her benefit. "I didn't think they played songs like that on the radio. He asked me what song I wanted too, but..."

"You didn't pick?" Eri asked, head tilting to the side. "But he would play it! I promise he would! Yama plays any song he wants, 'cause no one can tell him what to do!"

"I... couldn't think of any," 27 lied. He liked the intro song for Sailor Moon a bit more than the other songs he knew, but he didn't think asking Yamada to play it would go over well for him. At best, it made him look stupid, at worst, Yamada could think he was trying to mock him or sabotage his show.

"I imagine that Present Mic would like to know if you hear a song you like," his owner said, startling 27. The man's gaze wasn't directed at him, he seemed to be staring at the wall instead. "He enjoys talking about music."

"He can even take songs home with him on his phone!" Eri said, bouncing on his leg. "Then you get to listen to them anywhere you want!"

His owner smiled at Eri, then clicked on something to make the computer begin to play music. 27 watched as his owner picked up his phone, and wished that he was close enough to know what he was typing as he heard it buzz from messages being received.

But Eri was settled comfortably against his chest, making it impossible for 27 to sit at the corner of the cot, where he might have been able to see if his owner was messaging someone about The Miasma. He needed to find a way to learn what they knew, soon.

But tonight, he supposed he just needed to listen to the radio.

*

Aizawa loved his husband. He truly did, and he knew that he didn't show it nearly enough.

He just hoped that he didn't give Hizashi a heart attack with that last message.

Hizashi always responded to his texts immediately while he was doing his show, unless there was a technical issue or he was on the air. But the music had been playing with no commentary breaks or issues in sight, and what he thought had been a teasing text message was beginning to look like the last thing Hizashi saw before he died.

Finally, the reply came in.

Zashi: babe ARE YOU SERIOUS???

Zashi: I AM PLAYING SUCH SHITTY MUSIC YOU CANNOT

Zashi: I AM FREAKING OUT A LITTLE I HAVE NOTHING PREPARED I

Shou: A little?

Zashi: PLEASE TELL ME HE LIKED SOMETHING SO I CAN MAKE A NEW PLAYLIST OFF OF THAT

Zashi: THE FIRST REAL SONG SHINSOU HEARD WAS A SHITTY TOP 40 MY MANAGER INSISTED ON I AM CRUSHED I HAVE FAILED

Aizawa glanced at the screen's reflection, but as he suspected, Shinsou wasn't giving him any indication whether he liked the song or not. He certainly wasn't disinterested, his head tilted slightly so that he could hear the music better, his eyes a bit wider than usual. But he had worn that same expression since the show began, and after cycling through almost every music genre, Aizawa realized it.

Shinsou hadn't heard this kind of music before.

To Aizawa, it wasn't surprising. After all that had been denied to Shinsou, he doubted that any of his previous organizations would let him explore his taste in music in between rounds of torture. He thought that telling Hizashi his suspicions would make his husband a bit flustered, but make the night a little easier to work through. He knew that Hizashi had been dragging himself to the radio station, obviously wanting to stay home with them, and thought that changing his playlist up a bit to accommodate his ward would help him feel more connected to them.

This was a bit beyond that.

Shou: He doesn't seem to hate anything so far.

Zashi: babe ilu but not hating is not enough right now

Zashi: He looks like he likes Morrissey maybe? BUT I'M NOT ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE BABE HEEEEEEEEELP

Shou: He probably hasn't heard enough music to form an opinion.

Zashi: OH GOD I'M FORMING HIS TASTE IN MUSIC I CAN'T DO THIS SHOU

Shou: You've been a radio personality since you were 20. I think you're more qualified to form his taste in music, if that's a possibility, than anyone else.

Zashi: Did he tell you????

Shou: No. It's just an assumption. I could be wrong.

Zashi: Ur never wrong!

Zashi: mute me next break?

Aizawa tried not to roll his eyes, pulling out the bluetooth headphones he had started stashing in the Safe Room desk. Though Hizashi had started censoring his program a bit more since Eri started listening, he would still request that Aizawa mute certain live portions or bawdy English songs that his station manager insisted on playing. He had a suspicion that wasn't the case in this instance.

Shou: Ready. Don't give away any information about Shinsou.

Zashi: How do you know me so well babe??? It's a little creepy

Shou: You asked your fans to build a wedding playlist instead of doing it yourself.

Zashi: I NEEDED SUGGESTIONS IT HAD TO BE PERFECT!!!!

Shou: That's how I knew.

Zashi: 30 sec!

Aizawa tucked one of the headphones in his ear, hand hovering over the audio output menu to switch the devices as he counted down the seconds. He was a bit off, but the record scratch was all the warning he needed to know that his husband was about to start talking.

He heard Eri start to explain to Shinsou that sometimes the radio goes quiet for a while so that Yamada can eat a snack, a white lie that Aizawa had come up with on the spot, too exhausted at the time to properly explain that there were certain things that she wasn't old enough to hear. Shinsou seemed to accept that, turning back to his phone with a frown, before he let Eri take it over to check on their monster game.

"Helloooo listeners," Present Mic drawled as the jingle for his commentary break stopped. "This is your man of the hour, the voice hero when you're in need, telling you to Get Your Hands Up! Week after week, year after year, we get together for our little chats, our moments, our love for music. I know my most devoted listeners already know tonight's playlist by heart, but tonight, Get Your Hands Up! is going to do something we haven't done in a while! We're opening the phone lines for you, dear listeners, to send me some tunes for all of us to enjoy!"

Hopefully Hizashi cleared that with his station manager.

"I can hear my listeners asking, 'Why?! Why would you change a set playlist, Present Mic, oh masterful DJ that you are!' And to that I say, 'Because I can!' It's my show, I'll damn well do what I want on it!"

He definitely didn't clear it. Hizashi was going to get a lot of angry phone calls over the next few

days.

“But,” Hizashi starts to break through the Present Mic persona, his voice dropping a bit lower and becoming more even. “Listeners, you deserve to know the truth behind this decision. During the last music break, I got a call telling me that one of my listeners wasn’t just new to the show, this listener is new to music. My show is the first time he’s heard any music at all, and that...” Hizashi stops, pausing to collect himself. “That’s really humbling.”

Shouta finds himself smiling. It had been quite a while since he was able to hear Hizashi so clearly on this show, that side of Hizashi that few really got to know. A quieter, sweeter side that could be so vulnerable so easily. The Hizashi he fell in love with.

“I can’t play just any old song after hearing that, and despite being the Voice Hero himself, despite running this show for over 10 years, I can’t be the only voice this kid hears tonight. I want my listeners to not be listeners tonight, I want all of us, every fan of music that’s listening tonight, to reach out and welcome this kid to one of the most universal joys in this world. To share your favorite songs, the best songs you know. My audiophiles, my dedicated roadies, and every casual fan who knows what it feels like to listen to a song and have it *get you*, call in! Call in, tweet me, email me, I can send an intern up to the roof to look for smoke signals but we already have one posted at the fax machine! I want to hear you, listeners! Hear you reaching out through the airwaves!”

Present Mic rattled off all of his points of contact, his station number, all of his social media, and even his email and fax number. Hopefully his husband would pay his interns back with a well deserved pizza party after this.

“Now, there’s one song I know will start us off on the right foot! Not the left one, not the other left or the other right one! That lucky right paw that’s always waving goodbye to me with its squishy little toe beans - ‘Lovecats!’ ”

Shouta quickly turned the speakers back on, leaning forward with his elbow on the desk as he closed his eyes and listened, a smile tugging at his lips.

It wasn’t every night that Hizashi played his song for him.

*

Present Mic was about to lose it. From his station manager sending a parade of interns to his suite to shove memo after threatening memo under the door, to the snarky comments from a certain subset of former fans, to the overwhelming weight of running this show for Shinsou, Present Mic was about to *lose it*.

“*I just think it’s funny that you called me an elitist and now you want my help,*” the smug little bastard on the other end of the call said, toying with the very last of Present Mic’s nerves. “*If you can’t pick your own music-*”

“I’m sorry, not-listener! I think you missed the part of the program that explained what’s happening tonight! And you know what’s happening tonight?! Not you!” It was pretty hard to be a wordsmith when the voice hero could practically feel his blood pressure rising. Byte Sound raised an eyebrow at him from the other side of the glass partition, but he waved her off, signaling for the

next caller in the queue. “Get Your Hands Up! You’re on the air, dear listener! What funky fresh beats are you bringing to this salad?”

Maybe he’s used that line already tonight, but between the panic and zero sleep he’s gotten the past two days, he really can’t bring himself to care. “ *Oh, hi! Um, I’m a huge fan! I don’t really have a song picked, but I was going to see if my quirk would still work without seeing the little kid this show is for, if that’s okay.* ”

Present Mic was intrigued by the young man who had called in. “Your quirk?”

“ *It’s called Heartsong. When I look at a person, I can hear their favorite song, even if they haven’t heard it yet. I’m trying to get better at using it, but it doesn’t always work on someone I’ve never met.* ”

Present Mic muted himself to squeal in delight. “WOW! I would love that, little listener! What an amazing quirk!”

“ *Thanks! I really hope this works, though. Maybe if you tell me enough about him, I can start to hear it.* ”

Present Mic hummed, scratching his head. “Well, I can’t tell you a whole lot, I’m afraid. His mom would get pretty mad if his secret identity was exposed.”

Present Mic grinned to himself, finally getting a little vengeance for all of Shouta’s teasing since Eri came to live with them, which admittedly had made his mother henning worse.

“I can tell you that he’s wicked smart. I mean, this kid picks up language like a fish to water. He’s a little shy, at least right now, but I know he has a wicked sense of humor just waiting to come out. And he loves his little sister, she’s his entire world. He absolutely dotes on her. He’s a sweet kid, and... it surprises me sometimes. He’s been through a lot, more than he ever should have, but this kid... He’s pretty amazing.” Present Mic shakes his head, trying to pull himself out of the morose state he’s found himself in. That kind of feeling didn’t belong on the airwaves right now, not tonight. Not for Shinsou. “And he loves cats!”

“ *Okay! I can kind of hear something! It’s really faint, but I definitely know it,*” the listener hums, then snaps his fingers. “ *Flash by Sajou no Hana! It’s really faint, though, and a little distorted. I really can’t be sure if it’s right-* ”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out!” Present Mic thanked his lucky stars that this was a song they had the rights to play. His station manager was already taking a huge chunk out of his paycheck to cover the fines he’d already wracked up on the recommendation of his listeners. “Stay on the line with me, my talented listener! I’m going to try my best to snatch you up before every disk jockey in Japan hunts you down!”

His listener did, and they ended up talking for quite a while, Byte Sound pulling songs from the Twitter tag without having to be asked to. The kid was a college student with dreams of being a professional discographer, and he certainly had talent for it. Even if the move to Mustafu would be a bit much for him now, Present Mic had enough industry connections to make sure the kid would be able to quit his unpaid internship at his university, and start working with the music pros.

When he hung up, he got a scathing look from his sidekick, who signed, ‘ *If you fire me, I’m leaking That Call.* ’

‘ *No! No! I would never!* ’ Yamada quickly signed back, and it wasn’t just the fear of what would

happen if certain snippets of a conversation he had with Shouta while under the influence of an embarrassing quirk got out to the masses. ‘ *You’re my ears, Byte, I could never lose you!* ’

Byte Sound rolled her eyes, but the little smirk told him she just wanted a little reassurance. She’d gone through a lot of rejection to finally find an agency that would take her on as a sidekick, but their loss was his gain. She had been instrumental in too many stakeouts for him to ever consider letting her go. ‘ *Let me meet your son.* ’

Present Mic choked on air, brain stuttering over her assumption. ‘ *NOT SON! Ward!* ’

Byte Sound pulled her lips between her teeth, smiling and nodding tightly. He could hear that disbelieving ‘Mmhhh’ through the soundproof glass. He could never let Shinsou meet Byte. His ward already bullied him enough, but with her bad influence? The sass would be *unbearable*.

But Byte went back to her duties, counting him down for another caller. He took a quick sip of lemon water and did a few arm stretches, trying to shake out the exhaustion. The live portion of the show would be wrapping up soon, the rest was just a few pre-recorded bits and pre-selected music. Even if he wanted to work through the night on his show like he used to, his brain was already too fried to give his listeners the quality content they deserved.

“Before I take the last caller, I just want to thank all the music lovers who came out and jammed out tonight. I can’t wait to check in with our newest listener to see what’s caught his fancy! Lucky last caller, Put Your Hands Up! You are live and on the air with the Voice Hero himself, Present Mic!” Yamada dragged out his name for effect, hoping it ate up a few more seconds of air time.

“ *Lucky,* ” a familiar drawl answered, and Yamada covered his face with his hands, realizing how close he had been to getting fired tonight. “ *What a wild program you’ve had tonight. I kind of feel inspired by it, ya know?* ”

“Aw, Hawkes, don’t make me blush!” Present Mic protested. “The Number Three hero complimenting me is bound to give me a bigger head! It might even get big enough to match my hair!”

“ *It’s pretty deserved, ya know. I’ve enjoyed listening to all these people helping this kid out, except for those guys you pissed off on Tweeter, or whatever it is.* ”

Present Mic fumbles to find something to say that isn’t a bird joke. That didn’t go over too well when Hawkes broke the top 20 ranking. “I hope you’ve heard a few songs that caught your fancy! I certainly have! I really should make Open Mic Night a regular thing!”

Hawkes huffs a laugh, “ *I think you should. Before we do this interview thing, I’ve got a song request for ya.* ”

“Well! Far be it for me to tell Hawkes the Winged Hero no! What’ll it be, my friend?”

“ *Free Falling by Tom Petty, I know you don’t have to look for it too hard,* ” Hawkes teases. Present Mic didn’t, but he would have had it already queued up if *someone* hadn’t been spiteful enough not to warn him who was on the line. Not that it was her *job* or anything. “ *You know that’s my favorite, but be sure to tell me if the kid likes it too.* ”

Present Mic found himself a little taken back by the sincerity that had snuck into the usually blasé hero’s words. He wasn’t going to be Number 2 for just any reason. Even if he didn’t show it much, Hawkes had a genuine desire to help others, more pure than a lot of heroes could claim. “Of course! I’ll be letting everyone know how we did next week, but I guess now that I have your

number, you'll be the first to know!"

"I'll hold you to that," Hawkes says with a chuckle, and thankfully stays silent on the line until he hears the beep to confirm that they've moved off the air. *"So, who's the kid? You seemed pretty fired up about him, so I know he's not any old randy."*

Present Mic groans, realizing that his hero manager was going to have a field day trying to manage everyone else's curiosity in that very answer. "My ward. Was I really that obvious? And Hawkes, I've got to apologize--"

"Nah, I jerked you around a lot to get this set up. I don't really care for the fanfare anyway, but let's just call it even," Hawkes drawls, finally admitting that half of those infuriatingly vague responses were intentional, as he suspected. Even if the Winged Hero didn't care for the pomp and circumstance that came with media, he didn't have to make it harder to work with him. *"Heard a bit about him, thanks to a case I've got. Hope he's doing better now."*

"A bit," Yamada answers. Better than the way he was in that interrogation room, but nowhere near where he deserved to be. "But I know it'll get better."

"I'll bet on it," Hawkes answers, sighing into the phone. *"You sure I can't just take off after that? It's such a nice night, and I know you hate background noises, so I can't exactly stretch my wings and talk at the same time."*

The offer was oh so tempting, and he had a feeling Hawkes already knew that. "I don't know, maybe if I find someone else to fill the slot. I'll let my people call your people, you know?"

Hawkes just laughed it off. *"Come on! We're squarezies, right?"*

"Oh, we're squarezies," Present Mic answered, the memory of every missed call to his agency giving him enough spite to carry on. "But I can't exactly let you slip away so easily now, little bird. Not after you were so hard to catch. But since you're one of the few heroes I *like* chatting with, we'll keep it short. Half an hour to go through the usual yadda, then we can just chatter til the clock runs out--"

"Oh no, look at that," Hawkes says, full of false disappointment that Present Mic has heard far too many times to be fooled by. *"I've got an emergency in, like, 20 minutes. Do you think we should call it quits now or--"*

"Fine," Present Mic whined, the irritation fueling him burning out to fumes. "But stop giving me the run around, alright? I'm a hero, I get it, this part of the job sucks, so just work with me. I know I'm not as bad as the news anchor on channel 8."

"Pssh, no one is. I think half the pros she's interviewed have tried to dig up an old shoplifting charge so they could haul her off the air and into a cell for a few days."

Present Mic might be one of them, but after listening to her try to tell him he couldn't possibly be deaf if he was a radio show host, as though she knew anything at all about *anything*, no one could blame him.

Especially not Shouta, who ended up using an informant to find out about her little trips to a certain select club that she certainly didn't want anyone to know about.

And if the future Number 2 hero's song was the one that Shinsou liked, he'd certainly share that information with him.

Chapter End Notes

Here are the names for everyone in the Class 1-A chat:

Energize me Capitan > NANI??? > Pika CHUUU :* > Meme Master - Kaminari Denki
Omae wa mou Shindeiru - Bakugo Katsuki
Ya Good Boiii - Sero Hanta
Red Robin YUM - Kirishima Eijirou
What them cords doooo - Jirou Kyouka
YAAAS Alien Kween - Ashido Mina
Easy Bake - Yaoyorozu Momo
Sweet Honey Sugar Life > Sugar Daddy - Sato Rikido
Do The Robot - Iida Tenya
The Cure'd Bird - Tokoyami Fumikage
Kakashi - Shoji Mezo
Frog Princess - Asui Tsuyu
Floatalicious Def - Uraraka Ochako
Strawberry Cream Dream > Welcome to Chili's - Todoroki Shoto
Fidget Spinner Tail > Baby Jail > Best Boiii - Ojiro Mashirao
Broccoli Boiii - Midoriya Izuku
Hon Hon Baugette - Aoyama Yuga
C Me Dance - Hagakure Tooru
NANI??? > Goodest Boiii - Koda Koji
27 > NANI??? > 27 > Teen Mom - Shinsou Hitoshi (27)

And the lyrical translation for the song referenced is below:

I was fascinated by me. The more it becomes ash.
A simple word, dripping, all the gears went crazy. It 's a simple phenomenon. I know
my mistake doesn't work.
If you can love your shape, you don't need happiness anymore.
Everyone, he is just getting lost now. I was fascinated by the flashing sound in the
distance. The more it becomes ash.
The more blind you are, the more strongly your heart shines. Hey, do you know only
your eyes? I wish I could cancel all my mistakes with a simple self-harm.
Looking at me with scarlet eyes. Happiness is no longer necessary.
Everyone, he is just getting lost now. I was fascinated by the flashing sound in the
distance. The more it becomes ash.
The voice isn't even reaching you, both eyes are cloudy. I'm still dreaming of you. Oh.
Everyone, he is just getting lost now. I was fascinated by the flashing sound in the
distance. The more it becomes ash.

Source: <https://www.lyrical-nonsense.com/lyrics/sajou-no-hana/senkou/>

(There is meaning in the song that Heartsong picked, though I wouldn't say that it's Shinsou's favorite.)

Cat Studies

Chapter Summary

Aizawa tries to improve his relationship with Shinsou using the book that Ms. Joke provided with startling results, Class 1-A has a meeting to discuss Shinsou, and an emergency occurs in Todoroki's room that requires both Aizawa and Shinsou's expertise.

Trigger Warnings: Description of torture, Child death in a dream, Mention of animal death and subsequent incineration (though it does not occur), Brief mention of torture on a young child (that a character is mistaken about)

And there is a reference to a particular Dadzawa fanfic that will be referenced again later in this one, which will explain a certain new character's naming convention.

Chapter Notes

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa receives a book on caring for feral cats from Ms. Joke, with the advice that using that book will help him connect with Shinsou. Shinsou messaged a group chat containing himself and the students of Class 1-A, and at the end of that chat, asked what punishments were used by Aizawa and Yamada. While Shinsou and Eri were at the 8 Precepts, Eri would always have a serving of jello on days that she had to go to The Chair, though Eri never made that connection. Yamada changed his radio show program to ask for callers to recommend their favorite songs after Aizawa messaged him with the suspicion that Shinsou had never listened to music before.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When he first met Eri in that hospital room, the day after she had woken up from her feverish coma, she had shivered in fear, curling herself tight into a cocoon on her bed. Immediately, his mind drifted to too many rain soaked kittens he had rescued out of habit, and perhaps the familiar white shade of her hair in combination had pushed him to make his decision. He had long since learned that he couldn't walk away with half-efforts in these situations, not anymore.

Aizawa knew how to act with Eri. He kept himself small, distant, his hands visible and his movements slow. His voice was soft as he introduced himself, as he explained her situation. Hearing that he was a hero was what drew her out, just like setting a warm saucer of milk down in front of a drenched kitten. The blankets fell slowly through their conversation, and he was able to approach little by little. By the end his open arm and side was the cocoon she nested herself in

when a nurse startled her by entering the room.

Eri needed a safe place, a haven to return to when the world was too frightening or difficult to understand. He could make himself into that place, easily in spirit, though it was harder in practice. Aizawa had to learn how to make himself soft in ways no one had ever shown him, but Eri never noticed. She never seemed to see him flinch the first few times she played with his hair, or how stiffly he moved to return her embrace the first time she felt confident enough to initiate a hug, rather than ask for it.

But Shinsou was not a kitten. He was hardly a feral cat either. In that interrogation room, and sometimes after, the image of Eri held in Shinsou's arms brought about another comparison entirely.

There was a wildness in his eyes at times, a slow dissection of how to stalk forward, to use his claws, to make a kill. It was something he didn't blame Shinsou for knowing, the boy's survival likely hinged on it more often than not. Shinsou had been a kitten years ago, but now Aizawa saw that he had been made into a predator.

When he was with Eri, there was a softness that belied that. A tigress curled around her cub. The affection between them made it easier to ignore how much more dangerous it would be to approach, especially when the tigress was as wounded and cornered as Shinsou.

Shinsou needed to learn a different level of trust, back to the very concept of the word. He needed to learn that safety and security even existed, before he could learn how to ask for it. There was a level of fear ever present inside Shinsou that was easy to compare to a feral cat, but Aizawa could never forget that Shinsou could be lethal if he wanted to be.

It was Aizawa's job to make sure he was never in a situation where he felt he needed to be.

A situation like this one.

Shinsou was having a nightmare. It was clear in the twist of his mouth, the furrow in his brow. His hand was knotted in his own hair, making it easy to imagine what horrors were playing in his mind, even easier to know how to stop it. Aizawa could either wake the teenager or try to pull his hand away. He had done that plenty of times for Eri, pulling a blanket free from where it had wrapped too tightly around her, pulling her into his arms to cry it out afterwards.

He couldn't do that for Shinsou. For Shinsou, any touch that wasn't Eri's was violence, and in his terrified state, he would react in kind, on instinct. He had the police injury reports in his case to prove it. Aizawa could deflect, he could restrain, but either strategy only ended with another comparison to Chisaki. Even with a good reason, he would be subduing Shinsou all the same.

Aizawa heard it when he opened and shut the desk drawer, a measure he hoped would wake either ward without his interference. Distorted behind closed teeth as it was, that noise was still unmistakable. An imitation of a bark.

Aizawa moved to reach over Shinsou, to touch Eri's leg to wake her. Asking a 5 year old to comfort her former caretaker was cowardly, but logical.

Shinsou woke her instead, gasping with his eyes too wide, fingers running over his face in a manner approaching habit. Seeing if the mask was gone, seeing if his hair was still matted. Then his violet eyes darted around the room, shoulders rising as he spotted Aizawa, but falling when Eri wrapped her arm over his chest, holding him tight. "M' here, Twenny," Eri mumbled, alarmed but not entirely awake.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Shinsou answered, apologies spilling out in panic as he moved his hand to cover hers where it lay on her shoulder, brushing it over the length of her arm. Shinsou seemed to freeze, staring as Eri sighed and began to fall back asleep. There was something in that stillness that reminded Aizawa of the way Eri used to freeze up and shrink when she wanted something, something she wasn’t sure she could ask for.

Shinsou needed something, something he couldn’t ask from Eri. Something Aizawa wasn’t sure he could offer, but the pain held behind Shinsou’s clenched jaw made him speak regardless.

“Shinsou,” Aizawa would get better at not being hurt each time he was looked at with that kind of fear. “You’re okay now. It was a bad dream.”

Shinsou’s eyes darted between Aizawa and Eri, and Aizawa felt a bit too hopeful in thinking that Shinsou was considering him as a source of comfort now. Any port in a storm, perhaps. Shinsou moved his arm slowly, careful not to wake Eri as he pulled the trapped limb from beneath her, but he needed it to sign, ‘ *E-R-I okay.* ’

Aizawa nodded. “She’s been sleeping. No nightmares.”

Shinsou bit his lip, looking at Eri again. Still needing something, some comfort that Aizawa didn’t know how to give. ‘ *Arm.* ’ Shinsou made a fist after he signed it, shaking his head minutely. ‘ *I am sorry. Will sleep.* ’

“She will fall back to sleep if she wakes up,” Aizawa tells him, knowing that Shinsou knows that far better than he does, that Shinsou only needs some form of reassurance. Or permission.

It was enough. Shinsou took Eri’s arm and laid it back to her side, before rolling the sleeping child onto her back to expose her other arm. A quicker, more cursory brush of Shinsou’s hand finally let the kid relax, eyes falling closed before he pulled the blanket back over Eri.

Aizawa thought it had been a dream about the torture he went through at the 8 Precepts, one of the many that Sir Nighteye had listed when he asked for him to explain what he saw. *He will be held under water by his hair, and if he doesn’t bark quickly enough for the torturer’s liking, he will be forced back under. This repeats 12 times. I believe the water is also treated with a chemical, as the other criminals complain about the smell before they...*

‘ *I am sorry. Will sleep.* ’ Shinsou signs, and though Aizawa doubts he will do anything more than pretend to do so, he nods, keeping his gaze focused on the wall behind his ward.

“It’s fine. You didn’t do anything wrong,” Aizawa answers, realizing the reason Shinsou hasn’t laid back down after. He was waiting for permission again. “Goodnight.”

The kid is pretty good at slowing his breathing down, taking longer breaths and hesitating before he exhales. That much would fool most into believing he’s asleep, but Aizawa knows better. He knows that Shinsou would twitch away from Eri’s arm thrown back over him if he was actually asleep, that he would curl closer to her afterwards.

Aizawa knows he won’t sleep. He doesn’t either, on nights that he wakes up and runs his own hands over Hizashi’s arms, his face, the back of his head. The Nomu didn’t break his arms, it didn’t dig its claws into his scalp, it didn’t crush his skull while Present Mic was pleading for him to stop it, to use his quirk when his quirk was *useless* against that monster.

He doesn’t know what caused the scars on Shinsou’s arms. The autopsy results on the less fortunate members of the Nomu organization were inconclusive, the best theory being that something had burrowed underneath the skin, tearing the flesh apart in its wake. The result of

someone's quirk, but they couldn't be sure what type, whether it was a burrowing creature or a tendril forced under the skin.

That won't be the first question they ask Shinsou, when the time is right. Aizawa wants to ask him what the real name of 'the bad place' is, and with any luck, his network of informants will be familiar with it, enough that the investigation will need little else from Shinsou.

Yamada has another question, one he wanted to ask since he heard Shinsou muttering in his sleep the first night he spent at the dorm. One that leads into another question if Shinsou actually answers it.

Who is '50'? And does Shinsou know that she's dead?

*

Iida nods as Kirishima and Bakugo enter Yaoyorozu's dorm room, completing the list of expected attendants. "Now that everyone is here--"

"Headphone bitch ain't," Bakugo growls, smirking at him. "You that fucking blind even with your glasses?"

"Jirou has another obligation, but she will be weighing in on the Class 1-A chat," Iida answered, gesturing towards the rest of his peers, who were feeling quite cramped in such a small space. If he wasn't the class president, he too would much prefer to be in his own dorm room, or on his usual morning run. He also thought that meeting in a place that wasn't monitored by cameras was a bit paranoid, but too many had insisted on it.

In all honesty, he would much rather not have this meeting altogether, but the Class 1-A chat had demanded it.

"Now that we are all here, we should discuss our concerns about the message that Shinsou sent, and how we should respond to it," Iida continued, taking note of the expressions he saw as he glanced at each young hero. Some were saddened, others concerned, and others had already jumped to conclusions, anger and betrayal clear on their faces. "And I think it would be best to keep in mind that the way Shinsou communicates is quite vague, and regardless, text messages can be very easy to misinterpret."

"He seemed really worried, though," Sato mumbles, offering an assortment of cinnamon rolls and doughnuts for Kirishima and Bakugo to take. "I mean, he could have just asked right off the bat, but since he took so long--"

"Isn't it kind of weird that he didn't ask, though?" Sero interjects, hand raising as if he were in class. "The way he worded it was like he was specifically trying not to ask a question."

Midoriya startles, and Bakugo looms over him with a glare. "You know all this secret shit, Deku, so start fucking talking."

Midoriya noticeably pales as he starts waving his arms in front of him, a nervous reaction that Bakugo rarely inspires these days. "I really don't know anything! But I've noticed that too. He's messaged me like that on our chat, but I don't know why he does that. It might just be the way that he talks?"

“Does he talk about his feelings toward Aizawa and Present Mic in that chat?” Tokoyami asks, leaning around Shoji’s arm to look at Midoriya.

“We really haven’t talked that much, but he hasn’t mentioned them,” Midoriya answers. “But I really don’t think that they would do something to make him afraid of them.”

“Maybe he’s thinking of doing something he knows they wouldn’t like,” Hagakure says, the long sleeves of her pajamas crossed over her chest. “I mean, you wouldn’t worry about being punished if you weren’t doing anything wrong.”

Kaminari nods, hand cupped around his chin. “He did go to villain school, after a-“

“FUCK OFF!” Bakugo snarls, hands pulling at his own hair. “There isn’t a fucking villain school! Shitsou lied to you dumb fucks and you fucking bought it!”

“Dude, it makes sense!” Kirishima argued. “How could he take us down if he didn’t go to villain school to learn how to fight?”

“Wait, he really went to villain school?” Yaoyorozu asked, muttering to herself, “I thought I just didn’t know a new meme.”

“He did! He told us so,” Ashido confirms, crumbs still present around her mouth despite Yaoyorozu’s miming to tell the acid hero to wipe them away. “Since he was taken to villain school when he was 4, and he’s known Eri for 3 years, he must have been almost a middle schooler when he, um. Graduated, I guess.”

It was unnerving to see Ashido seem to shrink with those words, her usual exuberance disappearing in a flash. “Maybe he’s confused because that villain school was stricter?” Ojiro wonders aloud. “I mean, there are some things we get away with here that would get me in a lot of trouble at my former dojo.”

Bakugo hisses behind his teeth, swallowing a mouthful of doughnut before he speaks. “You forgetting about that Chisaki bastard? If he did shit to the brat, he did shit to the corpse.”

Iida felt now would be the time to offer his thoughts on the matter, judging by the way his peers’ faces had paled at the thought. “My brother did confirm that Shinsou would likely be confused by his new environment. Most wards are told what to expect as consequences to their actions, both as reassurance and to also decrease the likelihood of the ward reacting violently against their assigned hero in a str-“

“Wait, that really happens?!” Hagakure interrupts, hands making imprints on the comforter. “Wards just attack their heroes?”

“Well, not often!” Iida tries to reassure without outright lying. “It happens frequently enough that several policies are in place, and the certification process has become more stringent, but a major deciding factor in whether a hero is assigned to a ward is whether that hero could disarm a ward if that situation occurred. Midnight-sensei is one of the most in-demand heroes for wardship assignments in our region due to her quirk’s versatility.”

“Perhaps Shinsou’s quirk is similar to hers,” Todoroki muses, though he had seemed distracted throughout the meeting thus far. “If he speaks to you, he can force you to go to sleep, and has a resistance to her quirk as a side effect.”

“That’s not his....” Kirishima starts to speak, then cuts himself off, angling away from the outburst building in Bakugo’s vibrating frame.

“WHEN THE FUCK did you find out what his fucking quirk is?! And what fucking is it?! Maybe you should share that shit before the voices in dead eyes’ head tell him to kill!”

“Aizawa-sensei told us not to!” Ashido says, earning a death glare as Bakugo whipped his head to look at her. “Kirishima and I went to elementary school with Shinsou, so we know what his quirk is. And he can’t hurt anyone with it.”

“He could,” Kirishima disagrees, raising his hands in front of his chest as he realizes he’s captured the entire class’ attention. “I don’t think he will, though! And Sensei told us not to tell anyone! Me and Ashido would get expelled if we told you guys!”

“That’s kind of extreme, even for Sensei,” Uraraka comments, glancing at Asui before she sighs. “I know Aizawa-sensei is trying to keep us away from Shinsou, but expulsion seems a little harsh. Is his quirk really that bad?”

“More likely, he’s worried that we will try to make him use it, kero,” Asui says, looking at the rest of the class. “Since his quirk relies on his voice, that would mean forcing Shinsou to speak. Sensei believes we wouldn’t be able to control our curiosity, kero, perhaps for good reason.”

“It is super cool, though,” Ashido says, beaming as she speaks. “It kind of feels like-“

“*Ashido*,” Kirishima hisses, concern plain on his face. “C’mon, we can’t talk about it.”

Ashido pouts, collapsing back on the bed with her head landing in Hagakure’s lap. “AUGH! Tsu’s right, it’s just so interesting! I kinda want him to use it on me again to see if-“

“Ashido!”

“To see if it’s changed!” Ashido completes, turning to stick her tongue out at Kirishima. “But yeah, you guys might get freaked out if he used it and you didn’t know about it, so Sensei has a point.”

“Aizawa-sensei is probably more concerned with Shinsou’s mental well-being than our own surprise,” Yaoyorozu states, looking up from the messages she’s been sending to Jirou to keep her up to date on their conversation. “Pressuring someone with mutism to speak can cause them undue stress. And I think Sensei is right to worry that some of us would do that.”

“It’s dangerous for us not to know, though,” Hagakure says, bristling as she notices the looks she receives. “He almost broke Ojiro’s tail, and he didn’t even use his quirk! I don’t know if Shinsou is a nice guy or not, but I think that we should be more careful around him. He could be a villain for all we know, and just using Eri to get into UA. Maybe he even used his quirk on her and Sensei already.”

“Tooru, I don’t think-“

“TOORU?!” Ashido repeats, grinning with wide-eyed at Ojiro, who lashes his tail and looks away.

“I don’t think he’s... Well, he is dangerous, but I don’t think he’s a threat. And I don’t think we should treat him like one until he gives us a reason to,” Ojiro says, still avoiding Ashido’s stare.

“Seriously, we’re training to be pro heroes. If Shinsou freaks us out, then how can we say we deserve to be here?” Kaminari asks, earning a disdainful huff from Hagakure.

“Because he took down Bakugo, Sero, Ochako, and Iida, and almost did the same to Ojiro! Without his quirk! And he went to *villain* school!” Hagakure seems to shake her head with the way her hair tie moves in the air. “Maybe we shouldn’t just assume he’s here for the right reasons.”

“Likewise, we shouldn’t assume he’s here for the wrong ones,” Yaoyorozu states. “I think we should be more aware that Shinsou *could* be dangerous, but treating him that way without proof would be cruel of us. He already seems unhappy with how we’ve ignored him on the chat.”

Iida and several other students look to their phones to find several LNE notifications about user handles being changed. Iida has to disguise his laugh with a cough when the newest one appears, listening to Bakugo mutter a string of death threats under his breath. “I believe that brings us to the purpose of this meeting. How should we respond to Shinsou’s message when our situations are so different? Shinsou is not a student at UA, and would not be subject to any academic disciplines, but we do not know what kind of disciplinary structure our teachers plan to utilize at their home.”

“I don’t think they’d be strict,” Midoriya says, drawing more than his fair share of incredulous looks. “You know how Aizawa-sensei is around Eri, but when they’re out of class, it’s kind of... even more like that, you know?”

Todoroki is the only one who nods.

“Aizawa-sensei would be the disciplinarian, I would assume, kero,” Asui states. “Considering Present Mic-sensei’s personality.”

“He can be a little scary too,” Koda quietly adds, his fingers pressed together in front of him. “But I don’t think either of them would do something bad!”

“Jirou says that Present Mic would subject Shinsou to hours of awful music, and Aizawa-sensei would assign lengthy essays,” Yaoyorozu reads, looking up afterwards. “She also says that Present Mic-sensei has already punished Shinsou enough, and she won’t be leaving her room until she’s fixed it, but I haven’t been able to get her to explain.”

“Oh!” Midoriya exclaims, his fist meeting his open palm. “That must be why last night’s show was odd. The last Open Mic Night happened 9 years ago, and even then, it was announced well beforehand. Present Mic has never changed his set playlist so suddenly before, and his interview with Hawkes was later than it was scheduled for unknown reasons-“

“Did he fucking play that Nyan cat song because Shitsou did some stupid shit?” Bakugo asks, oddly devoid of anger.

“Non! It was a beautiful, touching moment, mon cher!” Aoyama says, leaning his elbows onto his knees. “L’amour de la musique va à celui qui ne l’a pas senti!”

“Yeah, That part was great,” Sero says, his smile strained as he looks up from his phone. “So, what? Do we tell Shinsou we don’t know or just tell him what we think will happen?”

“Or should we tell Aizawa-sensei, kero?” Asui asks, staring at Iida. “It appears as though this was a responsibility he was not aware of when he became Shinsou’s caretaker, kero. Perhaps it would be better for us not to interfere more than we need to, kero.”

“That is a very good point, Asui!” Iida remarks, raising his finger. “This is a domestic matter at heart, after all, and none of us are privy to Aizawa-sensei’s personal life enough to properly advise Shinsou in this matter.”

“But, he’ll probably find out about the chat if we do that,” Kirishima adds. “You know he’s all ‘don’t talk to Shinsou,’ so he’s not going to be happy that we went around his back like that.”

“I second that,” Ojiro agrees. “We should keep Aizawa-sensei from finding out we’re talking to Shinsou, for our own sakes.”

More students nod in agreement, and Iida takes that as a group decision to keep Aizawa from knowing about the chat. In truth, he's quite relieved, knowing that he would have to take responsibility for creating it. "Then, we should move to brainstorming our responses. Yaoyorozu has volunteered the use of her whiteboard so that all of our ideas can be recorded and voted on at the conclusion of our meeting."

A decision was reached by the time Shinsou had finished changing all of their usernames in the chat, though Iida noticed that he had taken several pauses, either distracted or perhaps waiting to see if further changes were necessary. Iida had to say he was amused by the results. Shinsou had an...expansive vocabulary.

Iida wanted to see more of it, more of that caustic sense of humor. When they fought, there was something approaching a grin on Shinsou's face in the split second before he swept his legs from under him, a joke he wasn't made privy to until it landed him on his back.

It reminded Iida of the ward that his father had been assigned when he was a young boy. He remembered the rules set in place, quite similar to the ones Aizawa made. He remembered the frozen fear set in that teenager's movements, the way he hardly seemed to move at all, making him wonder if he really had a speed enhancement quirk.

And Iida remembered how those frozen movements thawed over time. How the few interactions they had started drawing smiles from that ward, even compliments on Iida's success in school or quirk training. When the ward left their home, the investigation concluded, Iida's father had thanked him for helping him make the ward feel more comfortable during his stay. That he had been able to remind the ward of better times, though his father didn't explain what he meant by that.

Iida knew that wardships were a model of a hero's duty. Protecting and defending those that needed it. Bringing warm relief to frozen terror.

Iida wanted to do that for Shinsou. He didn't know how, not when he had forgotten how to approach others as casually and warmly as he had when he was a child. Not when Eri had clearly filled that role, and Iida floundered to find what Shinsou would want from him, how he could offer his help besides.

He was made into the unofficial authority on wardship cases for his peers, and as such was expected to guide them when Aizawa offered little advice, perhaps unaware that it was needed more than in Eri's situation.

Iida would do his best to succeed. To bring that smile out in Shinsou more often.

And he had an idea that could be beneficial to everyone involved.

*

One of the greatest resources available to a feral cat's guardian is having a domesticated cat who has bonded with the guardian. By demonstrating affection to the domestic, the domestic in turn becomes a social bridge for the feral. The feral learns how to interact with a guardian without fear by observing the domestic.

"Twenny! Zawa said the heroes made breakfast for us!" Eri tells Shinsou as he exits the bathroom,

changed into the galaxy cat hoodie that Hizashi thought he liked the most out of all of his outfits, judging by the way his eyes kept wandering to it in the interrogation room.

Shinsou's gaze is unreadable, though his slight hesitation is clear proof that the sight strikes something in him. Aizawa just pulls the last few strands into his hold, gathering Eri's hair into a half ponytail. He takes the tie from his mouth to wind it around her hair, making sure the plastic butterfly decoration ends up on top. "That isn't normal," Shinsou groggily states, his new habit of stating something to be corrected if he's wrong.

Feral cats, like any other, crave routine. In a perfect world, each day would look like the last, but out of any change that occurs, it is important to avoid changes in feeding times. Food is one of a cat's most important needs, and your greatest asset in establishing a bond.

"The students don't do it often, but they occasionally make a dorm breakfast on Sundays," Aizawa explains, leaning forward so Eri can begin to brush out his hair, starting with the ends. "I have a few breakfast items stored downstairs, so that you and Eri can eat before we leave at noon every week."

"Zawa makes cereal," Eri says, pulling his hair together into a loose ponytail. "Yama says he can't make other stuff, 'cause he's not allowed."

"That's not a nice thing to point out, Eri," Shinsou scolds, though Aizawa is surprised to find little evidence of fear in his body language. "People don't like hearing others talk about things they can't do."

Shinsou sits on the cot, raking his fingers through his hair, which causes Eri to protest, snagging a tangle in Aizawa's hair as she pulls the comb back a bit too roughly. "Wait! I'm almost finished, Twenny!"

"It's fine, I can--"

"I wanna comb your hair, Twenny," Eri pouts, and immediately Shinsou pulls his hand away. "Your hair is really soft now. I promise I would've combed it before, but now I'm gonna comb it for you all the time, 'cause you always combed mine."

Shinsou glances away, his hand curling into a half fist before it relaxes against his knee. "It's okay, Eri. I probably should have let you do it yourself." Aizawa stiffens at another snag. "You used to be really tender headed when you were little, though."

That seems to remind Eri that Aizawa was also a bit sensitive on his scalp, and she pulls the last few locks into her hand more gently, winding the hair tie a bit too loose to stay in place. Aizawa tightens it when she jumps off of his lap to work on her next victim, standing on the cot behind Shinsou with comb in hand. "You remember a lot of stuff, Twenny. Todo said you were telling the heroes stories about when I was little, and I don't remember some of those."

The slight widening in Shinsou's eyes might be due to the tangle that Eri snags, pulling back hard enough to pull his head back with it, but fear is more likely as he glances at Aizawa. "I didn't tell them much."

"I wanna hear Eri stories too, though!" Eri says, trying to pull Shinsou's hair into a small ponytail as well. "Like how I liked chicken, or sleeping with that book. I don't remember that stuff."

"I can't think of any," Shinsou replies, his voice a bit strained. Aizawa notices his fist knotted tight, his teeth clenching as Eri pulls more hair together on top of his head.

Shinsou probably won't ask her to stop. Aizawa noticed the distress that Eri touching his scars had caused, but Shinsou did nothing to stop it. He seemed incapable of defending himself from whatever Eri wanted from him, something driven by guilt or a lack of his own bodily autonomy. "We don't have any more hair ties, Eri," Aizawa lies, hoping that she forgot about the sizeable collection he started storing in the Safe Room. "You won't be able to keep that hairstyle in place."

Eri frowns, but releases her hold, and Shinsou nearly sags with relief. She doesn't seem to notice, though, combing his hair in opposing directions to return it to its usual wild state.

"You didn't like green food," Shinsou says, glancing up as Eri paused. "Especially jello. You said it was weird."

"I *don't* like jello," Eri replies, shaking her head. "It *is* weird! It's jiggly and slimy and gross! The doctors gave me jello a lot before Zawa told them to stop."

"That's good," Shinsou says, putting his phone into his pocket when he notices Eri's feet have shifted closer to it. "I'm glad you don't have to eat it anymore."

Something in Shinsou's tone suggests it isn't just a childish whim he's relieved to know is catered to. Something only Shinsou remembers, that luckily Eri forgot.

When Eri finishes, they exit the Safe Room, and though Aizawa is somewhat relieved to find the dorm still appear to be deserted, he's a bit concerned by the gathering taking place in Yaoyorozu's dorm. 18 students wouldn't cram themselves into a room that could only comfortably contain 6 for no reason, and the commotion last night was a bit beyond Class 1-A's usual Saturday night behavior.

Particularly Kirishima waving to the surveillance camera.

But out of all the things that Shinsou could have told his class, the existence of the surveillance cameras wasn't the worst, he supposed.

Aizawa sucks down a jelly packet after making sure that Shinsou would eat the cinnamon roll Eri handed to him. He realizes a bit too late that the jelly packet would have been more nutritionally sound, but the jolt of sugar seemed to help Shinsou appear more awake.

Hizashi had planned to pick up the wards after breakfast, but he must have slept through his alarm. That was unsurprising, considering how Sundays were his designated rest days, often the only day that he could get more than 4 hours of sleep. How his husband managed to be so energetic, or even function with his work schedule was completely illogical.

The wards would be fine with a few more hours in the Safe Room, being unaware of the difference. Eri usually stuck to him like a burr during the last few hours of his weekend dorm shifts, and he had forgotten to mention the change in plan to Shinsou beforehand. Though Aizawa and Yamada tried to let Shinsou know what to expect, some details tended to get lost along the way. They should probably give him a weekly schedule, once things settled down into a more predictable routine.

Eri decided that she wanted to watch a few episodes of the cartoon that Midoriya showed her, settling herself on his lap as he watched the other screens, waiting for his students to leave Yaoyorozu's room. Shinsou glanced up to watch the show a few times as well, but otherwise seemed to be busy on his phone.

The feral requires an available escape route from social situations, or challenge line interactions.

Many prefer a cocoon to hide in, but all benefit from the ability to survey their surroundings from a vantage point high and distant from the comings and goings of the home. Observation is key to a feral's understanding of its new environment.

Perhaps the surveillance monitors weren't the only way Shinsou could observe his new environment. Messaging the students, as Aizawa suspected he was doing now, would also be a good way for him to become more comfortable in the classroom, learning a bit more about their personalities from a distance afforded by the phone.

Aizawa was still concerned that Class 1-A would overwhelm Shinsou at the first sign of interest from the ward, which he had apparently given in messaging them. He would have to make sure his class was kept occupied for the next few days to make sure they wouldn't have the opportunity to swarm Shinsou.

Luckily, quirkless combat drills were a useful way to do that.

*

Something about this dorm building made his owner behave strangely. Perhaps it was because they were confined to this small room for hours at a time, perhaps there was someone higher ranked than his owner who was keeping watch over him with more hidden cameras.

27 didn't like it. He had barely begun to read his owner, and his tells suddenly changed. In fact, he seemed to have no tells at all, simply staring at him with that same impassive expression, purposefully made harder to read.

27 *did not* like that.

He needed to know what his owner was thinking, any twitch in his expression or narrowing of his eyes was more useful now than it ever was before. He needed to know what he thought after seeing 27 so rattled and *broken* last night.

It had been a bad dream. A familiar one.

It began with Bug. Just Bug and him, standing in the Red Room, screams echoing off the walls as though the Numbers who died in there were admonishing him for letting the heroes know about them, about how they were named. But in a blink, Eri was there, held in Bug's grasp. Bug's smile twisted and darkened, growing feral as the skin on Eri's bare arms began to swell and move.

He was frozen, just watching, straining against the hold of the dream that had captured him as tightly as his own quirk's victim, before Hari grabbed him by the hair, plunging him into the bathtub. Even as no one spoke, the only sounds he heard were screams, but he knew what he needed to do.

He just needed to bark. Bark like Hari wanted him to, to drag that airy laugh out of him and those sick praises of what a good dog he was. Then Eri would be safe, she would be let go, Bug would let her go.

But he couldn't. Each time he tried, his mind was frozen on the fact that *Hari shouldn't be here anymore*.

He beat Chisaki. He had the tattoos removed. He shouldn't think of Hari, he shouldn't dream of Hari, *he was supposed to be free* .

He barked, once, and didn't need Hari to tell him it was too slow. He knew.

He knew that they were going to kill Eri for it. Because he failed, he couldn't bark right, he wasn't a good dog and they were going to kill Eri.

Eri's eyes were fading when he looked at her, he wasn't sure how he was able to since he was supposed to be in the bathtub, but he was watching her die when he woke up to a new nightmare.

His owner staring towards him, not quite at him, like he *knew*. Like he saw what had been going on inside his head, he knew that he didn't protect Eri.

But he gave him permission to check her arms, the only thing that would quiet the buzzing under his skin, the fear steeped inside his mind, making him unable to think of anything else.

27 said he would sleep, but he didn't. He kept his eyes nearly shut, but not shut.

He watched his owner and thought, turning his situation over and over in his mind. Who to play to, how to angle the game, considering more options for his end game. Death by The Miasma was still nearly certain, but not entirely.

27 could try to escape.

He had skills that few did, thanks to The Miasma. As soon as he regained the ability to talk, he could use his quirk to survive. Petty crimes like shoplifting and breaking into warehouses could keep him alive for a while, he could keep himself moving to evade the heroes and criminals alike who would hunt him down. He could become more than a Dog, become a Rat, an ugly and desperate thing, but one that would outlive a Number. He could kill if he needed to. 50 would understand.

But that meant leaving Eri all the same. Eri couldn't survive as a rat, she deserved to be a princess, and though he doubted himself sometimes, he couldn't be certain that she would be safe here with the heroes.

He needed to cling to the child heroes. They had loose lips, and a subtle animosity against their teachers. He could play to that, he could force himself into their group. It hadn't worked nearly as well against the 8 Precept underlings, but a far subtler game worked in his favor against the 8 Expendables.

Dog had rolled on his belly for them, had whined as loudly as he dared when they kicked him. Over and over, until there was a foothold in their conscience that he could use. That was Chisaki's downfall, afterall. He never had a sliver of a conscience, had never understood the concept of the word. He thought that his followers would plunge those needles into Eri's body every night if offered the chance, but 27 learned that they wouldn't if it was their choice. That they could look away because Eri was distant from them, but if he translated that pain through his own body, they were weakened by it.

He had earned enough pity from Nemoto and Deidoro that they answered his questions despite knowing better. Rikiya had beaten so many whimpers of pain from him at that point that he was pretty much 27's friend.

If his owner pitted him against the heroes in a spar, that was all the better. He knew when to whimper and yelp, even better than when to bark.

But now, 27 needed to bark. He hadn't given them enough opportunity to make him whine, but if they dragged out their silence any longer, he would.

Provost Piston: I apologize on behalf of the class for our delayed response, Shinsou. We were discussing the matter in depth as unfortunately, we have little definitive advice to offer. - Iida Tenya

Adhesive Strips: No one is Marked for Death™ now and I feel oddly unsettled by that.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum changed Teen Mom's name to DEAD FUCK

Adhesive Strips: *sigh* It's not the same.

Palpitation Projector: We have a rule against RP actions, Sero.

Voltage Vermin: Vote to kick.

Genesis: As you are not a student at UA, you wouldn't face academic disciplinary action like we would, but as a reference, Aizawa-sensei is known to utilize logical deceptions to cause psychological stress (for the eventual benefit of our class!), the threat of expulsion, difficult training exercises, and suspension from class as punishment. Present Mic-sensei has not had much opportunity to discipline us, except for a few students who were asked to sing English nursery rhymes in class after doing poorly on an exam and then not paying attention in class afterwards.

Desperansur: Connaissez-vous le français? Je t'aime d'autant plus ma petite violette!!!

Buoyant Bob Cut: :(

Buoyant Bob Cut changed their name to Betrayed Buoy

Self Esteem Issues: Eri has never gotten into trouble as far as I know, but I don't think Aizawa-sensei would do something unreasonable! And I appreciate your concern, but I don't actually think of myself as useless!

Self Esteem Issues changed their name to Deku

Choppy: We all advise you to approach Aizawa-sensei and Present Mic with your concerns however. Iida has told us this is a matter they were supposed to discuss with you at the beginning of your wardship.

Ashid Spray: IF THEY HURT YOU I WILL DIE TRYING TO DEFEND U

Ashid Spray: y didn't u keep my nickname tho???

Ashid Spray changed their name to Ashi

Ashi: Fixed!!!

Blackened Overcast: Acceptable.

Heroic Teratoma: What did I do???

Sweetened Steroids: Did you like the cinnamon rolls? I know Eri likes them, but I don't think a tiny kid like her can eat 5 in one go.

DEAD FUCK: She ate 4. She usually doesn't eat that much at breakfast.

DEAD FUCK: @glitter Non.

Todo: We're friends.

DEAD FUCK: Not really.

Ashi: SHINSQUAD!!!

Palpitation Projector: TRAITOR. Don't leave me with these gross boys.

Ashi: gaaaayyyyy

Manly Midnight: Is it the hero costume???

DEAD FUCK: Yes.

Voltage Vermin changed Manly Midnight's name to Himbro

Himbro: okay???

Ability to talk to cats unknown: I can! They don't listen, but I can understand what they mean when they meow! They don't say nice things, though.

DEAD FUCK: Thank you.

Heroic Teratoma: Did I do something?

Todo: Koda please come to my room.

Ashi: oooo spicy

More Than 33 Vertebrae: I have 68, but is that a weird thing to know?

DEAD FUCK: It's useful to know.

Adhesive Strips: Ominous af.

Voltage Vermin changed Adhesive Strips' name to Adhesive Stripper

Adhesive Stripper: Thaaaaanks

Unknown limitations of invisibility: There are none. I'm always invisible.

DEAD FUCK: That has to be a lie.

Unknown limitations of invisibility: It's not??? I'm always invisible. I kinda know my own quirk...

Heroic Teratoma: I'm sorry?

Adhesive Stripper: Hey Shinsou, why don't you ask questions? It seems like a pain to talk like that.

DEAD FUCK changed Heroic Teratoma's name to Kakashi

Kakashi: oh thanks.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: ANSWER THE FUCKING QUESTION SHITFACE. ARE YOU FUCKING ALLERGIC TO QUESTION MARKS OR SOME SHIT?

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: ????? DIE ?????

Voltage Vermin: Is Bakugo having a stronk?

Voltage Vermin: Is this the thing that kills him?

Blackened Overcast: What is that which kills us all, if not the slow march of time?

Voltage Vermin: #midterm mood

Palpitation Projector: @Shinsou Alternative Rock or Grunge?

DEAD FUCK: I don't know your code words.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: I'M GETTING SICK OF YOUR SHIT, SHITFACE.

Palpitation Projector: Rock or Pop?

DEAD FUCK: I don't know the context for this question.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: YOU DON'T KNOW SHIT, APPARENTLY. DUMB FUCK. IT'S A SIMPLE FUCKING QUESTION.

Deku: @Shinsou What's your favorite song?

DEAD FUCK: Skip.

Palpitation Projector: Name A N Y song you like. I have too many playlists to pick from to save you from Present Mic, and I need you to make a d e c i s i o n.

DEAD FUCK: You don't want me to choose one that was on the radio show.

Palpitation Projector: I don't.

Betrayed Buoy changed DEAD FUCK's name to I thought you liked me :(

Ashi: awww Ocha it's okay!!!! Shinny just likes me the most :D

Ashi changed I thought you liked me :('s name to Shinny

Ashi: TWINSIES :D

Himbro: Yeah it kind of does but seriously I can't tell you about it dude. Sensei had murder eyes when he talked to me and Ashido. I don't know why he doesn't want us to know, I really think we should because it's kind of dangerous, but I can't get expelled!!!

Adhesive Stripper: ?

Unknown limitations of invisibility: Probably a chat leak meant for Bakugo.

Unknown limitations of invisibility changed their name to InvisiCutie

Himbro: yep. Ignore that.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: I KNOW WHAT YOUR FUCKING QUIRK IS, SHIT FACE. DROP THE SECRET SHIT.

Ashi: KIRI.

Shinny: Tell me.

Adhesive Stripper: HEY SENSEI WHEN YOU LOOK AT THIS TO EXPEL EVERYONE WHO KNOWS I AM TURNING MY PHONE OFF RN

Voltage Vermin: THAT MEANS RIGHT NOW. ALSO SAME DON'T HURT ME

More than 33 Vertebrae: I'm doing the same!

Shinny: You're pretty quiet now. It doesn't take that long to explain it.

Genesis: This isn't a good idea, Bakugo. Turning my phone off as well.

Choppy: Same.

Provost Piston: Sero, Kaminari, Ojio, Yaoyorozu, Asui and I are unaware of the rest of this conversation. - Iida Tenya

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: YOU'RE A FUCKING COWARD. YOU'RE FUCKING SCARED OF YOUR OWN QUIRK SO BAD YOU'D PISS YOURSELF EVEN TYPING A QUESTION.

Kakashi: I'm out.

Betrayed Buoy: Todo and Koda aren't on their phones but I warned them! Ochako out!

Sweetened Steroids: HAVEN'T READ SHUTTING DOWN

Desperancer: leavingggggg *~***

Shinny: You don't know it.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: THE BRAT CAN'T SAY HIS NAME AND YOU CAN'T ASK QUESTIONS. CHISAKI IS IN PRISON, YOU FUCKING COWARD. TALK NORMAL.

Deku: Kacchan you really need to stop this right now.

Deku: I know you think that you're helping but I really don't think you should mention Eri.

Shinny: The next breath you take to say anything at all about Eri will be your fucking last. You don't know SHIT about what she's been through and if you even THINK about Chisaki while you're in the same room as her, I will fillet your hands, each finger separated down to the wrist.

Shinny: Try being a hero after that. Or useful at all, to anyone. Like that League.

Shinny: You know I'm not fucking joking.

"Twenny," Eri called, and 27 realizes that the cartoon she had been watching had been turned off, his owner moving around the room to collect the few items Eri had brought. "Is the phone making you mad?"

"Bakugo is," 27 answered gruffly, drawing in a shaky breath. He didn't mean to let his anger carry through his tone with Eri, she didn't need to know what he sounded like when he was angry. He had never let himself slip like that before. He patted her head as some offering of reassurance, making sure to soften his tone. "Sorry, don't worry about it."

Eri just blinked up at him, then took his hand in hers, holding on to it as they left the Safe Room, trailing behind his owner. Eri waited for a while before she turned to whisper to him, "Bakugo makes me mad sometimes too."

27 considers carrying salt with him to go with the knife. It was a bit cliché, but he could attest to the fact that it was effective, thanks to Memory.

They had made it to the ground floor in blissful silence, 27 relieved to be able to avoid the student heroes in their own compound. Perhaps his owner was trying to avoid them as well, taking one of the service stairwells rather than the main one that the students preferred.

Before his owner reached the last step, Izuku threw open the door, panting from exertion. "Sensei! Don't be mad-"

"I am," his owner deadpanned, making Izuku jolt in panic. But the panic was short lived, and 27 found himself admiring the quick recovery. Judging by the scars on Izuku's hands and arms, he must be aware of the danger he was in to continue on with such a clear warning, but he must have a good reason to do so.

"There's an emergency in Todoroki's room, and we need your help!"

*

If it weren't for Principal Nezu's extraordinary security measures, this emergency would actually be one of the better ones that Aizawa has attended to for Class 1-A. Right now, he's afraid it will turn into one of the worst.

"How long have you had this cat in your room?" Aizawa asks, knelt in front of the opened floor vent. He pulls at his capture scarf, sending it into the air duct to wave gently in the air, hopefully entrancing the stray to attack it.

"Two months," Todoroki replies, seemingly unaware that he should at least *pretend* to be ashamed of breaking a dorm rule. "I rescued him."

"It's my fault, Sensei," Midoriya interjects. At least he and Koda are panicked enough to pick up Todoroki's slack. "Todoroki wasn't going to take him, but I told him he had to! Soba was so thin and hungry, and he curled up right next to Todoroki but wouldn't let anyone else touch him, and he has heteroch-"

“The reason that uncaged pets aren’t allowed in the dorm,” Aizawa interrupts, glancing over his shoulder to level a glare at each of his students. “Is due to this exact scenario. There are robots in these vents. They act as pest control.”

Aizawa still doesn’t feel a tug of interest on his scarf, and he’s beginning to give up hope. His students’ stricken faces aren’t any comfort right now, not when there’s a very real possibility that Aizawa will have to drag a cat’s corpse out of the walls before the robots dispose of it.

Even if he’s never met this cat, and he wasn’t particularly emotional about how any body was disposed of after the end of its use, Todoroki deserved the chance to grieve over it properly, and not be haunted by the knowledge that it was promptly incinerated inside the wall next to his bed. That much would drive anyone insane, and Todoroki of all people didn’t need another push.

His heart drops as the echoing yowl rises up, confirming the worst case scenario, until Koda shrieks. “*Ghost ?!*”

“What?” Aizawa asks, looking to Koda for an explanation as a warning growl rumbles from inside the wall, followed by the sound of claws scraping against metal and the heavy thud of flesh against the ventilation shaft walls.

“H-he says th-there’s a ghost! A d-d-dead b-boy,” Koda translates, his usually high pitched voice even more shrill as he quakes in terror, hands pressed against his jaw.

“That’s impossible, this is a new building,” Aizawa says, waving his hand to dispel that irrational thought. “Out of any place that would be haunted on campus, this is the least likely.”

Despite that, he twists his hold on the capture scarf to cause it to whip a circular motion down its length, to see if it strikes against anything other than the walls.

It does, but the cat doesn’t cry out.

There *had* to be a logical explanation for that.

The cat hisses, sputtering off into another growl. “H-he told the g-ghost to leave. H-he’s scared!”

Despite himself, Aizawa flinches at the sound of an even louder thunk, the crack of metal striking metal, and one of the robots beeping in alarm. Those things were armed to the *teeth* with lasers, taser prods, and anything else that Nezu could convince the Support Department to throw on it. But whatever was in the vents disabled it, causing those electronic shrieks that continued on until another metallic crash silenced it.

Aizawa looked to make sure his wards were still in the doorway, at a safe distance just in case whatever was inside that vent wanted to come out. Eri had moved to Koda’s side, staring blankly at the commotion, but Shinsou was nowhere to be found.

“Eri, where is-” Aizawa pauses while Koda screams when he notices Eri, for a second mistaking her white hair as a ghost. “Shinsou?”

Eri’s answer is cut off by the sound of louder thuds and accompanying hisses, the sounds moving along the wall then up towards the ceiling, growing more distant before it cuts off completely.

His personalized chirp identifies Principal Nezu’s text before Aizawa pulls out his phone, hoping that the robot had taken a picture of its attacker so that he would have a clue what he needed to defend the students against before reinforcements arrived. Instead, his words draw confusion, then relief.

Nezu: Please keep your ward out of the ventilation system until the next software update adds his face to the list of neutral parties in the security robots' configurations. Though I do appreciate his efforts to test our security system, I would prefer to remain aware of them beforehand. :3

That face would never cease to unsettle Aizawa. That face always promised a one-on-one meeting in the very near future.

Before he could text Principal Nezu back, Shinsou appeared in the doorway, his arms wrapped around a thrashing lump inside his hoodie. The teenager's cheek bore a scratch mark that was slowly weeping blood, and his forehead had a reddening welt that Aizawa felt particularly guilty looking at.

Judging by the way Shinsou's sleeves were pulled tightly around his hands, those weren't the only injuries that his ward had gained in the two minutes he was unsupervised. And though Shinsou wasn't even flinching against the cat's movements, that was no guarantee that he wasn't being eviscerated by a trapped feral cat.

"Give me the cat," Aizawa ordered, holding out his hands. A particularly nasty scream erupted as Shinsou trapped the animal tighter, trying to work it under his hoodie without allowing it to escape. Aizawa couldn't help but wince at the brief sight of the teenager's stomach, before he wrapped one hand in front of the cat's hindlegs and the other quickly scruffed it, making its movements quiet down though its cries did not.

Once he tucked the wild thing under his arm properly and released its nape, the stray just licked its lips and settled, though its eyes were still locked on Shinsou.

"I'm sorry for Soba's actions, he thought you were a ghost," Todoroki says, bowing low at the waist. "I can't thank you enough for saving him from the robots."

Shinsou just held up a finger. ' *One R-O-B-O-T. Evil cat. Not cute.* '

Midoriya busied himself by frantically looking through Todoroki's desk and drawers. "Todoroki, where did you put your first aid kit? I thought it was on the desk-"

"We'll take care of it," Aizawa says, pausing from his investigative caresses over the stray's fine cream colored coat. "He has fleas. You'll need to wash your bedding and clothes with hot water and buy medication to treat it. If you haven't taken him to a vet, do so within the week. He needs regular vaccinations and to be tested for diseases."

Todoroki snaps his head up at him, eyes widened in surprise. "I...can keep him?"

Aizawa turns the cat's face towards him, earning a slow blink from its mismatched blue and yellow eyes. "As long as I continue to be unaware of his existence, it's fine." He holds the cat out for Todoroki to take, and his student pulls the cat into the left side of his chest tenderly, removing any doubt that Aizawa had in his mind. "Do not let anyone know-"

"Ack! Okay, okay!" Midoriya hisses, one hand waving in the air as a distraction from pain, the other held in Shinsou's grasp, middle finger bent back just a bit beyond its limit. "I'm sorry, can you let me-"

His ward released Midoriya before Aizawa had to intervene, glaring at the student before he realized that Aizawa was watching, stiffly signing, ' *I am sorry.* '

"It's fine," Aizawa reassured, taking his turn to glare at Midoriya. "I said we would take care of it." *Because Shinsou would react that way to being touched.*

Midoriya shook his hand back and forth, gritting his teeth. It was his own fault for reaching out with his more damaged hand. Shinsou's hold was punitive, but when used against that hand, he might have dislocated the finger without meaning to. "Sorry, those scratches just looked really painful."

Shinsou glances at Eri, who luckily has kept her face hidden against Koda's jeans once she recognized a cat was in the room, and presses his sleeve against the scratches on his cheek. He was trying to hide the evidence of blood from Eri, which was likely Midoriya's goal as well, judging by the tissue that was laying on the ground between them.

Eri's fear of blood was certainly going to complicate matters.

Aizawa was able to pry Eri away from Koda by offering her his shoulder to hide her face against, submitting himself to carrying her back to their dorm despite the protest from his aching back. "Ask Toshinori to help you seal up that vent, but if the cat escapes again, I'm confiscating it."

Todoroki nods, but then walks forward and slowly puts his hand on Shinsou's shoulder, ignoring his full-body flinch when he does so. "You should come back to see Soba. He needs to thank you properly."

Shinsou gives him a withering stare, glaring down at the cat only to elicit a hiss. ' *S-U-S-H-I good. S-O-B-A evil.* '

At least he liked Sushi.

*

And Sushi was not available. Neither was Emi.

Perfect.

Aizawa frowned to himself, pulling the first aid kit from under the bathroom sink. He would have liked to have some backup in case it turned sour, but at the same time, he didn't want to disturb those deafening snores echoing through the dorm from their bedroom. Hizashi needed his rest day, and Aizawa wanted to avoid the scolding that was sure to come when his husband saw the state his ward was in.

He might be worrying over nothing. Perhaps Shinsou would be able to clean up his own wounds, and they could go on about the day as he planned to. Demonstrating the social bridge, speaking more than usual so that Shinsou could get used to his voice. Serving them food instead of Hizashi to deepen their tentative bond. Maslow's hierarchy existed for a reason, and Hizashi did have a better relationship with Shinsou, so perhaps the book that Emi gave him wasn't completely without merit.

When he set out the supplies from the kit onto the kitchen counter, Shinsou stared blankly at them. That wasn't a good sign, but he didn't want to give in quite yet. It wasn't until Aizawa turned away to look around pointlessly in the kitchen that he heard Shinsou pick up and use the spray bottle, followed quickly by a hiss. Aizawa turned to confirm that Shinsou had sprayed the sanitizer directly onto the scratches covering his hand, and was now frowning at the result.

Shinsou certainly wouldn't be the first teenager that Aizawa would have to teach the basics of first

aid to.

“Here,” Aizawa said, putting his hand out to take the bottle back from Shinsou. The ward glanced back at Eri after he handed it to him. She was hard at work on the purposefully distracting task of putting stickers on Yamada’s graded quizzes, sitting at the kotatsu.

Shinsou seemed a bit more relaxed at the sight, turning back to Aizawa with the blank expression that the hero preferred over fear.

Aizawa picked up a cotton ball with tweezers, and sprayed it twice. “This spray is an antiseptic, and though it stings, it won’t hurt as much if you avoid direct contact.” When he glanced at Shinsou, adjusting his hold on the tweezers to hand them off with little risk of skin contact, he instead was surprised to see the teenager moving his hand closer, pushing the sleeve above his wrist to show the criss-crossed scratches and bites on the back of his hand.

It wasn’t exactly a touch, but it was a surprising invitation nonetheless.

Aizawa’s hands moved with a confidence he didn’t truly feel, waiting for Shinsou to react. For him to flinch away, for his eyes to go wide or his shoulders to tense, but none of that happened. Shinsou just stared at him, watching his hands, but also glancing toward his face in an almost inquisitive manner. Aizawa was curious himself, but he waits until he’s taken care of both of Shinsou’s hands before he asks, preparing a new cotton ball for the injuries on his face. “Is this the first time someone hasn’t healed you with their quirk?”

The corner of Shinsou’s mouth pulls down, but in a flash it’s gone, like so many of his tells and expressions. He seemed to only be truly expressive with Eri, though the flashes seem to hold a bit longer with the students. ‘*C-H-I-S-A-K-I. Not always. Only bad. Not face.*’ His hand hovers over his mouth, too long for it to be a sign.

“Mask?” Aizawa asks, stopping to sign the word. Shinsou nods, then repeats it for himself.

‘*H-A-R-I. Useless to do.*’

Aizawa focuses on his breathing, unwilling to let knowing why the scars on his nose and cheek were so deep to unsettle him. That little yakuza bastard targeted the mask to make those scars, and Chisaki thought it was useless to heal the wounds afterwards. Had even told Shinsou that.

He walks around the kitchen counter to crouch down in front of Shinsou, who lifts his hoodie up to his chest. The cat certainly made a mess of the kid’s stomach, but luckily nothing was too deep.

Those circular scars still unnerve him. Aizawa has developed a strong stomach over his career, and unfortunately an imagination to go with it. Though these scars were only lopsided circles, they had the same grooves at the edges that the ones on Shinsou’s arms did. This set of wounds didn’t have length, they implied *depth*.

He asks despite his better judgement. “Were you healed by a quirk before the 8 Precepts?”

There’s the flinch. Shinsou’s right hand tightens in the folds of his shirt. If Aizawa looks up, he knows what he’ll see on the kid’s face, so he doesn’t. He just focuses on cleaning up the dried blood, trying to avoid thinking about the wounds those scars must have been before they were healed.

His question wasn’t really a question he needed to have answered. If the kid hadn’t been quirk healed, he would have died from those injuries, after something burrowed inside his abdomen to tear at his arteries and organs. He doesn’t want to imagine what it must have felt like, doesn’t like

knowing that Shinsou could have been as young as 4 years old when it happened.

Aizawa sucks in a breath and closes his eyes, returning to the first aid kit if only to distract himself by wondering if he should use an ointment that prevents scarring. It doesn't help.

‘ Yes. ’

Aizawa doesn't expect to see that, barely catches the movement of Shinsou's hands out of the corner of his eye. Shinsou tucks his hands under his arms afterwards, a clear sign that he doesn't want to continue this conversation, and he stares at Eri, likely finding some comfort in the sight of her picking at her sticker sheet.

It wasn't exactly new information, and it was useless without knowing more about the quirk, how it worked and who had it, but it was the first piece of information about the Nomu Organization to come from Shinsou. Willingly.

Naomasa had Shinsou for a month, and couldn't get a single word from him. Aizawa and Yamada hadn't even had Shinsou for a full week, and they had gotten this much.

Even if Shinsou begins to flinch again when he tries to apply the ointment, Aizawa isn't concerned. As that damn book put it, ‘ *After the moment is over, allow it to end on good terms. Don't pursue more than what your feral can give in that moment. Simply allow them the space to recover, and thank them for the effort they made.* ’

He watches Shinsou apply the ointment himself, and watches him secure the gauze pads with tape. The urge to take over rises in him each time Shinsou glares at the tape when it tangles and sticks to itself, but he lets it pass.

Shinsou made an effort, and he was grateful.

Chapter End Notes

Soba, Todoroki's cat, is a reference to an amazing Dadzawa fic that I hope all of you are familiar with. It is not at all a reference to hotandcoldsoba, the writer of The Last Resort!!! I just really couldn't think of a better name for Todoroki's cat, because nothing else would be more in character.

Class 1-A Chat Usernames:

Provost Piston - Iida Tenya

Adhesive Strips > Adhesive Stripper - Sero Hanta

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum - Bakugo Katsuki

Teen Mom > DEAD FUCK > I thought you liked me :(> Shinny - Shinsou Hitoshi
(27)

Palpitation Projector - Jirou Kyouka

Voltage Vermin - Kaminari Denki

Genesis - Yaoyorozu Momo

Desperancer - Aoyama Yuga (Phonetics of "hope" in French, which is correctly spelled "d'espérance")

Buoyant Bob Cut > Betrayed Buoy > - Uraraka Ochako

Self Esteem Issues > Deku - Midoriya Izuku

Choppy - Asui Tsuyu
Ashid Spray > Ashi - Ashido Mina
Blackened Overcast - Tokoyami Fumikage
Heroic Teratoma > Kakashi - Shoji Mezo
Sweetened Steroids - Sato Rikido
Todo - Todoroki Shoto
Manly Midnight > Himbro - Kirishima Eijirou
Ability to talk to cats unknown - Koda Koji
More Than 33 Vertebrae - Ojiro Mashirao
Unknown limitations of invisibility - Hagakure Tooru

Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes

Chapter Summary

27 doesn't know why his owner has begun to act differently after returning to their dorm, but he doesn't like it. Eri isn't sure if she likes Twenny having friends, or if she's having a good day today.

Chapter Notes

Previously on The Wards of UA: Shinsou got scratched by Todoroki's cat when rescuing it from the ventilation system, and afterwards Aizawa used a sanitizing spray before showing Shinsou how to treat those injuries. Shinsou was also struck by the capture scarf when Aizawa noticed that something else was in the ventilation shaft and was unaware that it was Shinsou. In the Class 1-A chat, Bakugo tried to make Shinsou send a message with a question, and mentioned Eri not being able to say Chisaki's name, which resulted in Shinsou threatening to mutilate Bakugo's hands. Todoroki is allowed to keep his cat, Soba, as long as no one else knows about him according to Aizawa's instructions. In one of the first chapters, Aizawa guided Shinsou through a breathing exercise when he was having a panic attack after attempting to burn off Nemoto's tattoo. Shinsou changed Shoji's username to "Heroic Teratoma," which is a cancerous growth similar to Shoji's quirk. Shinsou's mother moved to France 6 years after she sold Shinsou, and her last known location was in France.

Trigger Warning: Dissociation, Panic attack

Thanks for 4k hits AND 300 kudos! You guys are amazing!

Also, the links in the chat don't go to playlists, but they do go to certain songs mentioned. :-)

27's owner continued to act oddly throughout the day.

Even after 27 was punished, though 27 could scarcely call it that with how little the spray hurt using a cotton ball, his owner would ramble pointlessly about anything that caught his eye. He didn't even seem comfortable doing it. As soon as he would comment on the cartoon they were watching, that lazy slouch would stiffen up a bit, and sometimes his hand would rub the back of his neck, or twist the ends of his hair. Obvious tells like that didn't suit what he knew about his owner, and the sight of it unnerved 27.

Eri seemed a bit confused about it as well, her head tilting to the side when he went through each paper she had decorated, reading the name off the top with a mixture of 'Good choice,' or 'I like

that sticker,' as praise. She looked back and forth between 27 and his owner, as though she wanted to question it, but then she seemed to figure out something that 27 couldn't, eyes widening before she asked his owner if he would read a story to her.

His owner hesitated before he agreed, saying that he would change his clothes while she picked a few books. When he returned, he was wearing a black long sleeved shirt with a V-cut collar. It wasn't that different from what he usually wore, but somehow the shirt and haphazard ponytail made the man seem *smaller*, in a way 27 couldn't really understand. The reading glasses he put on when he picked up Eri's first book out of the stack magnified that effect.

Even if his owner didn't seem to have difficulty seeing things, wearing those glasses implied a weakness in vision. Without the white scarf or tight collar of his usual jumpsuit, his neck was left completely unprotected, and his hairstyle brought more attention to that.

Was his owner intentionally trying to make himself appear vulnerable?

Was this a test? Did his owner want to see if 27 harbored enough animosity towards his situation that he would attack at the smallest chance? Did he want to see how long 27 stared at his neck, as though he could read his mind to see if 27 imagined his own hands around it, or a blade pressed against it?

It must be a power play. Showing 27 that he was such a small threat to him when he couldn't use his quirk that his owner could let his guard down. An odd strategy, but 27 was beginning to accept that his owner was a bit odd himself.

27 played to it. He watched the show as long as he could stand to feign interest, then pulled up the monster game, scrolling idly through the ones Eri had caught for him. There was a monster that popped up nearby, but 27 didn't have any more capturing balls to throw at it, not after he wasted them all last night on a thin cat monster that kept escaping from him. He shouldn't have, but the monster had purple eyes with white irises, just like he did, and that fascinated him to the point of being reckless.

Eri had told him that Mirio knows places that would restock those capture balls, but that wouldn't help him. 27 didn't have anything to trade for that information, and Eri didn't seem to have it herself. The only thing 27 could offer Mirio was the one thing he never would, and Eri was far too important to even consider the thought. Hopefully she wouldn't be too upset when she wouldn't get to play this game anymore.

27 wished he could be dismissed to his room, or that this phone also had access to the Internet. He wanted to research how to improve Eri's hand-eye coordination, if that was possible at this point, and re-check her other benchmarks. His books had been written over 20 years ago, and may have contained outdated information. There might be other books that were a bit closer to Eri's situation, things he could do to keep her from being so upset by the sight of cats or blood.

Or help her say Chisaki's name.

27 knew he shouldn't let what Bakugo said affect him, not when that loudmouthed bastard didn't know anything about what she had lived through. Ignorant as they were, his words struck a nerve. Eri's inability to say Chisaki's name was normal at the 8 Precepts, but it clearly wasn't here. Chisaki couldn't hurt her anymore, but she might have formed a new superstition thinking that his name would conjure him out of his prison cell. 27 wouldn't put it past her.

27 realized he was counting again, first the monsters he had, then the rows. There were only three columns, he couldn't count that. The buzzing beneath his skin rose to his skull, and he knew if he

let it sit there, the feeling would only intensify until his body moved on its own to find some relief, jerking him to stand or pace around pointlessly so that he could count each lap he made.

Eri worried when he did that, and he didn't want to find out what his owner would think, what he would do. That half-punishment certainly wasn't the worst he could do to 27, despite how bizarrely defenseless he looked with his glasses on the tip of his nose, Eri cuddled comfortably against his chest.

He doesn't want to see that. He doesn't even want to hear his owner's soft voice, a dangerous feeling rising in his throat like bile, threatening to show on his face. It's a small mercy that Chisaki had never done something like that. If he had ever managed to make Eri seem as happy and content as she was now, 27 would have been killed for doing something reckless, a risk he still faces if he doesn't distract himself soon.

Luckily, there are more messages in the Class 1-A chat. Perhaps they realized Bakugo's amateur bluff was just that, and they were mocking him for it now.

Voltage Vermin: Can we have some cleansing memes in here?

Adhesive Stripper: @Kaminari There are no memes pure enough to save this chat. We should just burn it down and start a new one.

Voltage Vermin: If we do a bump chain, the messages will go away, and only the painful memories will remain

Voltage Vermin: bump

Palpitation Projector: @Kaminari If you start writing poetry about the pain deep inside yourself I will lose all sense of reality.

Palpitation Projector: Also @Midoriya save your father. Ashido and Bakugo are having it out in the living room, and it is going to get u g l y

Desperancer: Ma gauchissant friend is very frightening, and ma patisseries do not know this

Desperancer: h e l p m e

Sweetened Steroid: @Aoyama it's not worth it

Desperancer: Vanilla cream puff with berry chantilly. From mon cher Feliostix

Sweetened Steroid: Okay, that's worth it. Please don't die.

Desperancer: Gauchissant has Brouyant cornered. They speak of la delour de la petit violette. I flee from this.

Palpitation Projector: @Kirishima Get your man this is b a d

Kakashi: I heard that.

Palpitation Projector: CALLING ALL GIRLS TO ASHIDO'S ROOM

Voltage Vermin: V I B E C H E C K

Adhesive Stripper: Is this how Bakusquad dies?

Choppy: Ocha and I are on the way.

Genesis: Code blue or Code c?

InvisiCutie: C but be prepared for blue!

Adhesive Stripper: Not with a bang, but a slap?

More Than 33 Vertebrae: WHAT

Adhesive Stripper: Shinsou is tearing this family apart.

Provost Piston: And he can SEE THESE MESSAGES.

Voltage Vermin: WE'VE SUMMONED MAD DAD

Provost Piston: I am SEVERELY disappointed in my fellow heroes in training! Bakugo is at fault for a great deal of these issues, but each and every one of you should reflect back on the messages you've sent and ask yourselves if this is truly a reflection of the hero that you wish to be!

Deku: @Shinsou Kacchan is sorry, even if he won't tell you. Are you okay?

Todo: Iida don't interact: Soba is very sorry as well. I have pictures as proof.

Voltage Vermin: Todoroki that's not how it works, but I'm still proud of you for trying

Provost Piston: Who is Soba? And what did they do to Shinsou? Did something happen at the dorm?

Shinny: That demon has no remorse, but I respect him for it. @Izuku Your knuckle slid back farther than it should have.

Adhesive Stripper: IZUKU????

Voltage Vermin: whAT

Desperancer: KNUCKLE????

Deku: IT'S FINE

Deku: It's fine! The tendons are really messed u

Deku: Messed up from my quirk but you were bleeding a

Adhesive Stripper: W H A T I N T H E F R E S H F U C K ? ? ?

Deku: Soba attac

Voltage Vermin: @whoever is sniping Midoriya LET HIM SPEAK

Deku: Sorry! Soba attacked Shinsou, Shinsou grabbed my hand wrong. Did you call me Izuku because Eri calls me that?

Shinny: I didn't know that wasn't correct.

Deku: No it's fine! I can see how it's kind of confusing, and I don't mind if you'd rather call me Izuku too!

Adhesive Stripper: Oh god when Ashido sees this

Darkened Overcast: Don't speak that evil into being.

Provost Piston: WHO IS SOBA?

Todo: No one. Don't worry about it. Forget.

Adhesive Stripper: Todoroki is casting a spell. ~ Go to sleep, Iida~

Voltage Vermin: These are not the droids you're looking for.

Provost Piston: Shinsou was ATTACKED to the point of BLEEDING by this Soba person! Why are you hiding this villain?!?

Shinny: I'm insulted by the association.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: SOBA IS A FUCKING CAT DUMBASS. @SHITSOU HE SHOULD HAVE RIPPED OUT YOUR FUCKING THROAT

Himbro: @Shinbro uhhh What do you mean by that?

Provost Piston: A cat? Is this cat in the dorm?

Voltage Vermin: A cat? In this dorm? It's more likely than you think. ;)

Shinny: Explain the difference between criminal and villain. It's been bothering me.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: @PRES DUMBFUCK THE CAT'S BEEN IN THAT ICY HOT FUCKER'S ROOM FOR MONTHS. @SHITSOU SHUT THE FUCK UP

Provost Piston: Though both criminals and villains commit crimes, villains tend to do so to propagate a broader philosophy, either their own or the unifying belief of their organization. They also tend to wear costumes as a symbol, or as a mockery of a heroes. Criminals are classified more broadly as people who commit crimes, a subset being villains, but by and large they commit crimes for reasons unrelated to a personal philosophy, be it crimes of passion or desperation. Your question is a good one, as the boundaries are not often clear cut. - Iida Tenya

Shinny: I see.

Sweetened Steroid: Midoriya must be rubbing off on Iida.

Voltage Vermin: They didn't cover that at villain school?

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: SHUT THE FUCK UP KAMINARI

Shinny: I wasn't a good student.

Voltage Vermin: I feel that.

More Than 33 Vertebrae: Did you do well in combat training?

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: FUCK OFF OJIRO

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: @SHITSOU YOU GOT YOUR INFO NOW YOU HAVE TO ANSWER MY QUESTION

Shinny: I answered Bolt's.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: IT WAS A FUCKING STUPID QUESTION

Voltage Vermin: :(

Deku: Since Iida answered Shinsou's question, he should get to ask his own. That's only fair, Kacchan.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: DEKU. FUCK. OFF.

Shinny: That's true. Zappy, you owe me.

Voltage Vermin: A Kaminari always pays their debts.

Adhesive Stripper: I don't like that reference.

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: PRES DOESN'T HAVE SHIT TO ASK. WHAT'S YOUR FUCKING QUIRK?

Adhesive Stripper: Oh god please no

Voltage Vermin: VOTE TO KICK BAKUGO

Todo: Kick

Kakashi: Kick

Shinny: Kick. In the mouth, preferably. Teeth break easier than you'd think.

Adhesive Stripper: I don't like how you said that.

Adhesive Stripper: Kind of like you know from experience.

Shinny: Never said I didn't

Adhesive Stripper: ooooookay

Voltage Vermin: Sero has one (1) fear. It's Shinsou's vibe rn

Provost Piston: I would like to be clear in that I don't believe this question game should be seen as a clear reflection of how interpersonal relationships are modeled, and that you, Shinsou, should not be under the impression that friendships are merely an even exchange of any chosen currency. As Yaoyorozu has said, you should not feel pressured to answer a question that you do not wish to answer, and none of we HEROES IN TRAINING will be disappointed should you deign not to answer our questions. - Iida Tenya

Adhesive Stripper: Iida really wrote out a whole Terms and Conditions.

Shinny: Either your engine is stalling or you are.

Voltage Vermin: OOOOO BURN UNIT TO IIDA'S ROOM WEEE WOO WEE WOOO

Himbro: Bakugo liked thA

Voltage Vermin: SNIPED

Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum: SHUT UP

Adhesive Stripper: Bakugo is like tsun tsun tsun tsun tsun tsundere.

Adhesive Stripper: Once every three months, we see the dere.

Voltage Vermin: Unless he sees his shadow, then it's 6 more weeks of tsun.

Blackened Overcast: I find that hard to believe.

Voltage Vermin: COME TO BAKUSQUAD!!! You'll see it!

Adhesive Stripper: It's the 9th wonder of the world. You feel so blessed to witness it. Like watching a baby deer learn to walk.

Himbro: awww I love those videos!

Provost Piston: You can select any of these questions to answer: 1. What is your favorite food? 2. What can any of us do to help you adjust to your new situation? 3. Would you like to train with us in hand to hand combat? 4. When is your birthday? 5. What is your favorite 'Eri story'? - Iida Tenya

Voltage Vermin: POP QUIZ!

Voltage Vermin: I wish we could pick just one question to answer :(

Blackened Overcast: That's not surprising, coming from you Kaminari.

Voltage Vermin: @Shinsou can you use your villain training to give me the answers for Mic-sensei's homework?

Deku: KAMINARI NO

Voltage Vermin: KAMINARI YES

While 27 was still considering which was the safest to question to answer, the phone's screen went black and it vibrated in his hand, the logo fading over it and then back out.

The buttons weren't turning it back on.

Did he break it?

27 glanced back at his owner, who was still reading to Eri. The phone might not be in his line of

sight, for now he hadn't noticed, but he would. The next time Yamada took it from him, he'd know. He'd find out that he'd broken this phone, this expensive device that was used for the only job he'd been given so far, and he wasn't even using it for that job. He was just using it for his own purposes.

He broke the phone, and it was probably worth more than he was.

What was he even worth now? 112,000 yen when he was four years old, untrained but full of potential. 28 million after 7 years of training, and a quirk that Chisaki needed to control Eri.

He didn't have his quirk anymore. He couldn't use it. He was worth less than 112,000 yen, he knew that at least, but how little was he worth now? What had his owner paid for him? Did the information he had about The Miasma make him more valuable? What did his owner pay to get it? How much was he worth now?

How much did giving away 10's existence decrease his value?

He thought it was harmless to give that much away. Thought that they must already know, after he didn't know how to use the spray correctly. He only connected the dots for his owner, making sure to answer in a way that wasn't really useful. They didn't know anything about what 10 looks like, how his quirk worked. Just that 10's quirk was used on him.

But he gave it away for *free*, and now he wasn't as valuable. He would be worthless if he kept doing that, letting things slip out. He would be taken away from Eri, and disposed of.

He doesn't even hear his owner's words anymore, he doesn't feel that angry buzzing under his skin, he's too numb to anything other than the fear that sets into his bones. He wanted to test them, he wanted to see what they'd do to him, but not like this, not unless it was on his terms. He broke the *phone*.

"Shinsou? Is there something wrong?" his owner asks, sitting far closer than he should be, Eri still pressing herself against his chest though her eyes are turned to 27.

He tries to hide the evidence, even if he knows it's futile, trying to put the phone into the pocket in his hoodie, but his hands are shaking too much and it only draws Eri's attention to it. "Is your phone dead, Twenny?"

His gaze snaps back to her. *Eri, how could you?*

"Shinsou, it's alright. The phone turns off when it runs out of battery," his owner says, his hand held out to take the phone, before he pulls it back, another hesitation that doesn't suit the man he knew only a few days ago. "Eri, can you show Shinsou how to charge his phone?"

"Yup! Don't worry, Twenny! It'll come back on really fast, so you can keep talking to your friends!" Eri reassures, jumping off of his owner's lap to pull a cable out from under the side table on the right side of the couch. "You just put this thingy inside of it and it starts charging up again!"

27's hands were still shaking as he put it into the slot that Eri pointed out to him, but when the phone buzzed and flashed its logo again, the tightness in his chest finally relaxed. He *hadn't* broken it, at least not yet. He needed to be more careful.

"Sorry, we should have explained that beforehand," his owner says, glancing away with a hand on the back of his neck.

That didn't make sense.

“The phone requires electricity to work, and it’s stored in the battery inside of it. When the battery runs out of electricity, it powers off, but that doesn’t damage the phone.”

His owner apologized to him.

“Your phone is very fall resistant, so if it’s dropped, it shouldn’t be damaged either. If it’s dropped in water and doesn’t turn on afterwards, there’s ways that Hizashi and I can fix it before we have to take it to a repair shop. Rice works most of the time, but I know from experience that it’s not effective against quirk sludge.”

His owner shouldn’t have to. He shouldn’t feel the need to. He owned 27, he owed him nothing, certainly not an apology, not over something so small and inconsequential. Something that 27 had blown out of proportion, nearly falling out of his head because he was too stupid to know how a phone worked. And instead of mocking him for it, his owner was explaining it with that same even tone that was meant for Eri.

“Hizashi should be waking up soon. Would you like me to get him?”

27 shook his head, still feeling too numb to the world after it had shifted so drastically around him. Nothing made sense anymore. His owner wasn’t acting like his owner, something had changed in him and it *made no sense*.

“I’ll be in the kitchen, but let me know if you need anything. Eri, can you bring Shinsou a glass of water?”

“Yep!”

His owner knew he wouldn’t drink it if Eri didn’t give it to him.

27 thought he knew the game, but the game wasn’t like this. Chisaki wouldn’t have noticed, and if he did, he would have used that vulnerability against him.

Chisaki wouldn’t have changed so drastically in the course of a few days.

Chisaki would probably have taken him apart, starting from each fingertip down to his shoulders, stopping at each joint to hear him scream and leave him there for a while if 27 had *ever* broken something of his.

27 had been owned by a lot of people, but his owner was the most dangerous out of all of them. Too observant, too unpredictable. Too close to Eri for half of his strategies to work.

27 was a fool to think his owner was ever defenseless.

His owner was the most frightening person that ever had claim to him.

*

After his owner dismissed him to his room, 27 set to work. He finally had access to the Internet, and all the information it gave away for free.

27 really likes the Internet. With just a few minutes of research, he has several articles that explain that Eri is actually on track or advanced on her benchmarks, and several more websites dedicated to

coping strategies for traumatized children.

Touch is important, it can reassure traumatized children. He's glad that he no longer flinches when Eri touches him, like he used to before he trained himself out of the habit. It might have kept her from being more traumatized.

Acting calm, maintaining routines - those are also things that he's already done, but maybe he should keep a better schedule for her studies rather than letting her do whatever she feels like doing during class.

Help the child enjoy themselves - maybe he shouldn't, then. Maybe the routine of going to school and going to the dorm was enough for her.

'Help the child with breathing exercises.'

27 freezes at those words. He hasn't done that. He's never thought about doing it, he's never noticed that Eri might have trouble breathing. That she might feel like there's no air to breathe, she might have felt that strange panic that comes over him sometimes.

He's never done what his owner did for him, for Eri.

Did his owner think he was traumatized? He hardly had any tells, and 27 had thought that was because he was just that skilled, hiding himself and his intentions even better than Chisaki without having a mask to hide behind. But that was because his owner was so *unnaturally* calm.

Even when Eri wasn't in the room. Even when it was just 27. He acted that way towards 27.

Acting calm, routines, breathing exercises, *help the child enjoy themselves.*

His owner said he was allowed to watch the movie. 27 was allowed to read books, Yamada taught him things that he wanted to learn, he was allowed to have the phone, and they hardly ever took it from him.

His owner and Yamada are treating him like he's traumatized.

But he's not. He's not a child, he's not traumatized. Eri is traumatized. Eri wasn't meant to go through what she had to, she wasn't meant to be dragged to The Chair, to be hurt day after day, year after year, isolated and trapped in that cold, concrete room. Eri can't say Chisaki's name because of that, because it's a way of 'coping' and even if it's an odd way, that's normal. Traumatized children cope in their own ways.

He's not traumatized, he's broken. He's not Eri, he's not anything like Eri. He's never been anything like Eri. Eri was a child, and he was a Number, he was a Dog. He's not sure what he is now, but he's never been a child like Eri. He's never been a person.

27 closes the Internet, trying to sort through this odd fog that's flooded his mind. He can't wrap his head around this, he can only hope that he's wrong. That they haven't noticed, that they only think he's odd. That they don't know how broken he is, how worthless that makes him, like some clients that would turn away Numbers who had passed 5 rounds with Bug and shook too much. Too defective, even with a discount, and if that happened too many times they would be disposed of before they could waste The Miasma's resources any further.

He should probably stop ignoring Engine X at this point. Not only will the distraction clear his head, but as the leader of the underlings, Motorhead was probably closer to his owner. He could lash out, he could secretly be a right hand, and 27 had too many of those to concern himself with

already.

Adhesive Stripper: Since there aren't any girls here....

Adhesive Stripper changed their name to Ya Good Boiii

Adhesive Stripper changed Voltage Vermin's name to Sparky Boiii

Provost Piston: I can offer more questions if none of these are comfortable for you to answer. - Iida Tenya

Sparky Boiii changed Himbro's name to Crimson Boiii

Adhesive Stripper changed Kakashi's name to Quiet Boiii

Deku changed Ability to talk to cats unknown's name to Pure Boiii

Sparky Boiii changed More than 33 Vertebrae's name to Slappy Tail Boiii

Quiet Boiii changed Darkened Overcast's name to Crow Boiii

Todo changed Theocrat Thermonuclear Tantrum's name to Stinky Boiii

Provost Piston: Also I would like to keep my name.

Pure Boiii changed Deku's name to Mighty Boiii

Mighty Boiii changed Sweetened Steroid's name to Sweet Boiii

Desperancer changed Shinny's name to Mystereux Boiii

Sweet Boiii changed Desperancer's name to Pastry Boiii

Mighty Boiii changed Todo's name to Soba Boiii

Mighty Boiii: ALL BOIIS. Except Iida, because he likes his new username!

Stinky Boiii changed their name to King Explosion Murder.

King Explosion Murder: THE FUCKING CORPSE CAME UP WITH A BETTER NAME
FUCKING HALF N HALF BASTARD

Soba Boiii: It was very appropriate for you.

King Explosion Murder: DIE.

Provost Piston: You can ignore my questions, Shinsou. I apologize for placing pressure on you to answer. - Iida Tenya

Pure Boiii: Todoroki, has Soba been behaving aggressively or avoiding water? I don't want to be rude or say that Soba is mean at all, because he's not, but maybe you should have taken him to a vet because he might be sick and now Shinsou might be sick too? I'm sorry!

Ya Good Boiii: Holy shit Shinsou has rabies.

Pure Boiii: NO I DIDN'T MEAN THAT

King Explosion Murder: DUMB FUCK ICY HOT I'M COMING FOR THAT FLEA RIDDEN BASTARD

Mighty Boiii: No! Soba doesn't have rabies!

Sweet Boiii: Cat scratches can get infected though. @Shinsou, are you okay?

Quiet Boiii: Is Bakugo going to kill Todoroki's cat because he wants to kill Shinsou himself, or....

Ya Good Boiii: Shoji we've talked about this. ~Let them work it out~

King Explosion Murder: FUCK OFF I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT SHITSOU

Ya Good Boiii: Oof, so close to dere.

King Explosion Murder: FUCK OFF DUMB FUCK. YOU'RE FAILING CALC NOW, DEAL WITH IT.

Ya Good Boiii: MOM NO I'M SORRY

Crimson Boiii: @Todobroki just let me in? The ice is so not good for the door bro

Soba Boiii: No.

Palpitation Projector: Girls are back. Looks like a whole lot of stupid went on without us.

Ashi: i swear to fuck if another one of you hurts shinny i will go f e r a l .

Sparky Boiii: ashido pls. Ur doin me a frighten.

Ashi: THAT DOOR IS GOING DOOOOOWWN

King Explosion Murder: FUCK YES

Crimson Boiii: nO

Genesis: I'm not making another one.

Mysterieux Boiii: The phone died. Don't break the door.

Ashi: SHINNYYYYYYYYYYY

Crimson Boiii: @Yaoyorozu not even a little bit? Please?

Ashi: ARE YOU OKAY???????

Genesis: Fine. But someone needs to order pizza. I need a lot of carbohydrates.

Sweet Boiii: Can do! Also, me and All Might are making cupcakes. @Shinsou do you like carrot cake? All Might thinks you do?

Mysterieux Boiii: The cat didn't hurt me. And I've never had carrot cake.

Mighty Boiii: But Aizawa-sensei made sure to put sanitizer on it, right? Maybe that's a dumb

question, as an underground hero Sensei has a lot of training on first aid techniques, so of course he would know to do so, but it seems that sometimes he doesn't utilize those techniques on himself or allow for proper recovery, but I'm sure he would for yo

Mysterieux Boiii: He did.

Mysterieux Boiii: That was not

Sparky Boiii: SNIPER FIRE GET YOUR HEAD DOWN

Slappy Tail Boiii: Who sniped Shinsou? He's not at the dorm.

Palpitation Projector: @Kirishima where's your man?

Crimson Boiii: It wasn't Bakugo!

Mysterieux Boiii: My room doesn't have a window, and even if the sniper had a quirk to line up the target, the walls seem to be too thick to risk the shot. The only time I'm at risk is on campus, and I know where a sniper would set up.

Ya Good Boiii: Holy shit, please play Overwatch with me.

Ya Good Boiii: My SR needs you.

InvisiCutie: Why do you know that? Have you shot people????

Mysterieux Boiii: Training. And not really.

Ya Good Boiii: um how do you not really shoot someone????

Mysterieux Boiii: I have never shot someone.

Ya Good Boiii: why does that sound more suspicious????????

Ya Good Boiii: Hello????

Sparky Boiii: He's lining up his shot calm down.

Slappy Tail Boiii: Will we have weapons training at UA?

Provost Piston: Yes, beginning next year, though guns will not be covered or offered as an option to integrate into our hero costume unless a formal request form is filed, and none of us have quirks that would offer proper reasoning for it to be approved.

Ya Good Boiii: Unrelated but where's the safe room? Also Kiribro hold me? Like really tight with your whole body? And use your quirk while you're doing it?

Crimson Boiii: Sure! It's not gonna be super comfy tho!

Ashi: gaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAYYYYYYY

Mysterieux Boiii: 1. I don't know, but I dislike oatmeal. 2. I don't know, and I'd prefer if you didn't try. 3. Sure. 4. I don't know. 5. I can't think of one that you would like to know.

Provost Piston: Oh! You didn't have to answer all of them, Shinsou! I apologize for making you think that you had to, that wasn't my intention at all. - Iida Tenya

Sweet Boiii: Does Aizawa-sensei know your birthday? We need to add it to the calendar.

King Explosion Murder: You're seriously full of shit. How the fuck do you not know anything?

Ya Good Boiii: No caps lock? Dere: 67%.

Sparky Boiii: 69%

Crimson Boiii: niiiiiiice

Ashi: niiiiiiice

Ya Good Boiii: This is why we can't have nice things.

Betrayed Buoy: I want to know all the Eri stories! Even if it's a sad one. If that's okay?

Choppy changed Betrayed Buoy's name to #1 Eri Enthusiast

#1 Eri Enthusiast: :) Thanks!

Mysterieux Boiii: @Sucrose Male Tell me where he would put that information.

Mighty Boiii: You could ask him! Or I could ask him instead!

Slappy Tail Boiii: Can we do a prayer circle for Sensei to allow Shinsou to train with us?

Ya Good Boiii: oh please god no Ojira no

Mysterieux Boiii: @Mighty Don't ask him.

Sweet Boiii: I don't know? Probably in a folder with the investigation stu

Provost Piston: I think it would be better to ask Aizawa-sensei, it seems like the easiest course of action. We could ask in a way that would keep you out of the conversation if you would prefer that, Shinsou! - Iida Tenya

Sparky Boiii: Did Iida snipe my sugar sweet man?

Pastry Boiii: Oui. In front of All Might, no less.

Sparky Boiii: In front of MY salad?!

Mysterieux Boiii: @Motor no. I would prefer to know where that information is. @Battery If you know, I can get the information you want.

Sparky Boiii: MIDORIYA MY GPA NEEDS YOU

Provost Piston: KAMINARI THAT IS A CRIME.

Mysterieux Boiii: It's really not.

InvisiCutie: @Midoriya I think you should tell us! Shinsou really wants to know, you know, and he deserves to! He deserves to know when his birthday is!

Crow Boiii: We have fallen from our chosen path and into the depths of depravity.

Mighty Boiii: I don't know where it is, but it's probably somewhere we shouldn't know about!

Sparky Boiii: shinsou pls i tried

Mysterieux Boiii: You failed.

Mighty Boiii: JULY 1ST

Mighty Boiii: Sempai made sure to ask just in case it was coming up soon!

Crow Boiii: Cancer? How amusing.

Quiet Boiii: Tokoyami it's fine. It was accurate.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: ERI'S IS DECEMBER 21ST :)

Mysterieux Boiii: Thanks.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: :) can I please have an eri story this essay is k i l l i n g me :)

Mysterieux Boiii: Give me a minute.

Genesis: :)

Choppy: :)

Mighty Boiii: :)

Soba Boiii: :)

Sparky Boiii: Everyone liked that.

Mysterieux Boiii: You don't mind an unhappy one.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: I know a lot of them aren't happy, so it's okay

Genesis: Eri reminds us why we have chosen to become heroes in the first place. We know that a lot of her history isn't pleasant, and it's why we try so hard to make sure she makes happy memories here at UA.

Ashi: I need to hug someone.

Crimson Boiii: B there in a sec!

Ashi: :)

Mysterieux Boiii: When Eri was about 3 years old, I would make her count when she misbehaved. I found out later that it wasn't a good idea, since it can make a child associate learning with discipline and do poorly in school later on, but she never really misbehaved much anyway. Only

when Hari came to take her. One time, Hari came to take me out of the room for a bleach bath, and she tried to stop him by counting to him. She must have thought that if she completed her punishment, I wouldn't get punished. We were lucky that he ignored her, but she was really brave to do that. To try to stop him.

Genesis: Thank you for sharing that, Shinsou. Eri is a very brave girl.

Mighty Boiii: Hey Ashido where are you?

Ashi: my room

Mighty Boiii: I'm coming

Ashi: thanks

King Explosion Murder: what the fuck do you mean by bleach bath

Sparky Boiii: Bakugo maybe don't?

Provost Piston: You don't have to answer, Shinsou!

Mysterieux Boiii: You talk about how I don't know anything, but it's not a hard concept, Blasto.

King Explosion Murder: SPELL IT OUT SHITFACE.

Ya Good Boiii: I'd rather you didn't????

Sweet Boiii: PIZZA IS HERE. Also ALL MIGHT would really like you guys to COME DOWN HERE and eat these cupcakes and TELL HIM what you think about them.

Provost Piston: That is an excellent suggestion! I think we should all go downstairs and eat with All Might!

Mysterieux Boiii: Chisaki was a germophobe. Hari enforced that. Tell me when the lightbulb goes on.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: Is that why your hai

Mysterieux Boiii: Ho

Mysterieux Boiii: You shouldn't know that.

Choppy: Ochako and I saw a picture of you before you came to UA. We're the only ones that saw it.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: That's right!

Mysterieux Boiii: Explain how you got this picture.

Choppy: We volunteered at the hospital where you and Eri were. Though you weren't in the same room, the staff placed a picture of you by her bed, so she wouldn't be as frightened when she woke up, if she woke up before you did.

Palpitation Projector: Hey Shinsou, tell me what you think about this music:

<https://www.herotube.com/watch?v=1ox1GvNiwtc>

Palpitation Projector: I can fine-tune the recommendations after I know what you like, but this is just a broad sample.

Sparky Boiii: NO WAIT

Sparky Boiii: <https://www.herotube.com/watch?v=u5AUoTICTzg&list=LL75BHVjAoYOfbsOTa5rWnQ&index=23&t=0s>

Sparky Boiii: This one first :) Please.

27 waited for the heroes to say something else, but they didn't, and it didn't seem to be the right time to try to find out why his owner behaved so oddly, or why Choppy was lying to him. How they could possibly know what he looked like before his hair was fixed by Yamada. He would rather try to investigate that when their hesitation would be more clear if it came, and he could know when one of them tried to report it to his owner. Perhaps he could convince Provost Piston to create a chat just between themselves, now that he had stocked up enough answered questions to force him to answer.

The message Sucrose Hurry sent was clearly a code to call all of them to All Might, perhaps to tell them what he had said about the bleach baths. They must be very misinformed to think that was useful information to gather, but at least it proved that they were ill-equipped for their jobs to gain information about The Miasma from him.

27 tapped on the link that Sparky sent him first. Sparky was amusing, and a bit more interesting than Beat Dropper.

His music was also very bizarre. It certainly wasn't like the songs from Get Your Hands Up! and a lot of comments underneath the videos had the same code words that Sparky liked to use. Perhaps he was part of a cult, and the other heroes were unaware of it.

One video had a lot of comments calling the song it was attached to torture. 27 didn't see how, it wouldn't be effective with all the different sounds it had, repetitive as they were. He really liked that one, especially the little animation of the cat flying through the sky.

A few songs were in English, and this one seemed to pull from a lot of English songs. He couldn't tell if it was supposed to be choppy and unnerving because of that, but it seemed to make the lyrics simpler to understand, easier for him to pick out the words that he knew.

27 didn't have time to react when there was a knock at his door right before Yamada opened it, smiling at him before he stopped and stared, something approaching horror on his face. "SHINSOU WHAT HAPPENED?"

27 reached up to touch the gauze pad secured to his cheek. Yamada should have been aware he was injured, he thought his owner would have informed him. At least Yamada seemed concerned for some reason, rather than angry. Bug would often get mad when the other Numbers injured him outside of training exercises when he was younger. She disliked when it was severe enough to impact his training sessions with her. 'Cat.'

Yamada tilted his head, repeating the sign. "Cat? A cat did that to you? Was it Sushi?"

27 shook his head, which Yamada took as an invitation to approach. He fumbled a few times to turn off the music still playing, but after he succeeded, he noticed that Yamada's hands were twitching around in the air, and it seemed like it was frustrating the hero. ' *S-O-B-A. New cat. Dislike.* '

"Aw, Soba is such a sweetheart! I can't believe he did that- *he didn't do that one though*," Yamada said, glaring at his forehead while his finger pointed at the odd welt he had gotten. "That one looks very familiar."

That angry tone was far more familiar for 27. Yamada wasn't happy about that wound, far more than the others. Unfortunately, it was one that 27 couldn't really explain. ' *White thing. I don't know. Not hurt.* '

Yamada gritted his teeth, but then sighed, sitting in the computer chair while he looked around the room as though he wanted to find something out of place to comment on. It was odd to see Yamada acting this way, so similar to Hari.

27 thought that it would be a relief to see that kind of behavior, something so easily understood, but instead he found his gut knotted in worry. This wasn't something he could understand. This was another bizarre change, much like his owner's, and he liked it even less.

"Oh! Did you listen to my show last night?" Yamada asks, and like that he changes again. His usual tone, his usual smile, but now 27 knows not to trust it. "It's not my usual format, but I hope that hearing a wider selection was as fun for you as it was for my other listeners!"

27 nodded, though he thought that his owner had reported that information to Yamada. Perhaps he was testing him to see if he'd lie. It seemed too easy to pass, but that widening smile tells him he did.

"That's good! Did anything catch your fancy? I know you were listening to some, uh music before I came in, and you don't have to pause it if you don't want to. I'm pretty good at listening with both ears, you know?" Yamada says with a laugh, but something about the slight hesitation before he said 'music' tells him he shouldn't risk it. Not now. He might not approve of the songs he was listening to.

' *Like song. Something Dance. Mumble words.* ' 27 signs. He wasn't going to reveal which song he liked the most, but he did like that one. Perhaps if Yamada talked about it, he could begin to figure out why he only knew some of the words to it. It was a bizarre dialect, one he doesn't remember learning, but he should have understood more of the song if he lived in the region it was specific to before The Miasma.

Yamada seems to freeze up, then tilts his head curiously. "Mumble words? Do you mean French?" He signs the word for French, and 27 repeats it. Where was French spoken? Did he and his mother live there? "I didn't know you knew French! *Comprenez-vous cela?*"

' *You. This,* ' 27 signs. He recognized those words, but not the others. Why wouldn't he be fluent if he had lived where French was spoken? Aoyama was, maybe he came from that area and had lived there longer. He seemed to prefer using it when given the chance.

"That's right! You know a little bit, then. I could teach you more if you wanted, but I'm still learning myself," Yamada says, rubbing the back of his neck. He clearly doesn't want to, but he still offered to for some reason.

' *No. Want to learn English and sign. I don't know. Place.* ' 27 hesitates before he risks it. It might

not be a good idea to ask right now, but at least his understanding of JSL was sloppy enough to be misinterpreted. ‘ *I don’t know. I know. Live there. I don’t know.* ’

“You don’t remember learning French?” Yamada translates, and 27 nods. The hero’s fingers tap against his knee as he glances at the door, a new tell. Perhaps he’s worried that he shouldn’t give away this information, maybe his owner didn’t want him to know it. “I don’t think you lived in France, before... But maybe your mother taught you a little?”

Why did Yamada think his mother taught him? How did he know his mother knew? Did he know where his mother was?

Did Yamada know his mom?

She would have told him how much she sold him for. His owner would know not to spend too much on him. He must have bought him for less than what she got for him. That made him less valuable. He was a small investment at The Miasma, he wasn’t worth as much as the other Numbers, and Bug made sure to tell him that all the time.

They paid next to nothing for him, and he was worth next to nothing in return. They could dispose of him whenever they wanted to, as soon as he gave them a reason to. Even if he didn’t give them a reason here, when they had all the information they wanted from him, it would be easier for them to dispose of him. He wasn’t worth as much as those books on his shelf.

He never realized that, but the contents of his room probably cost more than his mother received for selling him.

Which one was worth as much as his quirk? How many books were equal to the value of his hands? How much did that laptop cost, or his phone? Should he even touch those things? If he depreciated in value with every injury, had just touching those things made them worth less too?

“-sou, it’s okay, it’s alright.”

‘ *Away.* ’

27 covers his hand with the other as soon as he can make his body obey him. He couldn’t *do that* around Yamada. Yamada *knows* what he means by that. Yamada probably knocks another thousand yen off of his value every time he catches him slipping out of his own head.

What is he even worth now? Was it even less than zero? Was he given away for free? When would they get tired of him? What would he do to mess up and make them think he wasn’t worth it, however little they spent on him?

“Can you tell me - I mean, can you make your hands into fists for me?” Yamada asks, his own hands moving to do it, as though 27 is too stupid to know what he means by that. “Just like this, just until you start to come back, alright?”

Come back? He already knows it then. He knows what ‘Away’ means.

27 does it. His hands don’t feel real, but he watches them move, slowly at first, but as though he’s sinking back into his body, he feels them more and more. He’s able to move them more quickly as he does.

Yamada notices that too. “Good, you’re doing good, little listener. Just like that.”

27 isn’t fully back, still on the edges of the fog, when he watches his hands betray him again. ‘

Mom. Do you know? '

He wants to slip back, he wants to slip *away* . He asked a question.

He asked Yamada a question.

There's a panic inside of him that won't let him slip back, every nerve singing like he's already strapped to the table in the Red Room, like Chisaki is taking off his gloves.

He doesn't even know what Yamada will do to him now, but he knows he won't like it, he knows it will hurt and he just hopes it doesn't kill him when he's worth so little. He doesn't want to die, he doesn't want to lose Eri, he can't die, he can't protect her if he dies.

"Hey, no no no! I'm not mad, I'm proud - Shinsou, please look at me," Yamada asks, and he looks oddly blurry. He's smiling like he's forcing himself to, worry threaded not only in his words but through the lines on his face as well. "Shinsou, you can ask me questions. I'm really, *really* happy you did. I'm really proud of you."

Why would he be? It doesn't even sound like he's happy to have a reason to punish 27, it sounds genuine. It sounds like he actually wants 27 to ask him questions, and he doesn't know *why* .

"I don't know your mom, I've never met her, but I know that she knows French. Naomasa told me that, he told me a few things about you before we picked you up at the station. You can ask me about those things anytime, kiddo. I'll answer any question you have, I'm just- I'm *really* happy about this, you know?" Yamada says, and his sincerity confuses 27 the more he insists on it. "I know that it's really scary for you. I know that - you know, I know why. But it's not like that here. It's okay to ask us questions. We'll never be mad at you for that."

It has to be a trap. He's reading Yamada wrong, there's no way that he means that the way it sounds. He wants 27 to ask questions because he wants to get 27 killed. 27 isn't allowed to ask questions to someone like Yamada, definitely not to his owner like he's implying.

"Did you know that- um," Yamada starts, then cuts himself off, hands dropping from a sign half-formed. "You know, I used to be really scared of talking for a while. Because of my quirk. I didn't know when I was going to get loud, it was hard for me to tell, so sometimes I'd just stop talking. Right in the middle of a sentence, I'd stop, and it would be really annoying sometimes. My friends made fun of me by saying I was the 'Master of Anticipation.' That didn't really help, because I always felt so bad about it afterwards, but I just couldn't trust myself not to hurt someone with my quirk, you know? My mom was the only one who could help me with it, because she was deaf, and my quirk was too weak to hurt her back then."

27 never realized it, but that was definitely a weakness in Yamada's quirk. One that he shouldn't give away so easily.

"We'd drive out to this really quiet field, outside of the city late at night. It was far enough away that I wouldn't really bother anyone even if I used my quirk. And she'd tell me to tell her about my day, about anything really, just as long as I was talking a lot. Even then, sometimes I'd freeze up, but the more I talked, the more I could tell when I was going to use my quirk. And I was able to control it better," Yamada stops while 27 wipes the tears from his face, trying to get rid of the evidence of whatever fit that had happened while he was out of his head. "I know that, you know, it's more than that for you, but I want you to know that I understand. And I *really* want you to know that I'm *never* going to be mad at you for asking a question. I want to be like my mom was for me, but for you. Even if it's really scary at first, you can ask me questions."

It's confusing. 27 can't wrap his head around what Yamada wants from this. He wants 27 to ask him questions, desperately, but he doesn't know why. Why he would risk being under 27's quirk. Why he keeps talking about how scary it is for 27, like he's trying to comfort him in a way that he would for Eri.

"Maybe we could start small, like, asking me what the sign for something is," Yamada says, leaning back in his chair. "You said that you have names for Ms. Joke and Midnight, and I really want to know what they are. Because as much as I just *love* all the attention my hero name gets, I really want to know what you'd do with their names. Especially Midnight, I need ammunition against her after all the names she's called me over the years."

27 at least understands that, somewhat. He wants 27 to come up with a mocking name for Midnight, and luckily he doesn't see her often enough to pose much of a risk if it got back to her. '*W-I-T-C-H. Hour. Lady Laugh. Single J-E-S-T.*'

Yamada snorts at the last name, covering his mouth afterwards. "Oh my god, if I called her that while she was flirting with Shou. He'd probably laugh, and that'd make her even more jealous." Yamada beams at him, rubbing his hands together. "What about my sweet herolets? Surely you have some names that I can call them in class! Like, '*Crimson Fight!*' Or '*Engine Man!*'"

'*Beat Drop. T-E-R-A-T-O-M-A. He disliked that.*' 27 thought that one was pretty clever, though. It took him a while to remember the name from the textbooks 10 had let him read.

"For Shoji?! Oh, I bet he didn't, but it's kind of fitting in a really gross way," Yamada presses his hands together to beg, looking to 27 for more names. "*Please* tell me you have one for Kaminari or Bakugo. Bakugo could really use some motivation, and it would just soothe my soul to be able to get one over on Kaminari when he acts up in class."

27 wonders if Yamada will get frustrated if he doesn't ask through sign, like he wanted him to. The heroes he picked might have been intentional, as though somehow he knew that he didn't know the signs for them, and the names were too long to spell out.

Yamada notices his hesitation, and 27 is sure that he's about to be proven right. "You can use the phone too, Shinsou. Or, you know, it's okay if you don't want to ask today. I shouldn't have made it seem like that. I of all people should know...."

27 doesn't like the way he said that, or the way his eyes move down and to the side, that smile falling. It's disappointment, but it's such a subtle shift that he doesn't recognize it as dangerous. '*How. T-H-E-O-C-R-A-T.*'

He avoided the last part of the question sign, just in case, but Yamada's eyes light up all the same. If his smile were any less enthusiastic, 27 would worry that he'd fallen headlong into that trap. "That's good! Bakugo, right? Mr. King Explosion Murder himself!"

27 repeats the signs for the hero's name, still curious why he would want to pick it when it wasn't heroic sounding at all.

"I... I guess this game doesn't really work, though. There's not a lot of synonym signs," Yamada says, frowning as he cups his chin. "King is just 'King,' and Murder can be 'Murder' or 'Death' or 'Die.' There's a few more for 'Explosion' -"

'*All of them. How to sign all of them.*' 27 needs that information too much to worry about the risks right now. He didn't make it into a question, he just made it a complete sentence, and if Yamada didn't react to '*How,*' then a sentence should be safe.

Yamada smiles so hard that 27 feels like it's going to hurt him, and his hands move too quickly in answer at first. "I'm going to need the JSL dictionary, I might be forgetting some, but I am going to make sure that you know *every* sign that you need."

27 couldn't wait to use them tomorrow.

*

Eri thought that she'd be really happy if Twenny had friends, but she wasn't.

The heroes being friends with Twenny was making him act really weird. He talked to them on his phone a lot, instead of paying attention to Eri, like he always did when they were in the room. Eri tried not to be mad about that, but she kind of was. Especially after Twenny talked at her a little mean, after Bakugo made him mad. It wasn't even Eri's fault that Bakugo made him mad.

But maybe it was. Eri told all the heroes to be friends with Twenny, so he was trying to be friends with Bakugo, and got mad. It was Eri's fault.

Eri must have done something else wrong today. Twenny got hurt by that mean cat because the cat got scared. Eri must have scared it because she was scared of it, just like the cat guy on TV said. She made Twenny get hurt again, just like she used to before they got rescued.

When Eri noticed that Zawa was in a talk-y mood, kind of like Yama gets, she tried to help him by asking him to read to her. It was a little selfish, because Eri really just wanted to be close to Zawa or Twenny, but Twenny didn't like cuddling with Eri after he got hurt, so she was happy that Zawa let her. Eri thought that she was helping, but she wasn't doing it right, because Twenny was acting really scared after his phone died, and he wouldn't have gotten so scared if she was cuddling with him.

Eri was really worried because Twenny was still too scared to eat as much as he should. Zawa and Yama worry about that too, probably because not eating enough is a good way to get sick, and Twenny barely eats as much as she does. Twenny is bigger and older than her, so he needs to eat a whole lot more than her, not less.

Zawa must think that Twenny is getting sick, because he told him he could go to his room if he wanted to. Zawa was also really explain-y today, because he told Twenny that he could go anywhere he wanted in the apartment, and didn't have to ask permission. Twenny should know that though, because Twenny was older, but he still seemed a little surprised.

Eri was trying to be good. She was trying not to be mad that Twenny wanted to go to his room. She was trying to be happy that Zawa was still letting her cuddle with him while he read his book about cats, but Eri just *really* wanted to cuddle with Twenny. But she messed up a whole lot today and couldn't.

Yama went to Twenny's room for a while after he woke up, and when he came back, he didn't look happy, even though he was smiling. It wasn't a nice smile, and Eri held on to Zawa's shirt just in case Yama did something scary to her. Yama must be mad at her after all the bad things she did, especially everything she did to get Twenny hurt.

"Shou, my dear, sweet husband," Yama said, his smile getting a little scarier. "Why does Shinsou look like he went on patrol with you?"

Zawa closed his book, and started moving Eri closer to Yama, sitting up so she was right in front of his chest. “We shouldn’t talk about that right now. Eri and I-”

“Shou, don’t use a sweet little girl like Eri to get out of this!” Yama said, pointing at Zawa. “You’re practically using her as a human shield!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Zawa said, putting his arms around her with his chin on top of her head. He sounded a little bit scared, and he was holding her like Twenny does sometimes when he’s really scared, so Eri put her arms out to protect him better.

Yama gave her that look that he does when she does something he thinks is super cute, and rolled his eyes. “Aw, I guess Super Eri has saved Eraserhead from the scary villain Mic today!” Yama started talking with his hands, really fast with words she didn’t know, but they made Zawa sigh and nod. “So, we’re going to expel Kaminari. I hope you’re good with that, but tomorrow is his last day at UA.”

Zawa just sighed a little louder. “What did he do?” Zawa didn’t sound like he was surprised.

“Shinsou likes meme songs now,” Yama said, and Eri didn’t really know what memes were, even though everyone talked about them, but Yama must not like their songs. “Because Kaminari sent him some on that chat they have. He was listening to a mashup that uses ‘ *Another One Bites The Dust* ’ by ‘ *Queen* ’ as a backing track, and I don’t think he’s even heard ‘ *Queen* ’ !”

Yama was using English words, but Eri didn’t know enough of them to know what they meant. Zawa just hummed, like he was going to say something to make Yama play-mad. “You know, someone told me that people who try to say certain songs are bad-”

“No, they’re *bad* , Shou! I take it back, those songs are bad!” Yama says, but then he looks a little sad and pouty. “No, you’re right. Shinsou should have his own taste in music, I just- no, it shouldn’t be mine anyway! That’s not what I wanted in the first place.”

Yama sounded really sad about that. Maybe Twenny should try to listen to more of Yama’s music to make him feel better. Music was really important to Yama, and he really wanted to be Twenny’s friend. Twenny should try to be a better friend to Yama, especially when it was as easy as listening to music.

“He did like ‘ *Deniere Danse* ’ though!” Yama says, and his hands say a lot of words at the same time. One of them means ‘Mom,’ and that makes Eri really confused. Were they talking about Twenny’s mom with their hands?

“That makes sense. His family has communication-related quirks, so foreign languages are probably more interesting to him,” Zawa says, also talking with his hands.

Eri doesn’t like that they’re doing that. They do it sometimes so they can talk about things she shouldn’t know about, but they’re talking about Twenny. Or maybe they’re talking about how mad they are that she was so bad today, and she got Twenny hurt.

Maybe they’re talking about how much they hate her. They’re talking about how much they hate that they have to live with her, but they have to, because she has a cursed quirk, and they’re the only ones who can stop her from using it. They don’t really like her at all, just like all the other heroes, but they pretend to be nice to her to stop her from using her quirk.

“Hey there, little bean,” Yama says, smiling while he ruffles her hair. “You doing alright?”

Eri hides her face in Zawa’s shirt. She really isn’t doing alright, but she doesn’t want to tell Yama

that. He'll hate her even more if she does, if she acts out and does something troublesome.

Yama touches her arm, like he's going to pull her away from Zawa, but Zawa shakes his head at him, and starts rubbing her back. "Eri, what's wrong?"

Zawa's nice voice makes her cry, and she doesn't know why it does. She doesn't want to, she doesn't want to be even more bad, but she can't help it anymore. "I'm sor-ry Twenny got hurt. I-it's my fault, I'm sor-ry!"

"Eri," Zawa says, like he always does before he tries to convince her she's wrong. "It's not your fault."

"But I scared the cat! I was bad!" Eri tells him, even though he should know. She thought he was already mad at her about that.

But Zawa didn't know that. His eyes get wider, and he holds her a little tighter. "You weren't bad, Eri. The cat didn't even know you were there. It was in the vents, right?"

Eri nods, because it was in the vents, but that doesn't mean it wasn't scared of her. Somehow.

"I know that seeing Shinsou hurt like that was very scary for you. But sometimes, scary things happen that you can't control. That doesn't mean they're your fault," Zawa explains, wiping away her tears while she tries to calm down like Twenny showed her to.

"You know, I used to think like that too," Yama says, sitting down on the floor in front of them. "When I was little, I used to think that I could turn off whether my foster parents liked me that day. If I stepped on a crack on the sidewalk, I wouldn't get desert, or if I didn't save an earthworm, they would be mad at me for not doing my chores. There were a lot of days that they were mad at me, and I didn't do anything wrong at all, so I figured that I must have thought something bad, and that made them mad! But when you think about it, it doesn't make sense, does it? Would you be mad at me if I stepped on a crack on the road?"

Eri shook her head. She wouldn't be, that would be silly.

"Of course you wouldn't, because that would be silly. And my foster parents weren't mad about that either. But when you're little, there's a lot of scary things that happen that you can't really understand yet, so it makes you feel better to find a reason for it. And that's not always a bad thing, because sometimes it can make you feel better. But whenever you find yourself getting sad about something scary, you can always come to me or Shou and talk to us about it," Yama says, smiling at her with his really nice smile. "We're always happy to tell you about the world, little bean, and sometimes knowing more about the scary thing will make it a whole lot less scary."

Eri nods her head. "Zawa likes explaining things."

Zawa laughs, ruffling her hair. "I do. Especially for you, Eri. You're one of the few people who actually listen to me."

Eri knows Zawa is complaining about the heroes, but she likes that he says that she's a good listener. "It wasn't my fault that Twenny got hurt? Or that he's mad at Bakugo?"

Yama laughs a little, but she doesn't think he's laughing at her. "I don't think he's mad at Bakugo anymore, and it definitely wouldn't be your fault if he was! Bakugo makes a lot of people mad at him, right? So he wouldn't need your help making Shinsou mad at him."

Eri nods. She didn't think about that, but Bakugo was so mad and mean that even Izuku got mad at

him sometimes, and Izuku doesn't get mad at anything, ever. "Is he friends with Bakugo now?"

Yama's leans to the side as he hums, like he really isn't sure about that. "It's hard to say with boys that age, but I think Shinsou is trying to find a nickname for him, and that's always the first step in being friends with someone."

Eri already knows that. Some of the heroes get really happy and brag about how they get names from Eri to prove they're good friends. She doesn't know how Twenny is going to give Bakugo a nickname when he can't talk to him, but Bakugo better like it, or she'll give him a mean face again.

"Would you like to ask Shinsou about it? We should probably bring him some more water, since it's been a few hours," Zawa says, but that just makes Eri confused.

"Is Twenny like Beanie?" Eri asks. Zawa has been telling her to water Twenny a lot more than she has to water Beanie, but it's a little weird that Twenny doesn't water himself.

Yama tries to hide that he thinks that's funny, but she can still hear him laughing behind his hand. Zawa just tilts his head, like he does sometimes when he's not sure how to answer her. "Everyone is like Beanie, because we all need water. I'm just a little worried that Shinsou forgets to drink enough water, so I want to make sure to remind him. Zashi does the same thing for me when I work too much."

"Sure do! Shou is a very complicated plant sometimes. I have to remind him to drink water, to eat, shower, shave, sleep--"

"Zashi."

"Go to school, come home, fix up his injuries, take his medicine--"

"We get it," Zawa says, like he's a little tired of all the fun Yama is poking at him. "I'm very lucky to have Zashi around to remind me of those things, aren't I?"

"Yup! You gotta drink water, Zawa! It's important!" Eri says, even though she doesn't know why it is. She needs to ask Momo about it, because Momo knows all about sciencey stuff, and she explains it a lot better than Zawa sometimes.

Eri gets to pick Twenny's new water cup and carry it to him, and she thinks that he'll be happy that she picked one that has a bunch of scribbly cats drawn on it.

But he isn't. He looks up from his new laptop and his eyes get really big, and he's really scared for a little bit before his face goes weird. It doesn't look like he feels anything when he looks up at Zawa.

"Twenny?" Eri asks, walking over to him. She hopes he's not mad about something she did, even if Zawa said she didn't do anything wrong.

"Sorry, Eri," Twenny says, putting his hand on her head. "Did.... You're okay."

Eri nods, but she's really confused. Twenny tried to ask her a question, and he seems really upset about something, and he keeps looking at Zawa with a kind of mean look in his eyes.

"Eri was worried about what happened today with Soba," Zawa says, leaning against the doorway with his arms folded. "Is her horn unusual right now?"

Twenny looks really mad at Zawa, and it's a little scary to look at. Eri reaches up to her horn, and she didn't even notice that it grew a little. It's almost bigger than her hand now.

Twenny starts talking with his hands, but he gets frustrated, and pulls up something on his laptop to start typing. Zawa walks over to read what Twenny types. 'What I signed is the trigger for it. Explain' Twenny deletes 'Explain' and makes a fist. He seems to get really mad, but Zawa just leans back, like he doesn't want to get close to Twenny right now. "Eri was very worried, but you can see that she's fine."

Twenny looks at her really worried, and his eyes look all over her before he looks really sad, and pulls her into his lap. He squeezes her really tight before he looks up at Zawa, and talks with his hands again.

"It's understandable that you would be concerned," Zawa says, patting Eri's head even though he makes sure his arm stays really far away from Twenny when he does it. "I would like to talk to you about Eri's quirk later, since there's a lot we don't know about it. It would help us to avoid this kind of situation in the future."

Twenny doesn't like that, but he doesn't glare at Zawa for saying it. He just holds Eri tighter, and she tries to hold him back just as tight. Zawa leaves and closes the door behind him, and that makes Twenny relax a whole lot. "You're okay, Eri."

Eri nods, even though she's still a little scared at how mad Twenny was at Zawa. "What's a trigger?"

Twenny sighs, like he's still a little mad, but he pats her head to say he's sorry for doing that. "It's something that causes something else to happen. With my quirk, someone answering a question is a trigger for it to work. With yours... When you get hurt, your horn grows. And eventually, your quirk starts up. I thought..."

"You thought Zawa hurt me? Like..." Eri doesn't want to talk about Him. Not when Twenny is as scared and mad as he is right now.

Twenny just nods. "I thought they knew that already." Twenny sounds like it's a bad thing that he told Zawa.

"Zawa wouldn't do that! Zawa isn't like Him at all! Zawa is really nice, and he wants to be your friend, Twenny," Eri puts her face against Twenny's shirt, and she tries not to cry. "I really want you to be friends with Zawa, a whole lot more than Bakugo."

Twenny starts rubbing her back, because he knows when she's going to cry before she does it. Sometimes he can even stop her from doing it at all. "I'm not really friends with Bakugo. I just think making him mad is fun, because he's too scared of Aizawa to do anything about it. I think his head is going to explode if I do it enough. Maybe his head is full of candy, and everyone will be happy that I made him explode because they'll all get a piece."

Eri giggles a little, even though she doesn't really want Bakugo to explode. She just thinks that it would look silly if he exploded like a cartoon and candy went everywhere.

"I know you really like Aizawa," Twenny says, staring at his laptop. "He's never hurt you."

Eri shakes her head as hard as she can. Maybe if Twenny sees that, she'll know that she's really telling the truth. "NEVER ever ever! Not even on accident!"

Twenny nods really slowly, still staring at the screen. His lips are moving around kind of weird,

and his voice sounds weird too, kind of like he's crying. "I'm just really worried about you, Eri. I really want to keep you safe. I'm sorry if that makes you sad, but I don't know anything about Aizawa, or Yamada. I think they'll keep you safe, but if I'm wrong...."

Eri knows that Twenny is really scared about that. He's a good TV mom, because he worries about her a lot, and he tries really hard to keep her safe. He was always trying different things to get them out before they got rescued, and sometimes he didn't tell her what he was doing because it was dangerous. Sometimes he got really hurt from trying.

It would be really sad if Zawa was like Him, and they never really got out. That would scare Eri too, but Eri knows Zawa's not like that at all.

"Zawa saved me, Twenny. When we were getting rescued, he used his quirk on mine 'cause mine was hurting me and Izuku. And then he came to see me a lot when I was in the hospital, and he protected me a lot. Even from the doctors," Eri pulls her knees up so she can feel smaller, and because Twenny always puts his arms around her to hold her better when she does that. "He's like you, Twenny. He's not like Him at all."

Twenny puts his arms around her like she wants him to, and she feels guilty because she forgot that he's hurt, and maybe that hurts him to do it, but he doesn't look like it hurts him. Twenny is still staring at the laptop, because he probably thinks she's wrong still.

She hopes he starts believing her soon. She knows that Twenny is scared, and he gets a different kind of scared when he's scared about Eri. But it would be really nice if Twenny and Zawa were friends.

It would probably be like living in a TV show, if her TV Mom and TV Dad were friends.

The Mondays

Chapter Summary

27 needs to remember his job, to protect Eri now that her quirk is a liability again. He needs to get the tools that he needs to do that. Aizawa has his own worries to ruminate over, but his thoughts are interrupted by a surprising conversation with Shinsou.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Self Destructive Thoughts (Similar to self-harm, but without the "self" creating harm)

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri's horn grew to signify her quirk beginning to build up. Shinsou kept a tupperware container with cookies that were made with Toshinori and All Might, though they have an extremely high caffeine content and made Shinsou sick when he ate them. Shinsou has been unable to eat or drink anything that Eri doesn't hand to him. Recovery Girl offered some advice concerning Shinsou's poor diet and recovery from being force fed at the police station, and her strictest instructions were to not give him coffee. Shinsou also learned that his mother spoke French the night before, and wondered if Yamada knew his mother. Shinsou fought Sero, Iida, Uraraka, and Ojiro on Friday, and won the first three of those matches. Shinsou has been calling Midoriya "Izuku" after assuming that was the correct name to use, since Eri calls him that. Ashido knew Shinsou before Shinsou was sold, though she assumes that he was kidnapped and taken to "Villain school," and has been extremely protective of him on the group chat after learning this.

27 needs coffee.

There are too many people who have access to Eri today, too many that could notice her horn. He should have thought about that last night, should have slept so that he wouldn't have to carry this ache in his joints, this familiar haze at the edges of his mind. He knows that it makes him slower to react, and he can't risk that now.

He planned on eating one of his mocha cookies to compensate. Just one should give him the edge, but not make him as sick as he had been after four. He had waited for almost an hour, crouched next to his bed listening for footsteps, for his owner or Yamada to walk into his room to find him out of place in the worst way. To find this stupid collection he kept adding to, even when he had far greater worries.

When he finally worked up the nerve, he lowered himself under the bed, and moved the blank notebook away from the corner against the wall, revealing the things that were too big to hide in his other caches. The note from Creati, the banana chips, a paper towel from the bathroom he fought Bakugo in, a clump of hair from his haircut - those were things he could hide far better. He tucked them in the pockets of his clothes in the closet, behind and inside his books. They were even more stupid to keep, but at least he could keep them hidden better.

He pulled the tupperware to his chin and opened the lid, but found that his cookies were all flecked with white and green fuzz, already spoiled. He knew what would happen if he ate them, even if he only ate one he would get sick, and he wouldn't be able to protect Eri.

Even though he knew just looking was a risk, that he could always be caught and his stash could be discovered again, he found himself touching each of his possessions, just to remind himself they were there. The goggles he stole from his owner, the shirt Emi gave him, the shirt that Yamada gave him to wear when he cut his hair, the knife he tried to burn himself with, his favorite cat hoodie that had blood crusted over it in places after being injured by Soba.

He knew he should have stopped this years ago, that Hari should have broken him out of this habit, but it just seemed to get *worse*. He knows the things he keeps are worthless, they're trash. He should throw out rotting food, not spend his time carefully arranging it into the darkest corner under his bed. He picks stupid things, he wastes his time on stupid distractions, *and he needs to stop to protect Eri*.

She's still sleeping peacefully when he rises, Mocha held tightly in her arms. He needs to stop thinking about how much he wants to put Mocha under his bed, his owner or Yamada would notice and they'd *burn him again*-

And he shouldn't care if they did. This is *Eri*. He shouldn't find himself wavering on this, but he knows he really doesn't. He's distracted, he keeps thinking odd thoughts, things he doesn't really mean. Eri is the only thing he needs to care about, she's more than his job, she's the only thing that matters to him.

But he keeps thinking of other things because he's distracted.

He needs coffee.

He knows how to get it too.

After Yamada wakes Eri up, he continues to pretend to sleep, just to keep up appearances, decrease suspicion. He doesn't want to be seen as a threat until he needs to be, and he thinks he knows how to take Yamada down if he's planning on using Eri's quirk. He thinks about that while she's gone, while he pretends to sleep until she wakes him up to comb his hair and pick out his clothes.

He stumbles into a wall on his way to brush their teeth together, but that should decrease suspicion too. He tries to reassure Eri that he's not sick by smiling at her more often, but somehow that makes him more aware of how sluggish his body is to react.

When they sit down for breakfast, just the smell of it makes him nauseous. It shouldn't, because Yamada has a way of arranging food so that it looks more appetizing, more colorful. It's an odd habit, but one he kind of likes.

Yamada hands a plate to Eri, and she puts it in front of him. He knows that doesn't make the food any different, it never has, but it's convinced him enough times before. Maybe it's stopped now, because all he can do is stare at the slices of strawberries and bananas that cover the top of his

pancakes, finding more patterns in the arrangement than he thinks there really are.

Even if Yamada didn't notice that, he noticed that 27 didn't sign 'Good morning' to him, and 27 realizes that when he hears Yamada tell him good morning for the second time, his voice strained with worry in the repetition.

27 snaps his head up and signs back to him, folding his hands together afterwards. He had *one job* this morning, one goal from this interaction, and he's probably ruined his chances now. It was going to be a risk regardless, no matter how much Yamada tried to convince him it was safe, he would never be sure. But he also knew that this was worth the risk, that he *needed* it, and he's gotten hurt from getting the things he needed before.

"Yep, you've definitely got the Mondays," Yamada laughed, pointing at 27 with a spatula. "But you're dealing with it a lot better than Shou does. I swear, it's a constant battle to make sure he remembers he has a job on Mondays. He probably wouldn't wake up until Wednesday if I let him."

Eri tilts her head, a bit of whipped cream on her lip from the face that Yamada drew on her pancakes, "Are Mondays bad?"

"For grown ups, they kind of are," Yamada answers, working on placing the vegetables he was steaming into the row of bento boxes on the counter. "Some people think they're the worst day of the week, but that's usually because they stay up too late on the weekends. Shou has always been really bad about that, even when we were in high school, so by his age he should definitely know better."

27 had been taking advantage of Yamada's back being turned to practice the question he wanted to ask. Even if it was risky to ask in the first place, he imagined that missigning could make it even worse. But Yamada had turned around, mouth already open to say something, and caught him.

"Oh, shoot! I'm sorry, Shinsou, I completely - Jeez, I *really* should know better," Yamada stumbled, his previous excitement snapping into nervousness. "I'll try to remember from now on, but if you need to get my attention, you can always tell Eri to yell at me."

' *No. Not-* ' 27 just waved his hands, unable to look at Yamada now, nonetheless try to manipulate him. He was apologizing to 27 for something ridiculous, as though he should make sure his eyes are on him at all times just in case 27 wanted to tell him something. Something he should just be able to *say*.

When he glances up at Yamada, he notices that he's moved the whole lunch set-up onto the opposite counter, just so he can see any movement 27 makes out of the corner of his eye. And Yamada noticed that he looked up, smiling at him like some people do when they're inviting the other person to talk.

Very few people have ever smiled at him like that, though. 27 pushes away the uncomfortable feeling that smile gives him, trying to focus on his mission. ' *How to sign C-O-F-F-E-E.* '

Yamada freezes up a bit, which confuses 27. He picked this phrase specifically because Yamada seems to enjoy showing him signs, and he wanted 27 to ask questions using JSL. He said it was fine for him to ask questions this way, and 27 thought that was proof that this owner and Yamada were more confident in their own power than anyone else who owned him. That they knew he couldn't use his quirk anyway, so asking questions when there was no chance of it activating would be fine.

But he was wrong, he read Yamada completely wrong, he wasn't allowed to do that, he messed up-

“Hey, it’s fine! It’s really fine, Shinsou! You did a great job,” Yamada says, his hand rising up as though 27 was about to do something to him. “I’m just not really awake right now, is all. But here’s the sign for ‘coffee!’”

27 repeats the sign without hesitation, but finds himself still staring at his hands afterwards. He hadn’t seemed like he was tired before 27 asked him, but it wouldn’t make sense if he was angry when he was trying so hard to convince 27 otherwise.

Yamada was so *confusing*, and 27 didn’t have the energy to try to understand him. If this was dangerous, he might as well risk it, because if he didn’t have coffee by the end of this he should at least have some wounds to help him stay awake, something to hurt worse than those half-healed scratches from the cat.

‘ *Can I have coffee?* ’

Yamada doesn’t say anything, and 27 forces himself not to look, so that whatever Yamada does to him will be a surprise. Instead, he glances to his side and freezes when he sees Eri looking back at him, playing with her hands like she does when she wants to sign, but can’t pick one that she knows.

He *forgot* Eri was here. How could he be so stupid? After everything he’s done to protect her, he would risk getting himself hurt right in front of her over a stupid cup of coffee. That was the surest way to make her quirk erupt, he was trying to *prevent* that, not egg it on. It hurts when it builds too quickly and he knows that and he’s just so fucking useless-

“Look, Shinsou, it’s not that I’m... I just,” Yamada sighs, but he doesn’t want to look. He messed up. Maybe if he pretends it doesn’t hurt, Eri won’t be worried about him. “I *really* want to give you some coffee, but Chiyo says you can’t for a while, it might make you- you know?”

He doesn’t know, and he can’t even think of a reason why Yamada seems so frustrated. 27 is pretty sure he’s not going to be punished though, and even as he tries to think of a sign to guide Eri through, his head is getting heavier and he wants nothing more than to lay it on the table and close his eyes.

“Yama, Twenny has some really bad Mondays! You gotta give him coffee so he gets better, like Zawa does when he gets coffee!” Eri whines, putting her hands on the table so she can lean over it, probably because it makes her just the slightest bit more intimidating.

Yamada must be really weak to fall for it, as he makes some kind of strangled whining noise. “I know, I know! Look, maybe if you finish your breakfast, I can give you a little. Chiyo won’t get mad at me for that, right?”

He doesn’t know if she will, and it doesn’t really matter, because what he’s asking for is impossible. His pancakes are *huge*, and he’s not even slightly hungry, he doubts that he could eat more than a few bites.

But he needs this coffee, so he tries.

He *honestly* tries. Every bite tastes like ash, and his stomach rebels against him. He wonders if this is what it would have felt like if he remembered being force-fed, if he didn’t slip out of himself when they started until it ended. If he ever made Eri feel this way when he had to make sure she finished her meals before she went to The Chair.

He has to force himself to swallow before he gives up. He knows he’ll throw up if he eats any

more, and he's only eaten less than half of it. Worse than having no coffee, he feels like he failed, he failed this stupidly easy task and he hates himself all the more for it.

He pushes the plate further up the table so he can lay his head on his arms. He doesn't care what that looks like, any implication or insult that Yamada could take from that. He's tired, he wants coffee, he can't do the simplest task, he can't stop wondering if his mother still thinks about him.

He feels like he's going to *cry* because he can't eat a normal fucking meal anymore.

There's something warm against his elbow, but he doesn't want to look up at it. If it hurts him, maybe he'll feel less useless. He'll remember that he has a job, to protect Eri, and nothing else matters to him, not even himself.

He hears his owner walk in, dragging his feet in long strides like he can't be bothered to lift them. 27 finds that he can't really be bothered to care, not even when he feels him stop behind 27's chair. "Zashi. He can't have-"

"I'm saying he can!" Yamada snaps, and 27 looks up, interested to know how this will play out. He's never seen a right hand like Yamada talk to an owner like that. But when he lifts his head, he sees the coffee mug at his elbow, half full. "Shou, I can only be so strong, and if you think I can really say no to Shinsou when he asks for something as simple as a cup of coffee, you're wrong! Shinsou has the Mondays and he's getting coffee!"

27 glances at his owner out of the corner of his eye, watching as the man just blinked in response. 27 doesn't think he'd stand much of a chance against his owner, because even if they'd both be fighting quirkless, he can tell that the scarf would be a huge issue. He's never fought anything like it.

But if he tried to hurt Yamada right now, 27 would probably risk it.

"Zawa," Eri whines. "You're not gonna be mean to Twenny, right? 'Cause Twenny likes coffee a whole lot, just like you do, and I don't want him to be sad about his Mondays."

27 can hear her lip wobbling as she talks, but he also knows by her tone that she's faking it. It's a little too high pitched, her words come out too evenly. She really shouldn't be doing this regardless, she knows not to draw attention to herself when things like this happen.

But his owner doesn't know she's faking, and he *folds*. "I'm not, Shinsou can have coffee," his owner says, a bit too quick for a man who seemed barely awake just moments before.

27 picks his mug up to take a sip, if just to hide the smile that he can't quite stop. The Numbers at The Miasma that he trained his quirk against told him it's creepy, the way he smiles when he feels like he's won something, and he's definitely won something here.

He doesn't even realize it until he's finished his coffee.

Eri didn't hand it to him, and he was still able to drink it.

*

Aizawa doesn't remember, but he thinks that USJ happened on a Monday.

As they walk across campus to the academic building, he can't help but feel overwhelmed in the same way he had during the battle. He feels like there's too many opponents, too many children that he needs to protect. He wants to cut himself into pieces to be there for all of them but all he can do is push his body to the limit, throw himself into fight after fight while he tries to find the head of the snake to end it.

It's far more overwhelming when his opponents are also the children that he wants to protect.

Shinsou doesn't help at all. The kid is a ball of nerves at the best of times, but right now, he's crouched over Eri to the point that even his arms are hanging around her, and throughout the morning, he's been looking at her like he wants to shove her into his hoodie to keep her close.

Aizawa knows the feeling, but he also knows that won't help. Shinsou knows that far better, but he can't blame the kid for being irrational. Shinsou knows the danger that Eri's horn poses more intimately than Aizawa ever will.

Aizawa knows as soon as his students see Shinsou, they're going to act familiarly with him, *friendly* even. And as soon as they invade his space, invade Eri's as well, Shinsou will probably snap. He will lash out, he will attack in what he believes is Eri's defense, and that will make him do far more harm than the broken bones he knows the kid can inflict when he wants to. He's more than a little concerned that the knife will come into play, and Aizawa will have to worry about something far worse than what Recovery Girl can mend.

That's why he texted Iida to make sure that his students will be dressed in their gym clothes and waiting on the track instead of meeting them in the classroom. He doesn't text Iida often, not just because he hardly needs to, but because he thinks Iida doesn't know how to lie to his peers about how he got his number. It would be easy enough to say that it's a requirement for his position as class president, but Iida gets flustered to the point of freezing up at the threat of his peers discovering that Aizawa has known the kid for years through Tensei.

He also dislikes that Iida doesn't know how to text back with less than 200 words, and this morning's reply is especially lengthy. Aizawa is highly tempted to stop reading after 'In response to your message regarding the preparations for training to take place during homeroom - I have dispersed your instructions to the members of Class 1-A and I am currently supervising their progress in meeting your requirements,' which really could have been boiled down to 'Understood.' But his eyes catch on Shinsou's name, and he forces himself to read the whole thing.

Iida is trying, poorly, to hide the fact that Shinsou expressed some amount of interest in training with them. Iida tries to make it seem like this is an idea that came to him naturally, that it would be beneficial for Shinsou to get more exercise and that martial arts is particularly well suited to that, as it improves self-confidence and overall mental health. He even cites several academic studies as evidence using MLA format.

Aizawa doesn't reply, not just because he hates MLA citations, but because Iida has a point.

And a far better reason to see what Shinsou can do than Aizawa does.

Aizawa has tried to dispel it as ill-advised curiosity, his own inability to sort Shinsou into a mental box labeled 'ward' or 'investigation witness' that causes him to think of Shinsou as a potential student at times. It doesn't help that Shinsou is the same age as his students, that he knows on the surface, Shinsou's training and quirk would make him into an exceptional hero. A student he would truly enjoy taking under his wing.

He also thinks that he should know what Shinsou is capable of, in a way that Naomasa's files can't

tell him. He saw Shinsou fight off the rioters in his cell, he's read the injury reports from police officers who tried to shake him out of a trance and found that their own training was lacking against a half-starved teenager. He's never seen Shinsou fight with his own eyes, and he wonders if that would make it easier to trust him around his students, if he could pin-point every opening and vulnerability he had to take him down if necessary.

But honestly, he's getting a bit frustrated with Shinsou, especially when he sees that everyone else seems to have a way to relate to him. He's at the point that he's comfortable enough with Hizashi to ask him a question through sign, he's been glued to his phone most of the weekend to message his students.

His students probably know more about the teenager that's been living with Aizawa than he does.

He knew it wouldn't be easy, that it's entirely possible that Shinsou was able to make those connections more readily because he had already decided that Aizawa was the greatest threat to him. He should be able to accept it under that theory, but he finds himself rebelling even more.

Aizawa doesn't know a single thing about Shinsou that didn't come from someone else or his case files. And that needs to change quickly.

He needs Shinsou to trust him, for Eri's sake.

He knows more about her quirk than anyone else, and even if that information was painfully gathered, it's vital for them to have. He knew how to trigger it to build, and may also know how to slow it, or predict the moment it would erupt. If there was a way for her to focus or control it that she had never been told, but Chisaki had learned and manipulated.

Shinsou needs to trust him for his own sake.

Naomasa wasn't supposed to know himself, it was a mistake that the file was leaked to him, but now that both of them know, they need to make much greater progress in the investigation.

He won't tell Hizashi about it yet, taking advantage of how Naomasa, like many others, tend to underestimate his husband. It's not because he thinks that Hizashi wouldn't be useful in this, he would probably be Aizawa's best chance of extracting *something* useful from Shinsou about the Nomu Organization.

But he also knows that Hizashi would tear up his own hero license if he knew what The Commission was planning.

Aizawa pushes that thought aside, noticing that Shinsou's steps falter when they pass Class 1-A's homeroom. "We're meeting the students on the track today, for hand-to-hand combat training. I'll decide between grapples or joint-locks when I get there."

He knew that they definitely needed more instruction on restraining holds, and his decision was really based on how energetic they were. Throwing each other around to practice grapples came with a greater risk of injury, but he wanted to make sure his students would be too exhausted to give Shinsou more than a wave while they dragged themselves off to their next class.

He wasn't really expecting Shinsou to weigh in. '*L-O-C-K-S. More useful. Not recognize it.*'

Aizawa knows that Shinsou might not have meant for him to see that, walking behind Eri with Aizawa's back turned to him. He wouldn't have if the kid didn't step closer to a student who was running down the hall, using his body to shield Eri from the perceived threat. But now, he couldn't help but ask. "They didn't know you were going to use a joint-lock on them before you did it?"

Shinsou looks up at him in surprise, confirming that he was sign-muttering to himself, then nods. ‘*Long Spine did. Float once. Float too aggressive. Jerky.*’

Aizawa nods in response, unable to hide his hum of approval. “I assume you’re referring to Ojiro and Uraraka. Ojiro has the most martial arts training out of all of my students, but Uraraka does have a habit of getting a bit too enthusiastic as the match goes on. More experience will help with that.”

He’s wondering if he should change his plan to keep the wards distracted, whether he should encourage Shinsou to weigh in on the training rather than avoid the sight of it, when Shinsou’s voice cuts through his thoughts. “Danger.”

Aizawa turns to look, to find the direction that Shinsou is looking so he can know where his opponent is, a danger familiar enough for Shinsou that he was able to speak in warning.

Instead, he sees Shinsou looking down at Eri, guiding her through the signs that she knows. “Bad. Friend.” He counts himself lucky that Shinsou didn’t notice, too attentive to their JSL lesson.

It’s more than a little odd that Eri never let them know that she knew JSL, given how much he and Hizashi have used it around her. He understands why Eri wouldn’t have asked Hizashi, given that ‘Yama’ is a new development, but Eri has always come to him with questions, with almost everything that she needs.

He’s beginning to think that Shinsou might have picked up on that, deciding that Aizawa was the new Chisaki because of it. Because proximity to Eri clearly makes him a threat in Shinsou’s mind.

But there’s almost a sort of rivalry at times. The way Shinsou glares at nearly everyone who seems close to Eri when she focuses her attention on them has a slightly possessive edge to it. Shinsou wants to keep Eri safe, but there might be a more selfish reason to keep her safe and close to him. That’s something that Aizawa can’t exactly blame Shinsou for, when Eri was the only source of comfort he would accept.

But the rivalry might not be entirely one-sided.

Aizawa has tried to be rational, to tell himself that he can’t connect to Shinsou because Shinsou fears him, because there’s little that they have in common, because Shinsou deliberately keeps him from knowing more about him.

But Shinsou knows more about Eri than Aizawa does, and there’s an irrational part of him that bristles at that. There’s a part of him that wants to know more about what happened at the 8 Precepts in a way that isn’t at all related to doing his job as Eri’s caretaker. A part of him that wants to know his wards history, not to evaluate their relationship or their needs, but just to know. To know more about Eri, the little girl that doesn’t feel like she belongs in a box labeled ‘ward’ in his mind anymore.

Aizawa busies himself with a headcount as they walk outside, trying to gauge whether his students are suffering from not only a Monday morning, but a morning that started far earlier than they expected it to at Iida’s instruction. He’s relieved to find even Kaminari swaying with the effort to stand at attention, Ashido leaning heavily on his shoulder while he does.

Joint locks it is, then.

“Good morning, Aizawa-sensei!” Iida calls, completely unaffected by the change in routine because not only is it hardly different from his usual one, he’s a *morning person* as well.

It's unfortunate that his energy seems to awaken most of Class 1-A, as they blink and look around. Unfortunately, their gaze finds Shinsou and locks onto him with a frightening yet entirely predictable intensity.

Aizawa steps in front of Shinsou on instinct. "After Iida guides you through stretches, run 5 laps and pair off to practice joint-locking your opponent. If I see that any of you have forgotten a lock, I will demonstrate it on you." He pauses to let the threat sink in, waiting a little longer than usual to adjust to their lack of sleep. "Unless I'm needed, I'll be in the stands. Don't need me."

As Aizawa walks away, he angles himself to keep an eye not only on Class 1-A, but on Shinsou as well. Only half of his students are paying attention to Iida's instructions, and more than half of them aren't pleased to deal with an enthusiastic morning person at this hour. The other half are still watching Shinsou like a cat who's found prey, but luckily Shinsou hasn't given them any interest in return. In fact, he seems to be avoiding their gaze, the tension in his shoulders and eyes focused on the ground gives the reason for it away.

Shinsou regrets talking to them.

Aizawa is familiar with that feeling. He's walked the halls of this very school with his shoulders raised to his ears, his eyes avoiding the expectant stares of his 'new friends.' Friends that were easier to make over the course of the week, trading little comments and interactions until a quiet weekend alone seemed to make him forget how to be comfortable with that.

But Mondays seemed to make everyone around him too energetic, too expectant. They crowded around him and told him they missed him, that they never hang out, that they should get together to do whatever they did over the weekend this coming one. Hands clapping his shoulders in a way he could tolerate on Friday, but never on a Monday.

It was a testament to Shirakumo's innate empathy that he never did that. He'd smile, wave at most, and try to distract Hizashi and the others, sometimes leaning completely over Aizawa to do it, which only gave him another excuse to lay his head on the desk and take a quick nap despite the cacophony above him. Even Hizashi never understood it, far too distracted by every single thing he had wanted to tell Aizawa over the course of the weekend. It was a report that he learned would be shorter and quieter if he simply gave in and met with Hizashi on the weekend, even if he just silently watched him record his podcast.

Shirakumo would probably be able to understand Shinsou at a glance, if he was alive. Just one look and he'd know exactly what Shinsou needed, what he wanted, and he would be able to give those things to him with that easy, utterly disarming grin.

But Shirakumo isn't alive, and Aizawa still fumbles to know what people want from him at times. He's just learned how to hide it better, no longer the awkward teenager who was still in the process of giving up on most people's expectations of him.

But he thinks that Shinsou wants some kind of distraction, one that he isn't seeking from his phone as though he's still under the assumption that he shouldn't use it during school hours, or Eri, who's happily drawing a picture of one or several of the members of Class 1-A. At this point, it's only blue and red scribbles, but she tends to put colors down before she defines them with black crayon.

"Did you notice anything else when you sparred with my students?" Aizawa asks, watching his class begin their laps with just the slightest regret that he assigned 5 of them. If picking apart his students' shortcomings was the bonding activity that worked, he was more than happy to do it with Shinsou. Toshinori always tried to argue in his students' defense, which irritated Aizawa to the point of avoiding that conversation.

Shinsou keeps his eyes trained on Eri as he approaches the railing Aizawa is leaning against, and probably dislikes the distance that's necessary in order to sign to him. But it's a good indication that he's interested enough to do it. *' Scared Tape not serious. Bad S-T-R-A-T-E-G-I-E-S. If he has one. O-V-E-R-E-X-T-E-N-D-S. '*

Aizawa hums. "This is 'strategy.' I don't remember if there is a sign for 'overextend,' you might want to ask Hizashi." His eyes find Sero, who was trying to improve his running form, but his concentration is broken by the conversation he's having with Todoroki. "He hasn't practiced much with using his quirk for mobility. I think he was planning to rely on it for crowd control and restraining villains. There's a balance between pulling enough tension from something like his quirk, and leaving yourself vulnerable. He hasn't found it yet."

Aizawa's fingers play with the ends of his capture scarf idly, wondering if he should take Sero aside to see if some private instruction would help or if his student would be too terrified to take it seriously. He can't help but smile a bit when he notices Shinsou's eyes linger on his scarf a bit longer than they would if he were simply tracking the movement of his hand.

"The capture scarf works similarly. It was designed to simply restrain, but over the years, I've learned to manipulate it for offense, defense, and mobility. Though it was a long process to master it," Aizawa can almost feel the spiral-shaped bruises that he earned before he learned not to untangle himself by manipulating the scarf again. That happened a lot before he started asking Shirakumo or Hizashi to watch him train with it, so that they could pull him out of any messes he caused. "It responds to the unique signals that most emitter quirks have. It was also a long process to learn how to manipulate those signals, but not my quirk."

Shinsou's eyes widen like they did when Sansa showed him his toebeans, and Aizawa nearly moves to take his scarf off just to chase after that moment, that sudden and intense interest that Shinsou couldn't hide. But Shinsou turns to look at the students, eyes narrowing not quite in a glare, lip pulled between his teeth.

Shinsou must have forgotten that he hated his quirk for that brief moment, too curious to know if he could use the capture scarf or not.

Too curious to know if he could use another weapon , Aizawa thinks bitterly. The knife was one thing, he was very experienced at disarming someone wielding a knife. He also felt like the kid would probably feel safer if he had some way to defend himself in an environment full of powerful quirk users. As much as he wanted to trust Shinsou, handing him the capture scarf wouldn't be a good idea. He's never fought his own scarf before, and he doesn't want to anytime soon.

Iida finishes the laps first, unsurprisingly, and volunteers that he, Midoriya, and Uraraka take the 3-man match up. How selfless of him. "Your match with Iida must have ended quickly. Ojiro almost forgot about it when he told me," Aizawa says, more than a little impressed that Shinsou was able to take Iida down in the first place. Iida was a wall of meat while Shinsou was a twig underneath his oversized hoodies. It's a wonder that Iida didn't break Shinsou in half.

' President Exhausting predictable. Power in leg. Attack with leg. ' There's a sadistic little smirk that flashes over Shinsou's face while he looks at Iida. *' Stop leg. He stalls. '*

Iida must be one of his favorites, then. Aizawa wonders how many car-related JSL signs Shinsou learned just to make a joke like that. "The Iida family has had the same quirk for three generations. They should have adjusted their training by now, but obviously, they haven't. Tensei should have prepared him, but sometimes I wonder if he knew I was going to be Tenya's teacher, and intentionally didn't."

Shinsou cocks his head at that, and Aizawa can almost hear the gears turning in his head, a question that he's trying to answer for himself or word in a way that it doesn't come across as a question at all. *'Names odd. T-E-N-Y-A. I-I-D-A. I don't know the difference.'*

Aizawa holds up a hand to Shinsou out of a habit grown from having to interrupt Toshinori in situations like these. "Aoyama and Ashido, Bakugo and Kirishima. If you keep squabbling like 4 year olds, I will make you wear the hats."

Aoyama turns his nose up at the thought, but Ashido knows that his threat isn't an empty one, and throws her arms around Aoyama to haul him to another sparring space before he could think of wheedling Bakugo further into being his partner. Bakugo shoots Aizawa a pointed glare, but Kirishima pulls him into a shoulder-hug, saying something that makes Bakugo sneer, then soften into a haughty cackle.

Aizawa sighs, scratching the back of his neck. "Sorry, but that was going to turn ugly if I let it. You're..." Aizawa trails off, struggling to find a way to word what he assumes Shinsou meant in a way that isn't accusatory. "Unfamiliar with family names."

Shinsou nods, turning to look at Eri for a while after he does. Aizawa can't tell whether it's discomfort or embarrassment that causes him to turn away, but he waits until Shinsou turns back to the students to continue. He needs to be able to read Shinsou while he explains this, to make sure he doesn't come off as demeaning.

"'Iida' is a family name, and both Tensei and Tenya share it, as they're brothers. It would be confusing to refer to both of them as Iida, which is why I use their given names when I have to, though I'm not familiar enough with Tenya to be comfortable doing it otherwise," Aizawa explains, noticing that Shinsou's head tilts again at 'comfortable.' "Using someone's given name implies a level of familiarity or closeness. Only family or very close friends do so. You might have noticed that Hizashi and I call each other different names when we're at home or at school, and you might have noticed that I just called him Hizashi again," Aizawa folds his hands in front of him, running a thumb over his ring finger. "I tend to forget over the weekend. Some of the students would find our relationship distracting to their studies, and neither of us would appreciate the attention."

He made that mistake with his first class. 15 year olds lack any emotional maturity or self-awareness, and he learned that in the worst way. He knows Hizashi still has some of the drawings from the girl he expelled for sexual harassment.

Aizawa should be paying more attention to his class than he is to Shinsou, to enforce his previous threat if they didn't run through all the joint-locks that they knew. But he's mostly trying to figure out why Shinsou seems even more uncomfortable than he was under Class 1-A's stare.

That's probably why Eri was able to sneak up on him. "Twenny, Zawa!" Eri sing-songs, holding up her completed work of art. "I drew the heroes in their work-out clothes!"

"You did a-" Both Aizawa and Shinsou say, in unison, before Shinsou stops himself. "Good job."

Eri beams at that, probably finding some amusement in their combined praise. "Do you think they'll like it?"

"They will," Aizawa promises, knowing that if Eri offers to give the picture to them, a fight will probably break out over who gets to keep it before one of his more level headed students suggests that it be displayed in the common area of the dorm. Even though the pictures in the common area still seem to go missing after a few days.

“They better,” Shinsou threatens instead, and though he probably means it, he smiles at Eri to play it off as a joke.

Aizawa is more than a little pleased that Eri decides to give her picture to the hero students, as it plays out exactly as he expected it to and distracts his students from Shinsou in the most effective way possible.

He’s too busy trying to keep a straight face as Bakugo argues that he only wants the picture ‘So none of you shit heads can moon over it all damn day,’ and forgets to do another headcount. If he did, he would have noticed that Ashido had snuck behind him at some point.

He’s made aware of it when he hears her yelp, and turns to find the aftermath of Ashido’s infamous stealth-hugs targeted at Shinsou.

Ashido looks shocked, rather than in pain, with Shinsou holding each of her elbows in each hand, thumb pressing her forearms up and fingers tucked into the bend. There’s several ways to cause a considerable amount of pain in that hold, and he’s almost certain that Shinsou knows all of them.

But Shinsou seems shocked himself, though it flashes to panic and fear.

Aizawa isn’t sure how to diffuse the situation appropriately, now that his entire class has noticed, so he tries to turn it into a lecture. “Shinsou is demonstrating an elbow lock. In what situations would you choose that rather than a wrist or shoulder lock?”

Shinsou’s grip wavers before he’s able to release Ashido, and his hands move away stiffly but don’t quite rest at his sides. Ashido pulls her arms behind her back, shifting her weight between her feet nervously.

Aizawa doesn’t know what she’s working up the courage to say, but he’d rather she not try it. He focuses on staring down his class to force one of them into answering, though he sees a lot of disappointingly blank faces.

Unsurprisingly, Ojiro is the one who knows the answer. “An elbow lock is a bit more challenging to do successfully, but it’s more effective against an opponent that has a weapon, or a quirk that originates from their hands.”

And that was not the answer that Aizawa nor Ashido wanted to hear.

Aizawa sees her flinch out of the corner of his eye, having turned to focus his attention on his class after Shinsou seemed to stand down. He doubts that’s why Shinsou chose that hold, but Ashido could be uncharacteristically sensitive about her quirk at times. This was clearly one of them.

“It’s also effective for controlling your opponent’s torso if you keep the arms in an appropriate position for it, which can allow you to move your opponent more easily. And because it’s difficult to execute, it’s also more difficult to break,” Aizawa lectures, fully aware that Ashido probably doesn’t hear a word he says. “Everyone except Ashido is dismissed. You have 15 minutes before English.”

Aizawa considers dismissing his wards as well so that he can have this conversation with Ashido privately, but he sees a few too many students looking at Shinsou with suspicion or concern to risk it. Instead, he takes Ashido by the arm to guide her far enough away that Shinsou hopefully won’t overhear.

Ashido won’t meet his eyes when he stops and turns to face her.

“I understand that you have a unique history with Shinsou,” Aizawa says, struggling to decide whether Ashido needs firmness in his tone to remember this lesson, or comfort to keep from crying. “But that doesn’t excuse you from my instructions to not interact with him. I’m fully aware that you and your peers have ignored that, and I’ve allowed it to a degree, but I’m strictly forbidding touching Shinsou in any manner.”

Ashido’s hand rises to pull at the ends of her hair, glancing at Shinsou guiltily. “I probably scared him, didn’t I? I guess it’s kind of weird, to think we were still kinda friends, or we could be friends again-”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Aizawa interrupts. He knows that Ashido translates physical affection into friendship in a way similar to but a bit more intense than Hizashi does. “Shinsou was probably startled, and if he was afraid, it wasn’t related to you. It’s logical to assume that he’s unfamiliar with a hug, or any other physical contact that wasn’t painful to him.”

He doesn’t entirely mean to tell her that, but he sees it click into place when her eyes widen. “That Chisaki guy... and the villain school....”

As much as he dislikes the implication that ‘villain school’ puts on Shinsou, he knows he can’t correct her. “He can react far more violently than he did. Now that you know that, take care that it doesn’t happen again, from any student in Class 1-A.”

Ashido nods, holding her hands together to either restrain herself, or out of a still-lingering worry that Shinsou’s hold was deliberate. That he chose it out of fear that she would have a quirk-slip and burn him.

She only relaxes her grip when they return to the wards, trying to smile brightly at them though it’s pinched at the edges. “Hey, I’m sorry! I’m just super clingy sometimes, ya know?”

Shinsou still doesn’t look at her, but Eri steps in front of him, arms slightly away from her waist in an almost protective manner. “It’s okay, Ashi! Shinsou said that he’s sorry, and he hopes you’re okay! He’d tell you with his phone, but he forgot it.”

Shinsou flinches, his right hand becoming a fist so tight that his knuckles whiten. Aizawa starts to regret not offering the capture scarf to him, even if he might have refused it.

Without the phone, Shinsou would be completely defenseless today.

I Don't Have Plans

Chapter Summary

Yamada has the opportunity to put his plans into motion. Eri gets to brag about a skill that's been kept hidden so far. Aizawa is trapped into an unavoidable conversation with Midnight. The Smart Kids of Class 1-A get two unexpected visitors at lunch. A confrontation with the Big Three ends in a way that Aizawa does not expect. And Yamada's heart is shattered during his new-favorite free period.

This chapter is dedicated to randomness, who has been suffering through Finals, but **ONLY ONE MORE DAY!** You can do it!

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou told Yamada that he liked 'Deniere Danse' from Open Mic Night on Get Your Hands Up! radio in an attempt to find out why he only knew some of the words, and Yamada explained that French was another language spoken in France. Principal Nezu is aware of Shinsou breaking into the air duct at the Class 1-A dorm to rescue Soba, Todoroki's cat, and vaguely threatened to meet with Aizawa concerning that incident. Shinsou has been avoiding using his right hand since coming to UA, after it was unmade by Chisaki and not made right, and visibly shakes when he tries to perform some complex tasks with it. Shinsou has been thinking more about his mother after learning that she knew French from Yamada. Toshinori organized a light sparring session with Class 1-A and Shinsou on Friday, which turned disastrous after Ojiro pulled Shinsou's hair and made him dissociate badly. Shinsou is aware that Mirio has lost his quirk, and Eri wants to use hers to return it.

Yamada is more than a little surprised that his husband and the wards beat Class 1-A to his classroom, strolling in as his homeroom filters out the door. But he also knows the reason for it. “Eraserhead, did you really put the herolets through Monday morning combat training?! On a *Monday morning!* ”

He doesn't like how Shouta follows Shinsou with his eyes while he scratches his neck guiltily. “Is that exam ready?”

Yamada knows that Shouta's best laid plans must have burn to ash in front of him to ask for that, given how obstinately opposed he had been last night.

“Still planning on doing combat drills first thing in the morning? On a Monday morning no less?” Yamada asked, watching Shouta pour over Shinsou’s statement about Chisaki at two in the morning, probably hoping to find something about Eri’s quirk that he missed the first five times he read it.

“Yes,” Shouta growls, though he’s leaning so heavily on his elbow propped on the desk that a long enough blink will probably put him to sleep. “Shinsou messaged them, so they’re going to come to class with the expectation that he’s their new best friend. And I do not want to have to deal with that on a Monday morning.”

“Lucky for you that I already had something planned. We can just swing by the staff room to pick it up, and you can spend your morning glaring at your little herolets whenever it looks like they’ll bother Shinsou, because he’ll be busy taking his General Studies exam.”

Shouta raises his eyebrows at him. “Zashi, you can’t be serious. It’s surprising that the kid can read, but do you really think this Nomu Organization taught him anything else? Enough for General Studies?”

“That’s the thing, we don’t know what he knows! And we owe it to him to find out! Trust me, the kid loves learning new things, he just has this look in his eye - and honestly, Shou, can we really call ourselves teachers if we have a 16 year old living under our roof that doesn’t even know that other countries exist?”

That had been the straw that broke the camel’s back for Yamada. The kid was so confused about French being another language, and his head tilted when he said the word ‘France’ like that too was a completely alien concept to him. There was a very real possibility that they had a teenager who had lived in the darkest recesses of the criminal underworld for so long that everything normal was new to him.

If nothing else, this was something that he could do for Shinsou. He could teach him what he had missed out on, he could fill in the gaps where school hadn’t been an option for him. Shinsou had missed out on his entire required education, and even if he remembered every lesson from his first year of school, that wasn’t even approaching enough for a boy who would become an adult in just a few short years.

“Actually, I’ve got a better one!” Yamada answers, pulling out the thick manilla envelope from the top drawer of his desk. “I talked to Principal Nezu, and he whipped this up in no-time flat! Actually, he might have already planned this, I didn’t ask- Oh, and he definitely wants to talk to you about some air duct adventures when you get the chance! So, uh, maybe you should stay busy for a while.”

Shouta sighs, glancing back at the wards to make sure that Shinsou is busy helping Eri with her science workbook. “I’ll have an excuse today. Naomasa wanted to meet with me after school.”

Yamada can’t help but look at Shinsou as well, even as he knows that carries the risk of Shinsou becoming suspicious of their conversation. “Is there something going on that I should know about?”

Shouta looks to the side, confirming his suspicions, but he knows he can’t pry right now. He just hopes that Shouta reminds Naomasa who Shinsou’s appointed hero is, since the detective seems to have forgotten to keep him in the loop. “I don’t know myself, but I will. Make sure to yell at Class 1-A if they try to distract him.” ‘ *He forgot his phone. Seems scared to tell us.* ’

Yamada nods, throwing a thumbs up with one hand while he adjusts the volume on his speakers

with the other. Shouta finally breaks into a smile at the prospect of Class 1-A receiving some psychological conditioning to keep them from talking to Shinsou.

Shinsou seems a bit more jumpy than usual as Yamada approaches, but Yamada tries to reassure him with a grin, struggling to keep his own excitement to a minimum. “So, I’ve got a super fun project for us to start on today!”

Shinsou eyes the envelope warily, even as Yamada pulls the thick stack of papers from it. Eri’s eyes brighten at the prospect of grading more papers, and he feels a little bad for having to disappoint her.

“So, I know we’re making a lot of progress on English and JSL, and I’m still just *so thrilled* that you’re enjoying those lessons! It’s such a nice break from these knuckleheads I’m stuck with most of the day,” Yamada intentionally rambles, placing the first section of the exam on Shinsou’s desk so he can dig out the other tools for it. “But, I think we should see where you are in other subjects! It’s not really fair that Eri gets to study math and science while you’re stuck with languages, ya know?”

Shinsou’s eyes are still locked on the exam like it’s going to bite him, and Yamada hopes this wasn’t a bad idea. That maybe he’s more concerned with having to circle his answers than being unable to answer most of them. He knows that Shinsou should know how to add and subtract, since Eri was working on multiplication when she came to live with them.

“So, we’ve got this nifty little pen here that you can use to circle your answers! You just put it over the answer and click the top,” Yamada says, demonstrating on the top corner of the page. “And presto! All circled and everything!”

Shinsou takes the pen when he offers it, staring at it with wide and curious eyes before his mouth pulls into a frown. He was just a little too observant for his own good.

“A couple of students use that when they have to take really long tests, since circling all those answers can give you a pretty sore hand,” Yamada lies, shaking his hand for effect.

It was a pen that was designed for students who had trouble with using pencils for a variety of reasons, either their hands were too big due to their quirk or they had muscle or nerve issues. Which was something that Shinsou might also struggle with, but Shouta insisted that they shouldn’t bring up.

“And if you see anything that you kind of know, but don’t know how to answer, you can use this pink highlighter so we can go over it later. And this yellow one is for something that’s totally new for you. And don’t worry, I’m expecting to see a lot of yellow when you get to the end of this exam, since it goes all the way to Calculus! And all I know about Calculus is how to spell it!”

Shinsou still didn’t seem to be reassured by that, going stock-still at the thought of not being able to answer something. That was what Yamada was afraid of.

Shinsou had been so terrified of not remembering how to spell ‘job’ that he dissociated on Friday. It was something that Yamada wanted to chalk up to being put on the spot, as some of the most confident hero students tended to get a little stage fright in front of the chalkboard. He thought that Shinsou being able to do the exam on his own time might take enough pressure off of him, or that maybe he had gotten a little more comfortable with Yamada now that he could sign ‘I don’t know.’

It might be something deeper, but Yamada doesn’t have a clue what it is. He knows that it’s not the right time to find out, but before he can take back the exam, Eri pipes up.

“Yama, can I please grade Twenny’s test?” Shinsou turns to Eri, who has her hands pressed together in pleading. “I promise I’ll pick the BEST stickers! I don’t like using the cat stickers ‘cause I wanna keep them, but I promise I’ll use the cat stickers for Twenny’s test! I’ll use all of them!”

Shinsou’s expression finally breaks into a smile, and now Yamada *really* can’t refuse her. “Of course! In fact, we’re probably going to have to go shopping for some more cute cat stickers! I want to see a cat sticker on every single question! Do you think you’re up for the task, little bean?”

Eri gives him an enthusiastic salute, which he returns without hesitation.

“ ‘ *God speed and God bless!* ’ ” Yamada answers, pleased to see Shinsou picking up the pen to start answering the questions on his exam.

Relief finally sets in when he counts three clicks before he makes it back to the front of the room.

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Twenny should get coffee a lot more often.

Twenny still seemed kind of scared sometimes, but he was trying to be good friends with Zawa and Yama, just like Eri told him to. That made Eri really happy, especially when Zawa and Twenny talked at the same time. The heroes made fun of each other when that happened, and said weird things about why it did. If Izuku and Toshinori talk at the same time, the heroes laugh because Toshinori is Izuku’s dad. If it’s just the heroes, they either say they’re ‘jinxed’ or that they must be really close. Ashi says that in a really weird way, and it sometimes makes the other heroes mad when she does it.

Eri doesn’t spend a lot of time with Ashi, because Ashi is kind of loud sometimes, but Eri is definitely going to spend a lot more time with her now since she’s Twenny’s friend. Twenny doesn’t really know how to make friends, because he didn’t know how to hug Ashi back, but Eri can show him how if she hugs Ashi for him. Just like it’s Eri’s job to talk for Twenny sometimes, it’s going to be her job to hug people for Twenny until he knows how.

And it’s also her job to make sure that Twenny does his tests, even though he doesn’t want to. He was giving the papers a really weird look, kind of like how the heroes look at their homework when they don’t want to do it, but if Yama wants Twenny to do his tests, he’s really got to do it. Yama was right about it not being fair that Twenny teaches Eri everything, because Twenny should get taught different things too.

Eri knows that Twenny will be a really good student for Yama, and he wants to have a lot more good students in his class. Especially because Kaminari wasn’t being a good student, and it seemed like he was being a really bad one today.

“KA-MIN-A-RI,” Yama yells, stopping at different parts of Kaminari’s name like he does when he’s really mad. “I see a beacon of light under your desk, and I don’t think it’s to catch any moths!”

Kaminari tries to smile, but it kind of looks like when Eri tries to smile and it doesn’t work. Eri doesn’t think that will work for Kaminari either.

“Since possessive conjugations are just *so beneath you* today, let’s try running through the alphabet! A!” Yama says, pointing at Kaminari so he knows to stand up.

Kaminari stands up, but he starts counting with his fingers while he starts saying the alphabet. “B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N.” Kaminari starts to sound kind of embarrassed when the other

heroes start laughing, but Eri knows they wouldn't laugh at him, because that's mean. "Q-"

"O!" Eri says. She's trying to be helpful, and stop the heroes from laughing and making Kaminari feel bad, but she doesn't do it right. Kaminari's head moves down like he's trying to look at his shoes, and all the heroes start laughing even louder.

But Yama smiles at her really big, like she was helpful. "Eri! I didn't know you knew English!"

Eri nods, and she's happy that she made Yama happy, but also because the heroes stopped laughing at Kaminari and started looking at her. "Twe- um, Shinsou taught me! He taught me the alphabet, and how to say some stuff!"

Twenny looks at her kind of scared, because maybe he's worried that Zawa would get mad at Eri for almost calling him Twenny. Zawa told her to try not to do that at school, and she tries not to, but she knows he won't get really mad like Him if she doesn't say stuff right. But not even Yama is mad about that, he's just really happy that Eri knows English. "Let's hear it! Take the stage, little, uh, listener!"

Zawa must have told Yama not to call her 'little bean' at school too, because it kind of sounded like he was going to. Eri stands up on her chair, even though she's not really supposed to, but the heroes wouldn't be able to see her if she stood up by her desk. "A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, and Z!"

Yama starts clapping, and some of the heroes do too. Some of the other heroes are still picking on Kaminari, but she tries to give them a mean face to stop them. Yama also gives them a mean look, and that stops them, but he's back to smiling when he looks at Eri. "Can you say 'Hello' or 'Goodbye'?"

Eri remembers how to say 'Hello', but Twenny didn't teach her what 'Goodbye' means. "Twenny didn't teach me a whole lot, 'cause-"

"I didn't," Twenny says, even though he doesn't look at her because he's too busy scratching the back of his neck. "I didn't teach you how to say it right."

Twenny sounds like he's kind of embarrassed about that, but Yama tells his class all the time that even if they don't know how to say something hard, they should always try. Eri pats his head to make him feel better.

"It's okay, Twenny! We're in English class, so we can learn how to say it right from now on!" Twenny still looks like he doesn't want her to say the words he taught her, but Yama looks like he really does. " 'Hello! My name is Eri! I'm a good girl!' "

A lot of heroes make 'Aww' sounds, and Yama covers his mouth like he does sometimes when he doesn't want to make a weird noise or laugh. But Eri knows he's not trying to laugh at her, he's probably just embarrassed to make that weird sound that he does when she does something cute.

" 'Are you from America? Can you take me with you?' " Eri wants to say everything she knows, so she can make sure she says them right, but Twenny pulls on her dress like he wants her attention, and makes the 'Danger' sign at her. It doesn't really make sense that he does it, but maybe he's worried that she's going to fall off her chair, so she jumps down and sits in it right.

Ocha stands up with her hand raised, but she doesn't wait for Yama to call on her. "Present Mic-sensei! We need to have a field trip to America!"

"My family's company will be able to offer a sponsorship-" Momo says, but a lot of heroes start

talking over her while they try to convince Yama to let them go to America.

“HOLD ON!” Yama says, yelling really loud so the heroes stop yelling at him. When they do, he puts his hand on his chin in a Thinking Yama pose. “I can have a budget worked up just in time for the semi-quarter staff meeting, and if I work it around to say that you guys need more interaction with native speakers, maybe find a few exchange programs with the American hero schools-”

“ ‘ *Florida!* ’ ” Kaminari shouts, throwing his fists in the air. “ ‘ *Disneyworld!* ’ ”

Yama’s eyes go really big, and then he smiles super big too. “ ‘ *YES!* ’ Kaminari, you’re a ‘ *GENIUS!* ’ ”

The heroes get super excited, and all of them start yelling about how much they want to go to ‘ *Disneyworld.* ’ Even Twenny seems like he’s not scared anymore, since he starts working on his test again, and he’s even smiling.

“Aw man, thanks Shinsou!” Kirishima says, turning around to look at Twenny. “We’ve been trying to get Mic-sensei to take us to ‘ *Disneyworld* ’ all year, and thanks to you and Eri, he really can’t say no!”

“What’s ‘ *Disneyworld* ? ’ ” Eri asks. It must be a really fun place if all the heroes are excited about it.

“It’s the happiest place on Earth!” Hagakure says, bouncing up and down like she does when she’s excited. “There’s roller coasters and fun rides and American food and cute cartoon animals! Mickey Mouse is there too! If you go to America, you’ve GOT to go to ‘ *Disneyworld!* ’ ”

Eri looks at Twenny, and pulls on his sleeve because he looks like he’s really busy with his test. “I’m glad your plan didn’t work, Twenny! Now we both get to go to ‘ *Disneyworld,* ’ instead of just me!”

Twenny looks at her really scared, like she really messed something up, but she doesn’t know what he’s scared of. Nothing bad happens at school, but Twenny thinks that a lot of bad things happen here, even though she’s tried to tell him they won’t.

“What plan?” Hagakure asks, and she stops bouncing. Eri doesn’t know why she isn’t excited anymore, but maybe she’s just confused because she doesn’t know about the plans that Twenny made when they were in the room. Maybe Twenny hadn’t told the heroes about them yet, because he was embarrassed that a lot of them didn’t work.

“Twenny made a lot of ‘get out’ plans for us! He taught me how to say stuff in English so if I got out but he got lost, then I could go to America and be safe! ‘Cause we thought He couldn’t go to America, but then we found out He could, so Twenny made other plans,” Eri starts squeezing her hands like Yama taught her, just in case she started thinking about Him and it made her dizzy. “Twenny even told me to talk to heroes if I got outside, and that’s how I met Izuku and Mirio! And that’s why we both got out, instead of just me!”

Eri looks up, because the heroes aren’t yelling anymore. A lot of them are staring at her like she said something weird again. Even Yama is kind of staring at her like that, and she really doesn’t like it.

“Y-You didn’t think Togata-sempai was American?” Izuku says, trying to smile at her but he always gets kind of nervous when he talks in class. “C-cause, I mean, he looks kind of like- with the blonde hair and everything-”

“I resemble that remark!” Yama says, like he’s play-mad. “It seems like you guys need a crash-course on what Americans look like before we head off to ‘*Disneyworld!*’ Let’s start by naming American actors, you guys call out a name, and I’ll put them up on the screen!”

Yama starts setting up the projector while a lot of the heroes start yelling names. After Yama finishes getting set up, he puts pictures of people up on the screen and picks a hero to tell him what they look like in English.

Eri doesn’t think that’s what they were supposed to do in class today, but she’s kind of happy that Yama does it.

But Twenny still looks really scared, even after the heroes stop looking at him.

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What Shinsou didn’t know about coffee, was that it often caused a crash.

The kid put up a good fight. Aizawa noticed that he was dragging his feet when he walked into the staff room, that he was slouched over his exam so heavily that sleep would take him in just a matter of time. The teen kept glancing over at him, as though the movement could put off the inevitable, but in the end, his head fell against his arm on the desk and his breathing evened out.

Aizawa didn’t protest when Eri started glancing between the sleeping bag and Shinsou. He gave her permission to use it. She had to stand on her tip-toes to reach, but the sleeping bag was now tucked over Shinsou’s shoulders, and no longer an option for him to use.

The ache in Aizawa’s limbs might be put off for a few more hours if he indulged in a second cup, so he started brewing the sub-par coffee that Nezu kept ordering for the staff room. He probably did it out of spite, a lingering resentment to the humans that he couldn’t torment as well as the students, but UA certainly had the budget for something better.

Eri shifted her weight between her feet, the only indication of nervousness he needed to focus his attention on her. “Is something wrong?”

Eri tilted her head at him. “Twenny’s acting really scared today. Is it ‘cause he has the Mondays?”

Aizawa couldn’t help the smile pulling at his lips, a bit relieved that she seemed to think that ‘Mondays’ were some kind of illness, but not one that she considered dangerous. “I think that Shinsou had a rough morning. School can be overwhelming at times, but Class 1-A might be making it worse. They want to connect with Shinsou in ways he’s not ready for yet.”

Eri looks over at Shinsou, nodding. “He’ll feel better after a nap, though. He was kinda grumpy at Monoma, ‘cause Monoma really wanted to look at his test. Kendo had to chop him a couple times before he stopped.”

Aizawa hums, recalling Hizashi’s suspicions about that particular member of Class B’s interest in Shinsou. If Monoma wasn’t careful, his little crush might end up earning him far greater injuries than Kendo seemed to cause on a daily basis. “I wonder if Kan will let me move her into Class A. They could certainly use her firm hand.”

Of course, Kan had been vehemently opposed to the idea. “*You had a reason to pass them over*

before, and you should have realized that having an uneven number would cause problems during training. Find a kid from GenEd instead of stealing one of mine! ”

At the beginning of the year, he didn't think having 19 students would be an issue. It wasn't unusual for him to expel or transfer half of the group that he started out with. His current class was the first to make it this far without a single change in the roster, and by this point, he had given up on waiting for one of them to fail. Even Hagakure was becoming more confident in being placed in the hero course, much to Powerloader's disappointment.

Eri started eying the couch against the wall, her eyelids starting to look heavier. She had been a bit more lethargic the past few days, and Aizawa had no doubt that her quirk building up might have affected that. Just like with Shinsou's quirk, he was surprised that she hadn't had any issues with it until now based on how often Chisaki had forced her to use it.

When he saw the small yawn and the glance in his direction, he gave up all hope for that second cup, and accepted the aching hips that would no doubt linger the rest of the day. Just like the coffee machine, he was sure Nezu selected a couch that wasn't well-padded in the middle, meaning that the cross beam from the frame dug into the spine of whoever was naive enough to try to sleep on it.

That might have been an attack on Aizawa, but the animal principal would never let him know.

At this point, he didn't need to ask if Eri wanted to take a nap. He knew as soon as he laid down, she would make herself comfortable, curled up on his shoulder and clinging to his side. With the narrowness of the couch, that wasn't exactly feasible, but she made it work out for her. She dug her sharp little knees into his stomach and pulled herself on top of him with a hand fisted in his shirt, and despite nearly knocking the wind out of him, she felt nearly weightless on his chest.

Eri sighed as though this was the most comfortable position in the world, right as he felt the sharp edge of that wooden beam on his lower back. He tucked an arm around her back, just in case she happened to roll off of him, and accepted his fate. He didn't have a patrol tonight, wouldn't have one tomorrow. His body shouldn't get used to this odd reprieve from injury.

Being beaten up by a sleepy 5 year old certainly wasn't the worst thing that could happen to him.

That would probably be waking up to Midnight's shit eating grin.

“Hm, daycare workers aren't supposed to nap during naptime. And you're out of uniform too,” Nemuri teased, earning a glare that she had built up an immunity to years ago.

Aizawa brushed his hair away from his face, finding the ends of it still trapped in Eri's hold. He couldn't feel his legs at this point, but he had a slightly greater concern. “Where's Shinsou?”

“Napping all by his lonesome,” Nemuri pouted playfully, before it cut into an accusatory smirk. “But I'm glad he has rights to the sleeping bag.”

Satisfied, Aizawa looked down at his current situation. There didn't seem to be a way to adjust his position without waking Eri up. He would have to accept that he wouldn't have the use of his legs until she did, even if that meant that there was no escape for him.

“There was this odd memo in my inbox this morning,” Nemuri said, pressing a finger to her chin. “I think someone stole your identity, and now they're trying to-“

“I have wards,” Aizawa interrupted, watching Eri's foot kick the cushion in hopes that the other would follow suit. “I don't have time for whatever you're plotting to do to me tomorrow, and they

don't need the added stress."

Her smile, at first irritatingly amused, became sinister as she met his eyes. "Aizawa. *Modeling* behavior means that you have to teach them how to celebrate a birthday." *Damn her.* "Don't worry, I've already made the adjustments. We'll have party streamers and hats, and the cake won't even have a stripper inside. All you have to do is smile and be a happy little birthday boy."

He sighed, his head falling back on the arm rest as Eri decided that her foot was more comfortable on his thigh than at his side. "Shinsou does *not* need this right now. With Eri's quirk and..." He stopped, watching Eri whine and pull herself up a bit further, worried that she had heard her name or was having a nightmare. Another sigh and she relaxed, and he spoke a bit more softly. "We have a lead. One that he needs to talk about."

Nemuri's eyes were softened as she watched the 5 year old slumber on his chest, but they hardened when they looked at him. "I was worried you were going to say he doesn't need to know what a birthday looks like because he wouldn't be your ward by then."

That was something that Aizawa didn't want to think about.

It was the nature of wardships that they ended. There was an investigation to complete, and when the ward was out of danger, they were removed from the hero's home after a suitable one was found.

He imagined that he and Hizashi would have a fair amount of input to decide where Shinsou would be placed, what family would take him in. Hizashi would be thorough, he would know the signs to look out for from firsthand experience, and he imagined even Hizashi's mother would pull from all the contacts she had in the foster care system to make sure that Shinsou would be safe and well-cared for.

And the 5 year old sleeping so peacefully now would lose the only family she ever had.

He doubted she would ever forgive them for it, and he honestly wouldn't blame her. As unhealthy as it was beneath the surface, Shinsou and Eri's relationship was vital to each of them. They were safety to each other, a familiar balm to their wounds. Eri was only slightly better adjusted to the company of others, but if she had to be parted from him again and know that he wasn't missing, he was just away in a place that he belonged and she didn't, she would reject them.

She would hate them.

"I don't think Shinsou's the only one worried about Eri's quirk," Nemuri whispered, trailing her fingers over his arm, knowing that it was trapped around Eri's waist.

"Shinsou said it was triggered by pain. Emotional as well, it seems," Aizawa explained, running his fingers through the ends of Eri's hair. "He knows more about her quirk than I do, and I can't assume his anxiety is unfounded."

"Then you need to ask him about it," Nemuri says, as though it were that easy.

"He doesn't trust me," Aizawa whispers. "To ask him to trust me with Eri's quirk, after what Chisaki did--"

Nemuri chuckled quietly, her eyes wandering from his still numb feet to the arm around Eri's waist. "If he saw this, I think he'd be convinced."

"Or threatened."

Nemuri rolls her eyes, rising to walk to the coffee machine and help herself to the pot he brewed.
“So pessimistic-“

“Mom?”

Aizawa sits up before he realizes it, and though his arm is still holding Eri to his chest, she wakes with bleary eyes and a swaying head, before she lays back down. He still can't see Shinsou very well from this angle, only the edge of his shoulder and arm as it rises to touch his head. He wishes he could tell if he was checking for a muzzle after what he said, to tell Naomasa to add it to Shinsou Ui's charges.

Shinsou jolts to standing, his chair squealing against the floor before his head pops over the cubicle wall. Even the red imprint of his arm on the side of his face can't detract from his clear panic, which softens with an audible exhale when he sees Eri.

And that was honestly a bit surprising.

“Good morning, sleepyhead!” Midnight calls, making sure that Shinsou wouldn't be alarmed to find her presence later on. He still seemed surprised, a flash of a frown afterwards, but half-signed ‘Good Morning’ back to her before he remembered he wouldn't be understood.

“Shinsou signed ‘Good Morning,’ ” Aizawa translates, catching another glance in his direction from the teen. “Though he doesn't have to be polite to *you*. ”

Nemuri hummed, stirring the creamer in her cup as she leaned her back against the counter, making sure her body language was open, relaxed. Catching that Shinsou was still evaluating her threat level. “Shinsou is a very polite young man, despite the company he has to keep. Hopefully, he'll be a good influence on you.”

Aizawa noticed that Shinsou's attention had been caught by something, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. Was it the whip at Midnight's side? Had he been-

‘ *Coffee.* ’

Aizawa considered turning his head away to give Shinsou the impression that he hadn't seen him sign that, but decided against it. “You can't have coffee. Chiyo was very strict about that, and you wouldn't like the flavor of that one. It's only slightly better than *instant*. ”

Midnight shot him a smirk, wordlessly mocking him for having a taste for good coffee. He didn't have one until he and Hizashi started dating, the blonde latching on to the one place that Aizawa would enjoy going to take him to increasingly expensive coffee shops. By their 6 month anniversary, Aizawa had lost the ability to stomach instant.

They hadn't told Shinsou that he couldn't stomach it either, not until his health improved. The purple haired teen didn't protest, but his eyes remained locked on Nemuri's cup, who wasn't cruel enough to drink out of it yet. Aizawa didn't doubt that the teen was trying to devise a way to get coffee despite his denial.

Before Aizawa could come up with a good distraction, Hizashi and Toshinori entered the staff room, Hizashi still laughing at a joke that seemed to be at the retired hero's expense. The sound of Hizashi's voice woke Eri completely, her heel digging into his hip bone when she sprang up to pull Shinsou towards the bathroom to wash their hands.

He trusted Hizashi to make sure the hall was safe as the wards made their trip while he tried to rub the feeling back into his legs.

“How underweight is he?” Nemuri asked, finally partaking in her coffee.

“Very,” Aizawa answered, hissing as a sharp pain announced the pins and needles running down half of his body. “Eri was in far better condition.” He’s almost certain that Shinsou was the reason for that.

“I happened to have a conversation with Recovery Girl about that,” Toshinori said, setting down a white box at the cubicle Shinsou had been sitting at. “It turns out that I’m a bit of an expert, considering my own condition. I have some supplements that will help, and these cupcakes are well-within his limits. I think they’re rather tasty myself.”

Aizawa hummed, sending his husband a pointed look. “Thank you, Toshinori. It’s nice to have someone take precautions with Shinsou’s health.”

Hizashi sputtered. “Look, I really couldn’t - it was the first real question he asked! If I didn’t reward that-”

Midnight tsked. “Whipped. Both of you are absolutely *whipped*, and it’s infecting the entire school. Even the students who haven’t met them yet are talking about making offerings to UA’s new mascots for good luck on their midterms.”

Aizawa wondered if Nezu would still receive a pile of anonymously sent teas outside his office door next week. If he would be insulted if he didn’t.

If he would have to defend his wards against his boss if he didn’t.

*

Midoriya finished the last of his dumpling set, wondering if he should return to Lunch Rush for a second serving or if the food just hadn’t settled in his stomach yet. He was still trying to catch up on the calories he burned from training with Kacchan so much over the weekend. Kacchan had a habit of approaching him or Kirishima to go out and spar when something irritated him, and Shinsou’s comments in the group chat seemed to bring that out a lot.

That was pretty concerning, but he knew Kacchan wouldn’t talk to him about it. And he trusted that after the fight he had with Shinsou, most of his threats were just bluster and pride. Most of them.

Midoriya startled as Ashido slammed her tray into the empty space between himself and Tokoyami, huffing as she did. “I’m sitting with the smart kids today, because NOBODY in Bakusquad has any brain cells at all!”

Midoriya looked to see Jirou slump further into her chair, and Kirishima send him a guilty shrug. Bakugo caught his eye for only a second before he kicked his chair out and started calling after Monoma.

“The name ‘Bakusquad’ gives the impression that you’re all very insular,” Tokoyami mused, sending a glare towards the window as the sky brightened, the clouds parting for a moment. “Perhaps it’s regrettably self-imposed.”

Ashido tore open a bag of chips violently, sending several scattering across the table. When she

noticed, she gave a frustrated shout and buried her hands in her hair. “AUGH! Why is it Monday?! Why do Mondays exist?! Can’t we just stop having Mondays and name them something else?!”

“The assumption that Mondays are bad luck is a self-fulfilling prophecy, kero,” Tsuyu said, tongue darting out to snatch one of Ashido’s chips as payment for her two-cents.

Ochako nodded. “Just pretend it’s Tuesday! Then, you won’t be blaming bad luck on a Monday, so you won’t have to go through the day thinking that something worse is going to happen!”

Ashido took a deep breath, exhaling loudly. “Okay. That’s a good plan. It’s Tuesday now, the curse is broken-”

“Curses can’t be broken so easily,” Tokoyami chuckled, while Shoji rolled his eyes.

“Midoriya. Hug,” Ashido demanded, holding her arms open for him. Despite how awkward it felt to hug Ashido in such a public place, Midoriya did, tucking an arm around her shoulders while she squeezed him so tight that he worried that there might be a reason she usually went to Kirishima for this. Eventually, she sighed in relief, slapping his back hard enough that he could feel every bruise under her palm. “Much better. Now the curse is definitely broken.”

Todoroki stared at Midoriya, either forgetting that his ability to not blink for long periods of time was a little unsettling, or considering whether to have another theory talk to dispel any tension in the air. “Why have you abandoned Bakugo’s pack today?”

Midoriya really hoped this wouldn’t turn into another ‘Bakugo is a werewolf’ discussion.

“Because I need smart brains to help me with something,” Ashido answered, smiling as she tossed a chip in the air to catch it in her mouth. And didn’t wait to swallow before she started talking again. “So, I’ve got this friend, and he doesn’t like being touched-”

“Shinsou,” Todoroki assumed, and hit the nail right on the head, judging by the way Ashido froze.

“Jeez, I really am at the right table,” Ashido muttered, perhaps forgetting that she had threatened everyone in Class 1-A with both Aizawa’s and her own wrath in the changing rooms this morning. “Yeah, so I know that I said all that stuff already, and Sensei might probably kill me, like, for real, but... I need to hug him and I can’t so help?”

Iida looked up from his Hero Ethics textbook with a frown. “Aizawa-sensei is trusted with Shinsou’s care, and if he believes that physical contact with Shinsou would be detrimental, we should abide by his words.”

“But, it’s *Sensei* we’re talking about here!” Ashido said, chopping her hand over her tray to either mock Iida or just subconsciously mirroring his habits. “He probably doesn’t see anything wrong with that! Does he even hug Eri?”

“He does! He, um,” Midoriya trailed off, scratching his head nervously as he noticed everyone’s stares, his voice dropping to a mutter. “She says they cuddle a lot, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“But does Shinsou get cuddles?” Kaminari asked, standing behind Midoriya with a hand cupped around his chin. “Does he even get the Good Boy pat?”

Ashido narrowed her eyes at Kaminari, but turned and huffed instead of acknowledging him directly. Yaoyorozu didn’t look up from her Art History textbook, still reading as she spoke. “Humans require 17 positive touches a day to avoid detriment to their mental health. Ashido might

have a justifiable concern.”

“See! So, let’s get cracking, Smarties!” Ashido cheered, waiting eagerly for a response.

Todoroki placed his chopsticks on his tray, meeting Ashido’s eyes. “I have a theory.”

Ashido nodded encouragingly, while Midoriya hoped it wasn’t the one Todoroki had told him and Koda about yesterday.

“I believe we were lied to about the nature of Shinsou’s quirk.” Midoriya fought the urge to cover his face, his suspicions already confirmed. “Eri’s fear of cats. Soba’s hostile reaction to him. Aizawa-sensei’s protectiveness. They’re all connected.”

Ashido started nodding more vigorously with every pause Todoroki took, and at this point, everyone but Midoriya was watching with anticipation.

“Shinsou’s quirk allows him to turn into a cat.”

Ashido froze, then collapsed face-down on the table, whining. “That’s not his-“

“He was supposed to keep Eri from escaping by transforming whenever she attempted it. She would be paralyzed with fear from the sight. Soba is very territorial, and could tell that Shinsou was an intruder in his domain. And Aizawa-sensei is a cat person. He instinctively knows what would make Shinsou uncomfortable, but he seems to be at a loss in some areas, which is why he had that book.” Todoroki explained, nonplussed by Ashido’s reaction. “ ‘Loving Your Feral Cat.’ Shinsou may not have been socialized early on in his life-“

“He was!” Ashido argues, springing up. “I know his quirk, I know- I *knew* Shinsou!”

“Feral cats are unique,” Todoroki continues, barely seeming to register Ashido’s outburst. “In that they don’t trust human contact at first. Trust has to be built through offerings, and small steps. By offering your hand like this,” Todoroki lifts his hand, fingers remaining limp. “They can decide whether to approach, to rub against your hand or smell it to get used to your scent.”

Ashido paused, then mirrored Todoroki’s hand. “So, they can choose, right? So it’s not scary....”

Kaminari held out his hand to Ashido, palm facing her. “High five?”

Ashido beamed, slapping Kaminari’s palm so loudly that students from the surrounding tables looked over. “Kaminari, you’re on a roll today! Looks like you’ll be sitting with the smart kids in no time!”

Kaminari grinned back, shaking his hand as he withdrew it. “So, coming back to Bakutable-“

“Nope!” Ashido rejected, crossing her arms in front of her for emphasis. “If I stay here, my GPA will get better just through that osmoso-thingy. And Ocha needs to give me her chocolate covered potato chip hookup.”

Kaminari’s eyes widened, then moved to sit in Ashido’s chair with her. They managed to make it work, both of them half-falling off the chair, and while Ashido talked to Ochako about the specialty snack shop in the mall, Kaminari laid his head on the table, stroking it as though to encourage the type of osmosis both he and Ashido were hoping for.

Midoriya didn’t have the heart to tell them that there was a vacant chair at the table right behind them.

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Aizawa should have taken advantage of Shinsou's surprising friendliness towards Toshinori, and asked the retired hero to watch him during his free period.

While he ignored the other teachers who filtered into the staff room, something that Midnight had probably orchestrated so that both wards would be more familiar with them before tomorrow, Shinsou paid a great deal of attention to Toshinori. At first, it was to wave off the carrot cupcakes and apologize for Friday, which Toshinori in turn waved off as an accident and ill-planning on his part.

Shinsou didn't eat any of the cupcakes, and might have been making conversation to distract from that, but the things he signed had seemed like genuine attempts to connect with Toshinori. He even translated the retired hero's catch phrase into JSL, which Toshinori had apparently taught himself, sputtering that he was touched by the gesture before Hizashi could translate for Shinsou.

Now that Aizawa is faced with the threshold of Class 3-A's Hero Ethics, he realized that those attempts might not have been entirely genuine, but manipulative. Shinsou might have been under the impression that Toshinori was seeking to use Eri's quirk to regain the former strength of his own, and was deliberately making himself closer to the retired hero to determine whether he was truly a threat.

And now Shinsou would be sitting behind Togata, someone that he knew would need Eri's quirk in the near future. Eri had told Shinsou herself, and hadn't exactly hidden her excitement about her growing horn, as even now she had a hand raised to feel it. She might be considering hiding it to reveal to Togata with a flourish, promising the student that she would be able to fix his quirk soon.

A glance at Shinsou's stiffened posture and blank face confirmed that he wasn't likely to treat Togata with any friendliness, and the hand hovering close to his knife made Aizawa uneasy.

"Amajiki, switch seats with Togata," Aizawa ordered as soon as he entered 3-A's classroom. He didn't look to see if any students were confused by that, keeping his expression blank as he placed his notes on the podium. The sound of chairs being pushed back to comply was interrupted by Eri's predictable outburst, which immediately drew his attention.

"Look, Mirio!" Eri exclaimed, pointing at her horn and beaming at the blonde student. "My horn grew! My quirk is gonna work soon!"

Togata smiled back at her, too surprised to hide the hope apparent in his eyes, ruffling her hair excitedly. Amajiki's smile was a mix of hope, relief, and pleading for Eri's quirk to return Togata's before the semester ended, or else he would have to graduate without his oldest friend at his side. "I'm really happy about that, Eri-"

"Tell me if it starts to hurt, Eri," Shinsou interrupted, his voice too low and threatening to be truly meant for her ears. Aizawa couldn't see the expression on his face, but he knew by Amajiki's narrowed eyes that it just as threatening as his tone, and directed at Togata. "I know it can be extremely painful at times."

Eri turned to Shinsou with a frown, her eyebrows knitted together in confusion over why Shinsou would mention that now. Togata's falling smile was kept hidden from her, as was the way he

withdrew his hand and shot a glance in Aizawa's direction.

But the smile returned when Togata spoke to Eri. "You should definitely let Shinsou or Aizawa-sensei know, Eri. I don't want you to be in any kind of pain. Even if it's just a little tiny ache, you have plenty of heroes to save you from it!"

Shinsou guided Eri to her desk, not so subtly moving it closer to his with his foot hooked around the leg. While Togata stared at the board, still refusing to let his smile drop, Amajiki glared at his desk. The other students of 3-A mirrored Amajiki's reaction, and Aizawa doubted that his lecture would truly be heard by any of them.

He tried to engage them more often to distract them, and more than once had to erase Shizuo's quirk when their spines subtly extended, taking Shinsou's locked stare at Togata as a more immediate threat than it was. He counted himself lucky that Shinsou didn't notice, knowing that an obvious threat from Shizuo wouldn't be taken lightly in his already heightened state.

Eri also didn't notice the tension in the air, distracted by a drawing that he hoped wasn't a gift for Togata.

The chime to announce the end of the class period came with only a brief moment of relief before Aizawa noticed Amajiki stand and turn to Shinsou, his back straightened from his usual slouch. Eri took advantage of Shinsou's attention being focused elsewhere to hand off her gift to Togata, which he accepted with his usual heartfelt appreciation.

"I don't think you know Togata very well," Amajiki said, his voice even and confident in a way that only seemed to occur when he was speaking about his friend. "I think if you did, you would know why even now he's a peerless hero."

Shinsou's jaw clenched, but he refused to break the staredown he was having with Amajiki until Togata clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Tamaki, don't say embarrassing things like that! Just be direct and tell Shinsou that you want us to play Pokemon Go together sometime!"

Amajiki deflated, the redness on the tips of his pointed ears revealing that had been something the student wanted to do before today. Nejire took advantage of the other members of Big Three being distracted to scoop Eri into her arms, holding her to her chest like a teddy bear as she joined the discussion. "Right?! Tamaki's *super* embarrassing! And he's a *super duper* big nerd about Pokemon! It's embarrassing! You should see for yourself how embarrassing it is!"

Shinsou seemed to find something reassuring in Eri's contentment in being treated like an oversized doll, his glare flickering before he seemed to relax. ' *Fine. I don't...* '

His hands twitched before he laid them back on the desk, tension working its way back into his jaw while he stared at them. Before Aizawa could translate for him, Shinsou surprised him completely.

"Okay," Shinsou spoke, still refusing to look up from the desk. His eyes narrowed, his jaw working around another word that he wasn't able to form, but he was distracted by Togata's loud cheer.

"Yes! I'm excited! I can't wait to show you all the gyms me and Tamaki control! It's supposed to be super sunny on Wednesday, so maybe we can catch some exclusive sun-type Pokemon!"

Togata said, drawing Shinsou's gaze back to him though it lacked the hostility from before.

"You're Team Instinct, right? Or maybe Mystic, like Tamaki-"

"You three are going to be late for your next class," Aizawa interrupted, hoping to avoid the possibility of Togata asking to see Shinsou's phone to check. Nejire whined as she set Eri back

down, begging to take her to their next class so they could spend the rest of the day playing with each other's hair. Aizawa wasn't sure why Shinsou didn't react to that as a threat, or why he waved goodbye to Nejire without prompting.

But if Shinsou's attitude could flip so quickly between threat and friendliness, Aizawa could only assume that they were both used with the same intention. To protect Eri by violence or manipulation, whichever suited his perception of the situation.

He found himself hoping Shinsou chose to be threatening when they met again for Class 1-A's homeroom.

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Yamada could have found himself a little disappointed in Shinsou wordlessly deciding to work on his exam rather than taking a break for an English lesson, but the budget he committed to planning wasn't going to make itself.

The silence from his wards as they worked on their lessons seemed a little stifling, though. Yamada found himself glancing up from his phone just to make sure they were still there, the pauses between Shinsou's pen clicks and Eri's page-turning seeming to grow a bit longer as the period went on.

And just as both wards seemed to have something they were worried about, they both looked up to bring it up at the same time. '*I don't-*'

"Yama, can you teach me English?" Eri asked, unaware that Shinsou had started signing.

Yamada looked to each ward, unsure who he should address first until Shinsou folded his hands and looked at Eri. A wide smile overtook Yamada's face with the decision made for him. "Of course! I'd be happy to! I'll have to find some workbooks for us to do it right, because I've only taught high school level English. But is there anything you want to learn today, like numbers or how to say good morning?"

"I wanna learn how to say the stuff Twenny taught me right," Eri answered, unaware of the clench in Shinsou's hand.

Yamada tried to keep his own uneasiness from becoming noticeable. Eri said that Shinsou had taught her to approach a tourist if he got 'lost' during an escape attempt, but Yamada knew what he really meant by that. He didn't like thinking about what Shinsou must have felt when he made those plans, didn't want to know how many he made with the intention of laying down his own life for Eri's.

How close he was to doing something reckless before the raid took place, and the heroes he had given up on finally arrived.

"I don't really have anything to teach you there," Yamada said, leaning against the back of his chair. "English is pretty tricky to speak sometimes, but you did a really great job! You and Shinsou must have practiced a lot."

Eri looked to Shinsou, expecting him to be as pleased with his praise as she was, but the purple haired teen refused to look up from his desk. "Twenny, Yama said I did it right! You did a good

job teaching me, so don't be sad."

"I'm not sad," Shinsou answered, resting a hand on Eri's head while he turned to look at her. "I'm happy about that."

Neither Yamada nor Eri were convinced by Shinsou's flat tone. "Were you going to sign something, Shinsou?" Yamada asked, hoping his answer would distract Eri from prodding further, and Shinsou from the memories that her interest in English seemed to bring up.

Shinsou pulled his hand away with a flash of a frown, hesitating before he answered. '*I don't have plans.*'

He might have wanted to sign more, but his hands were shaking too badly for it. Shinsou pressed them together on his desk and shrank in on himself, still not looking up from his desk.

Yamada wished it had been just painful memories that caused Shinsou to recoil like that. That he had tried to stop Eri from speaking in 1-A's English class because of those memories, or even a fear of disappointing Yamada somehow. That Shinsou had refused to look at him during lunch because he wanted to talk to Toshinori.

That Shinsou wasn't trembling in fear of Yamada like he would if Chisaki had discovered those plans.

Yamada had no idea how Shouta could stand it.

He could feel his own heart being ripped apart, betrayed by that comparison and desperate to prove it wrong. Not because Yamada didn't want to be seen as a villain, or was hurt that Shinsou could think of him that way after all their progress, but because the kid was *safe*. Shinsou was safe, but so used to terror that he didn't recognize it, couldn't know the difference between heroes and villains when both had failed him in different ways. He wanted to scream that it was different, that this was what Shinsou had always deserved, but words were nothing in the face of what Shinsou had been violently taught to expect.

"It's okay, Shinsou," Yamada tried to keep the distress from his voice, tried to be reassuring even if he had no idea how. "I wouldn't be mad if you did. You shouldn't feel trapped here. I'm really proud of you, to be honest. A lot of people wouldn't have had the guts to try to get out, but you did. And in the end, you beat him, right? You both came out safe."

Shinsou flinches at the vague mention of Chisaki, too vulnerable to hide it, but he looks at Yamada with wide eyes that aren't entirely out of fear. That bit of surprise in his expression gives him hope that Shinsou might remember this, might trust it just a little bit more.

"Yeah, Twenny! We're safe now," Eri adds, closing the distance between them to wrap her arms around his, holding him tightly. "We're really *really* safe, I promise! You can't be scared because we *live* with heroes, and they keep everyone safe! It's Yama and Zawa's job!"

"That's right," Yamada said, trying to distract Eri from trying to force Shinsou to believe her through her desperate pleading, sure that the kid would fake it for her sake. "Shou and I have one job that's more important than all the others, and it's keeping you guys safe. And other than a few slip ups with Soba and the students, I think we're doing alright so far--"

'*S-O-B-A not dangerous. Hero students not dangerous.*' Shinsou paused, considering though his blank expression didn't betray what was on his mind. '*I'm not weak.*'

That expression couldn't tell Yamada whether he meant that as a threat, out of pride, or an attempt

to convince himself of it. The kid hadn't given them any indication that not being able to use his quirk bothered him, his muteness only seemed to be an issue when he tried to communicate with others who didn't know JSL. But Shinsou *was* a little weaker because of it, and he hoped the confidence he had now wouldn't break later on.

"I know you're not, kiddo," Yamada reassured. "I've never thought you were. We're not protecting you because you're weak, it's because you deserve it. Because I want you guys to feel safe."

The bell announcing the end of the period came at the worst time, just as he caught a flicker of Shinsou's eyebrows rising and knotting, eyes wide in a confused and desperate way. And that was all covered up by the mask before Yamada could think to soothe it, to insist once again that Shinsou was safe in the hopes that his vulnerability would let him understand it.

Yamada would tell him as many times as he needed to, would prove it every chance that he had.

Shinsou was safe now. And he would start to believe it in time.

Baku-Study

Chapter Summary

27 is having a difficult Monday, and a familiar threat arises to make it even worse. But 27 has long since learned how to spin threats into opportunities, and while intending to avoid Yamada, he makes a risky play. And the information that both he and Aizawa gain from it changes things for them drastically.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Near anxiety attack, desire for harm (not self-inflicted), references to sexual abuse that are not described in a healthy manner (Specifically: Bakugo thinks that Shinsou was "bad touched and can't do shit anyway", asks "They do shit that you fucking had to show on a doll or some shit?", and thinks to himself that Shinsou wears hoodies like a survivor of sexual abuse might, and if he "perpetuates" that onto Eri, that Bakugo would kill him.) Bakugo is concerned that Shinsou might be self-harming, and specifically references a knife that he finds, and dissociation.

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri's horn has grown, causing Shinsou to worry that she could be harmed for her quirk. Shinsou has been messaging the students of Class 1-A, but avoiding interacting with them at school. Shinsou verbally agreed to play Pokemon Go with the Big Three in the class before this. Yamada gave Shinsou a math test to see where he scored, with a pen made to overcome his injured hand and color coded highlighters to mark new concepts for him. In the previous chapter, Yamada said that Shinsou beat Chisaki when he was terrified after telling Yamada that he didn't have plans to escape from UA. Shinsou threatened to mutilate Bakugo's hands if he looked at Eri, while in the chat. Bakugo wants to meet with Shinsou, and justifies it as part of his 100 page essay on trauma related disorders when he requested it from Aizawa. Shinsou told Eri that he doesn't want to be friends with Bakugo, he just wants to make him so angry that his head explodes and sprays candy everywhere. Shinsou learned that using someone's first name was a sign of being close to them, and has been trying to stop thinking of Midoriya as 'Izuku.' Uraraka and Asui mentioned in the chat that the reason they knew Shinsou's hair was damaged from the bleach baths was because they volunteered at the hospital that Eri was staying at, and saw a picture of him that the staff provided in her room. Yamada gave Shinsou coffee that morning. Aizawa asked how his students fought in the sparring matches that Shinsou had with them, which Shinsou interprets as advising him in their training. Shinsou revealed the existence of surveillance cameras in the 1-A dorm in the chat. Shinsou also revealed to 1-A that he doesn't like oatmeal. Todoroki said that the reason Aizawa couldn't pay for surrogacy services in Shinsou's conception was due to Aizawa being an underground hero, and which is one of the lowest paid positions in the hero industry. Shinsou said that he knew where a sniper would set up due to 'training,' but was not referring to knowing how to shoot a gun. Shinsou doesn't need to talk to Eri to bring her under his quirk, but has had quirk slips from asking her a question, and thus refrains from doing so. Shinsou did research on traumatized children, noticing that Eri is traumatized, and also noticed that Aizawa and Yamada use some techniques for helping traumatized children on him, but he refuses to believe that he is traumatized.

27 wanted this day to be over.

His nerves sang with his attention too divided. Eri working on her science workbook, each of the hero students in turn, his owner glaring up from his book, the clock on the wall that didn't seem to move like it should. That clock was trying to torture him, keeping him in this place with the heroes and Eri and if they moved he couldn't protect Eri from all of them.

He forced himself to look back at his test. A job. An easy one, he thought at first. It could be a distraction, it could be a way to worm under his skin like an oversized splinter, like Yamada *knew* that it would.

He knew it. That's why he gave it to him. He wanted 27 to fall out of his head so they could take Eri, take advantage of her horn, her quirk, force her to use it.

He couldn't answer this fucking question .

Failure. Stupidity. Those weren't things that 27 could accept from himself. Dangerous. Dangerous things. He couldn't risk it, he couldn't-

Why won't that damn clock move?

27 tries to breathe, tries to convince himself he can before he forgets how and makes a fool of himself in front of these hero students. Make himself look weak.

He focuses on Eri. She's warm, and he's too relieved that she wanted to sit on his lap instead of at her desk, even though he knows it's because she's worried about him. She's happily reading her science workbook now, learning about rocks. She's learning things that he doesn't know now. He knew about sand and concrete and stones, not that stones break and weather into sand by the slow movement of the tides. Every minute, every thoughtless motion from the sea eroded millions of pieces of rock into something round, something soft when they were grouped together. Something unnatural for rock, to become soft like that.

He didn't need to know that. He checks the hero students again, his owner, the clock on the wall. It still doesn't move like it should. His time here should be over, but that's just a lie his body tells him. His nerves are running wild under his skin like a fight isn't going the way it should, and it isn't. He's been losing the fight all day, and he'd cry tears of joy if it ended like it should, if Chisaki would grab him by the mask and tear him up, tear into him without worrying about death because death is just the nothingness and Chisaki pulls him out of it just to tear into him again-

He can't be nothing here. He has to fight. He can't be weak, he can't be away. He has to focus.

The heroes make that impossible. He looks again to see if they've crowded around him somehow because at times he can feel them *breathing* on him, but they haven't. Ashido glances at him again and he doesn't want to know what that means, he feels bleach soaked, he feels weak and he can't be weak here he can't-

Another minute passed. The time should add up, he shouldn't have lost any. Fifteen more minutes and the heroes will stop being so large for a few hours, they'll turn back into those little words on a screen that enticed him into this stupid game in the first place.

He shouldn't have started it, he knows that now. He didn't have information but he gave it to them. He didn't need a distraction but they gave it to him. Stupidity. Dangerous. He can't afford it, he needs to end it but he has no idea *how*.

He can't focus. He can't play the game. He's lost and lost and *lost* today, he spoke just to prove that he could, he promised something he didn't want to give. He needs to keep Mirio at a distance but he didn't, he invited him in and he shouldn't have. Stupidity. Dangerous. Nejire was dangerous, he mistook her for a moment and that was all it took, she was too familiar and she had to *know* that, had to take advantage.

Two minutes passed. That doesn't feel right, that feels too quick. He needs to focus, focus on something else. Find a way to play, find anything to do to recover from this.

The test is his best chance at that. Yamada was distractible, especially when he was trying to train 27. This was training, he knew that. An evaluation of what he could do, but it felt crueler than any other he had done. No one wanted to know what 27 knew like this, Numbers didn't need to add or subtract. He knew that, he taught himself how. He felt proud when he proved it on this test, when the first few pages were finished with ease.

Then multiplication. He knew that, mostly. Eri didn't always like his hovering when she studied, and he didn't want to mess up her work. He knew enough to answer those questions, bringing him to five completed pages out of 103.

He didn't know what this symbol was. There was a word, 'divide,' used over and over again in the next two pages. Then fractions. He knew what divide meant, to divide someone's attention to take advantage of their distraction. To divide his opponents. To fracture something, or someone. A fraction of someone's worth.

What was he worth here?

He looks at the hero students, his owner, the clock. Not even a minute has passed.

Eri cocks her head when he touches the pink marker. He doesn't want to use it, doesn't want to admit any weakness, but he needed to distract Yamada from his plans, and five pages wasn't enough for that. But Eri cocked her head, he shouldn't use it. That was the wrong choice, he pulls his hand away. He looks at the clock, the minute finally passed. 11 more, just 11 more minutes.

"Tw- Shinsou, you know that one. It's easy."

Why does Eri talk so loud? The silence of the room is shattered, he can feel every stare boring into him. He doesn't look up, doesn't need to. He can feel it under his skin, nerves that were screaming are mute now in the numb shock of it, the betrayal. He focuses on Eri's presence to keep himself from going too numb, becoming more useless.

"You take the 6 and cut it in half, so it's 3," Eri says, reaching for that pen Yamada gave him. He was supposed to do enough of this test to be sore afterwards, but he wasn't, he failed in that, but even worse, he failed Eri. "You know that, though. You know all kinds of stuff, Twenny."

He doesn't.

He doesn't know anything useful. He's out of his depth and he doesn't know how to play that off,

he doesn't know how to hide that. He's tried to slip behind masks all day, tried to be someone who doesn't feel bothered by these too-large heroes surrounding him. He can't pull it off without a mask, without something to hide a part of him that doesn't play the part. He's exposed, he's too vulnerable here, and he can't hide that and *they know* .

Eri is doing his test for him, and she shouldn't. Even if it earns him more completed pages, he can't lie to Yamada, can't be caught in a lie. "You can't do my test, Eri." He pulls the pen from her hand, placing it on the desk beside the pink highlighter he has to use now. "I'm really glad you know that, though. You're really smart."

He gives in, he threads his fingers through his hair and lets the softness soothe him, lets his arm shield his expression from the hero students for just a brief moment. He can't cry here, even if he does it silently, and he shouldn't feel like crying over this, but that brief moment to let his eyes water scares him enough. He blinks back the tears and remembers his job, remembers to not feel it.

He looks at the clock, 5 minutes. He doesn't know if that's right, if he lost any time. He wonders if rocks feel the pieces of themselves being eroded away, if they do then what it feels like, if it feels like this, before he realizes he's putting off the inevitable.

Neither hand makes a straight line, even when he risks switching them in a place that people will notice. Eri doesn't, she's turned back to her work book with a stiffness that betrays how unhappy she is to not help him with his test. That shaky pink line, the brightness of the color, those simple little words and symbols that Eri knows and he doesn't. It hurts, it hurts, it *hurts*.

He thought he was smart. He thought that was one thing they couldn't take from him, one thing he could keep for himself. Even if he was a silent Number, he knew how to read. Even if he was a Dog, he could twist the game and beat Chisaki.

"And in the end, you beat him, right?"

What did Yamada mean by that? 27 has to know, he has to be smart enough to piece that out, especially from Yamada because Yamada hides *nothing* , but he couldn't. Yamada had hidden how he could slip behind a mask too, he could hide his meaning behind a wincing smile that reads 'this is painful, but believe this smile,' but that wasn't what he *meant*.

Yamada knows something, knows something about 27 that he didn't want him to find. 27 can't play the game with him, not when there are pieces he doesn't know, there's something he has that 27 doesn't know about. He doesn't even *know* what he could know now, but Yamada knows that 27 has plans. That he's made plans. He's tried to escape, he's disloyal, he's stupid because they've never worked, but he's always been too stupid to stop himself from trying.

The first time he tried he had 98 and 65 under his control, and what he got from that was his first session with Bug. He didn't have a plan, he was moving on a whim, grasping at the hope that he could get out. He could get out of The Miasma, he could find 50's body before they took it away, he could tell her all the things he never could because his mask was open. He could tell her that he-

"Oi." Something kicks at his desk. The shoe still resting at the edge of it connects to a leg, connects to Thermal Expansion staring at him, not at Eri and that's why he's still standing. Even though 27 is still tempted to throw him into the desks behind him. With that leg so close, it would be too easy. "Earth to Shitsou, I'm talking to you."

27 slides on the mask, leaning back against his chair and forcing himself to meet Fulmination's beady red eyes with a blankness tinted by boredom. He's not a threat, he's too weak to be one, he's just a bother, he tells himself as he works it into his limbs, opening his arms to drape lazily over

his desk even though he wants to hide his test, hide Eri still sitting on his lap.

She puts a hand on his shoulder and pulls herself closer to Bomber, the same way she leans closer to intimidate. Explosion ignores her, and that's the only reason he's still breathing.

"Bakugo," his owner growls, closer than he should be but 27 can't break the staredown to check. "Class is dismissed."

"You said I could talk to him on Monday," Bakugo answers, his lip curling into a smirk that 27 wants to shatter with his fist. Neither of them break the stare. "So Shinsou's gonna stop pretending to be a fucking mute and tell me he's going to study with me."

27 has to stop himself from rolling his eyes when he realizes it. This was bullying. He never had the chance to truly experience it for himself, but now that he does, it feels even more juvenile than he expected. He pulls his hands from the desk, and ignores the flicker of relief in knowing that Detonation is one of the few people who understand JSL. ' *You have nothing in exchange, Explosion.* '

Salvo cackles at that, sneering down at him. "That right, you wannabe Yakuza bastard?"

27 raises an eyebrow. Wannabe? He took Sakazuki, he's lived with the 8 Precepts for 3 years as something lower than a kobun. He's done things for mafias before that, learned how to speak the languages for each family well before Nemoto gave him his tattoos. If anyone was a wannabe here, it was Ignition.

"You're that fucking predictable," Fulmination sneers, his hands moving to repeat 'Exchange' in jerky, ill-placed motions. Something that might be taken as mocking, but 27 doesn't think that's entirely the case. "How about I teach you how to fucking count, since you're stupid at math? That a good trade off, 'boss'?"

27 narrows his eyes, ignoring the insult that cuts a bit too deep for him. Ignores that the heroes should probably learn enough about the Yakuza to know that addressing him as Boss is a serious offence. There's something there that 27 wants to test. ' *Crimson. Lavender. Strategy. Fuck you. Apple.* '

He can see the vein throbbing on the blonde's forehead as he scowls. "Oi, I'm trying to be helpful and shit, watch your fucking mouth."

27 can't hide his own smirk, though he tries to play it into his mask and that works, earning a few frustrated pops from Ignition's quirk. 'Kacchan' wasn't the only one who only remembered how to sign swears. ' *Watch my hands. You don't know sign.* '

Bakugo seethes. "Don't talk shit about me with that creepy fucking grin, just nod your fucking head. You want me to teach you math shit?"

' *K-A-C-C-H-A-N. Ka chan. Katsu chan. Blast chan.* '

"Shitface," Blast-chan grinds his teeth around his words, the pops from his hand start giving off more heat, enough for him to feel it on his shoulder. "Answer. The fucking. Question."

A stack of papers obscures 27's vision, ending the staredown. 27 takes the opportunity to blink, his eyes stinging when he does, and looks at his owner whose attention is focused on Blasty. He doesn't know why his owner is still holding the papers between them, keeping him from seeing what Detonation is doing. "Class is dismissed. I suggest you return to the dorm and work on your assignment the way that I assigned it."

The papers finally lower, Bakugo having turned his scowl to his owner before he turns his head back to 27 with a hiss. “Fine. I know how to fix that mute shit, but since you keep talking shit with your hands, I guess you don’t wanna know.”

27 watches the teen kick off from his desk, storming across the classroom while he runs the word over and over through his mind. It worked before, it's always worked for him, even with Chisaki.

[illegible]

“Fine.”

Blast-chan stops, turning slowly with a smirk that belongs on a perverted street-hustler instead of a potential hero. He's aiming it at his owner, and despite how much 27 wants to know what Blasty knows, wants to use him to avoid Yamada, wants to use him as a pawn in a hundred different half-formed plans, he also hopes that his owner will knock that smug look off of his face with the capture scarf. Not just to see the weapon in action.

His owner looks at 27, evaluating him for something that he doesn't find, which causes him to ask. "Do you want to meet with Bakugo?"

He hates that his owner could strip every hint that he needs from his words. He knows there's animosity between his owner and Bakugo, that there's an assignment that Bakugo is supposed to be doing for him. His owner didn't want Bakugo to talk to him in the first place. The answer should be 'no,' but he's not sure. This should be an easy test, but he can't answer it, he's too tempted to say 'yes.'

Eri seems to know the answer to this too, while he struggles to understand the question. “Twenny wants to make Bakugo’s head explode, but if he does it on the phone, he won’t get any candy. I think Twenny wants to get the candy today, Zawa.”

27 bites down on his lip in a bid to keep from laughing, especially as he watches Salvo's impotent fireworks, jaw working around a threat that he can't speak because as stupid as he is, he knows better than to threaten Eri. He didn't even look at her earlier, suggesting that 27's earlier threat to mutilate his hands if he did was understood.

His owner raises an eyebrow, but doesn't force 27 to answer, turning slowly to the underling still throwing a temper tantrum. "5 o'clock, at the staff dorm. Even if you still have access, wait for Present Mic to buzz you in. Don't get candy on the-"

“FUCK OFF, I’m not-fucking,” Blast-chan levels an amusing glare at him, and despite the distance, he can still see that vein throbbing. “Get ready, bitch, you’ll be shitting Algebra by the time I’m done with you.”

‘ *Childish. Threats better now. Fight on.* ’ 27 fights to keep the smile off of his face, and the sudden realization that he has over an hour until Bakugo comes as a distraction helps. His owner looks at him, that stare still evaluative, still searching for something that he can’t find.

“Twenny, it’s okay if you don’t want to be Bakugo’s friend,” Eri tells him as she slides off of his lap and begins putting her things back into her backpack. “Even if he’s Ashi’s friend, you don’t have to be his friend.”

“I know,” 27 says, plucking the pens and highlighters into his hand, unsure where he should put them until Eri opens her backpack in invitation. “But, he knows stuff that I don’t, so I might as well hear him out.”

“He thinks it’s due to your quirk,” his owner says, hand tucked in his pocket and eyes focused on something to the side. “There’s little evidence to suggest that. If that changes your decision, let me know.”

‘ *How does-* ’ 27 stops himself, folding his hands together while he hopes that his owner didn’t see that slip, only catching the the last part of his signing. ‘ *They know my quirk.* ’

Izuk- Midoriya does. Ashido and Kirishima do as well, but unless something changed, they weren’t supposed to tell anyone else. Those were the three heroes that knew, the three he had to keep an eye on, but he thought that they were threatened well enough not to tell Bakugo.

His owner is taking too long to answer. There’s something he’s not supposed to know, not supposed to read into, but he tries to piece it out. He hates that his owner doesn’t let him, the pause is the only tell he has because his owner betrays nothing else.

“I told them that you have a voice activated emitter quirk. They would have asked otherwise,” his owner finally says, tucking a thumb between the pages of the papers he’s still holding, might be nervousness. Guilt doesn’t fit him, it doesn’t fit an owner. “Asui, Uraraka, Kirishima, Midoriya, Togata, Amajiki, and Nejire were told that it requires a verbal response, but not that it was triggered by a question.”

How? Why? 27 can’t find a way to ask without those words coming to his mind. He needs to know why those seven heroes are different from the others, why they were told something more specific. Told at a different time. Especially now, now that there’s a *chance* .

“They participated in the raid on the 8 Precepts,” his owner answers for him, as though he was reading his mind. “That was all the information that we had at the time.”

The raid. They were there. He knew Mirio was there, he knew that he saw him. He knew that Mirio knew, but Froggy and Floaty.

Lied to him.

There wasn’t a picture at the hospital. They saw him. They saw his hair, they saw his mask.

He doesn’t remember them. He barely remembers when the officer told him about how the raid ended, how Eri used her quirk to pull him out of the nothingness, out of Chisaki and Nemoto. He doesn’t remember any of that. He remembers being in a white room but that memory is short, just a blink and then he’s in a car. Wearing handcuffs. The officer that knew his name beside him.

He met the heroes and he doesn’t remember it, and they never told him. Hid that from him. There was a reason they did that, and he doesn’t know what it is.

“Shinsou,” his owner calls. 27 looks down at Eri, wearing her backpack. The desk is cleared off now. His owner still hides all of his tells. “Did you hear me?”

27 shakes his head before he can decide whether that’s safe to do. He wonders if he can play it off casually, can play the part of a more useful underling now that he’s advising his owner’s training strategies. ‘ *Long day. Need coffee.* ’

The barely noticeable huff of amusement is pure relief to his nerves. “This is Hizashi’s fault.” His owner rubs at his eyes, his tone dropping back into its usual neutrality. “I have hero work to do, so I won’t be there when Bakugo arrives. If you want Bakugo to leave, or if he uses his quirk while he’s there, tell Hizashi and he’ll take care of it.”

Eri starts pulling at his sleeve, but after he stands she still looks at him, and he realizes that she’s playing with her hands again. “Friend,” 27 says, signing the word so she can copy him, but she shakes her head at him.

“What you said. I wanna know those words,” Eri says, her hands still doing the circular motion for ‘friend’ despite her disinterest in it.

“Long day. Need coffee,” 27 says slowly, making sure that the signs match up to each word. He repeats it as they walk through the hall, and every time she fumbles, she catches herself and looks up for the correct sign. By the time that they reach Yamada’s classroom, she has it down perfectly, and she decides to demonstrate that.

“Yama!” Eri yells, running up to the hero with determination written on her face, and wordlessly signs what she learned.

Yamada covers his mouth with his hand, his eyebrows knitted together to try to keep himself from losing his composure. Once he regains it, he smiles brightly at Eri, his hand ruffling her hair so vigorously that the ends dance around her shoulders and back. “Eri, that’s so CUTE! You did such a good job! Who taught you that?”

“Shinsou,” his owner answers, crossing his arms. “So, are you going to give her coffee or-”

“Shou! Don’t be mean, let me have my moment,” Yamada snaps, turning back to Eri with a soft smile. “Shinsou is a very good teacher. Having him around must have inspired you to learn more JSL, so you can be just like him.”

Eri nods her head sharply, her eyes nearly glowing with the smile behind them. “Yeah! I wanna talk with my hands like Twenny does! Can you teach me that too?”

Yamada beams at that, brushing a finger at the corner of his eye. His voice comes out a little more choked up when he speaks. “Of course! I’d really love to do that, little bean!”

27 bites the inside of his cheek, watching another thing that Eri gets from him being given by someone else. Another way she doesn’t need him, another person who can give her something better than he can offer.

He hopes she doesn’t succeed. That she never becomes *anything* like him.

That she only plays with her hands, instead of having to talk with them.

Aizawa thought he had escaped any more interactions with his students today, but Bakugo had a tendency to appear just as the relief from that thought began to settle in him.

His student was still engrossed in his phone, leaning against the security guard's booth as he waits for someone to leave campus. This is apparently a habit of his, if the complaints he's ignored from other members of UA's staff are any indication. As a student without a provisional hero license, Bakugo can't leave campus without an escort, which most students arrange beforehand.

Bakugo has apparently found that harassing anyone unlucky enough to pass by this exit is a way to circumvent that.

Aizawa nearly makes it. He keeps his footsteps light, slow, movements to a minimum. Bakugo shouldn't have noticed him with the distraction of the phone, but he must have smelled the relief that came to Aizawa too early. "Oi! I need to go to the combini, sign off on that shit."

Aizawa closes his eyes, regretting that he wanted to leave early. Someone else could have fallen victim to Bakugo's brand of highway banditry. "You should arrange these trips beforehand." He pointedly doesn't offer the teen to arrange them with him, or say that he should have mentioned it during homeroom.

Bakugo just stares him down, finger pressed on the sign-out sheet until Aizawa gives in and fills it out. "Just because I'm being treated like a fucking 5 year old doesn't mean I need to ask permission from Mommy."

Aizawa hopes his blank stare as he clicks the pen and places it back on the clipboard reminds Bakugo that he's still asking for permission, and that Aizawa certainly isn't his mother. "If you're wasting my time to buy something that's already at the dorm, I'm adding 10 more pages to your assignment."

"How the fuck would you know?" Bakugo asks, shoving his phone and his hands into his pockets as they walk through the gate as it opens. "Got cameras in the cabinets and shit? You should tell me who's eating my Takis, haven't caught the bastard yet."

"There aren't any cameras there, but I suspect Ashido is the culprit," Aizawa answers, trying to walk ahead of Bakugo to avoid any further conversation, but his student just walks faster to keep the pace. "She has enough prior offenses to justify it."

"She can't fucking handle mild curry, so it's not her," Bakugo defends, forgetting that 'mild' to him was a level of spiciness worthy of being a food challenge. Luckily, his investigation into snack theft holds his interest enough to keep quiet for a few blocks, until they get to the convenience store. "Oi, this is the shitty one, the good one is-"

"It's a combini," Aizawa interrupts, struggling not to roll his eyes. "Get what you need here, or I'm taking you back to campus."

Bakugo snarls at that, hands splayed open at his sides, but another escort thankfully informed him that using his quirk would end the trip immediately. "Fine."

This time, he follows Bakugo, trying not to sigh when he notices his student pick up two baskets to carry his items. This was becoming a much longer trip than he anticipated.

Aizawa knows the cashier but doesn't acknowledge his greeting, scanning the store for any other customers who aren't as reformed as Bokuto has become. He never thought he'd have to buy first

aid supplies and energy drinks from the pickpocket he arrested on a near-monthly basis, but if their interactions were ever as awkward for Bokunto as they were for him, he had a true talent for customer service by never letting him know.

Bakugo tips a few energy drinks into his basket, pausing before he tosses in a few bottles of tea, soda and coffee as well. At the candy aisle, he grabs three large mix-bags, seething as he does. Apparently, Eri's comments struck a nerve but didn't put too much of a damper on his absurd cravings. At the snack aisle, he fills the first basket with three Taki bags, but seems to be at a loss for what should go into the second. "Oi. The fuck does Shinsou like?"

Aizawa truly regrets wanting to leave early. Bakugo wouldn't have asked any other victim, and if he did, their response wouldn't be as incriminating as his. "I don't know."

Bakugo raises an eyebrow at him. "The fuck you mean, you don't know? He lives with you. You feed him, right? He ain't so damn twiggy because-"

"It's touching that you would make an effort like this," Aizawa interrupts, pleased to earn that frustrated growl that he intended with his words, as genuine as they were behind the mocking tone. "But Shinsou can't eat any of this. Just buy your own snacks so we can leave."

Bakugo plucks at one of the candy bags, glaring at him. "Tch, you don't know this shit? When he gets a question right, he gets a piece of candy. Positive reinforcement shit."

That must be why Kaminari's grades improved after what he thought was Sato's stash doubled in size. "As a teacher, I'm aware of that method." He's also aware that his students don't deserve it. "You can't feed Shinsou junk food, and he won't eat it anyway."

His statement of facts seems to be taken as encouragement to defy him, as Bakugo starts grabbing snacks at random, including things that he knows Bakugo doesn't like. And Aizawa doesn't like the reminder that he knows each of his students' preferences in food, but he still doesn't know Shinsou's.

Eri told him that she didn't like jello the second time he met her. It took a bit more time to work out what she *liked* to eat, but even before the festival he knew that she liked ketchup, especially because he used it to draw cats on her omurice.

"He doesn't like oatmeal," Bakugo mutters, shooting a glare at him that isn't nearly as impressive as he thinks it is. "So don't feed him that shit."

Out of all of the students who could have slipped up, he didn't think it would be Bakugo. He expected Midoriya to come to him with a concern, a battle between self-preservation and the urge to protect dancing behind his frozen green eyes when he asked, "How do you know that?"

Aizawa eagerly awaits a flustered denial from his student, even if he knows it won't be half as entertaining. Bakugo disappoints him, not for the first time. "The chat that Four Eyes set up. He talks a lot of shit in there, so I'm not being rude or shit by talking shit back to him. If he can dish it, he can take it."

Beyond the disappointment, he finds himself a little surprised that Bakugo had some level of self-awareness regarding his abrasive personality. That his student knew that it should be tempered for someone like Shinsou or Eri, for children who wouldn't know how to take his swearing and shouting for anything other than anger. Something that should be taken as a sign of danger, but Chisaki seemed to have kept his rage quiet.

“What kind of shit was he talking anyway? I’m learning, don’t make a fucking deal out of it, but if he said some off-the-wall bullshit earlier I need to beat the shit out of him,” Bakugo asks, his tone unnaturally demure in a way that can’t quite be blamed on his attention being focused on a box of fruit gummies.

“He was testing whether you could understand JSL, and encouraged you to work on your ability to threaten others,” Aizawa answers, wondering if he should have answered more vaguely to further encourage Bakugo’s interest in JSL. “I believe he also gave you a sign-name. It’s the first one he’s given, so you should feel honored by that.”

There’s an obvious fight to keep from smiling playing on his student’s features, before he turns it into that smug leer that someone should really tell him to stop doing. It’s incredibly villainous, especially from a hero in training. “Oh? I get a name before the brat does? Or you?”

It’s a fight to not betray his own amusement. “It appears so, ‘Blast-chan.’ ”

The pay-off is *glorious*.

Frozen indignation gives way to rage, which in turn causes Bakugo to start destroying the box of fruit gummies as his hands turn into fists, struggling not to bring his quirk into play out of habit. And when he realizes that he has to buy the gummies now, despite how he seemed to still be unconvinced beforehand, the ensuing screech is deafening.

Aizawa has nothing else to say, keeping his attention on the customer swaying from intoxication as he enters the snack aisle. It’s not someone he knows from his own hero work, not a quirk that he can predict, but he’s relieved to put some distance between them when Bakugo stomps into the toy aisle, cackling to himself as he picks up a miniature purple haired Troll doll and throws it into the basket with childish glee.

Bokunto repeats his greeting as he begins scanning, which Bakugo dignifies with a surprisingly pleasant “Yo.” Aizawa keeps his eyes trained on the wall behind the check-out, finding himself a bit proud of Bokunto when he finds his picture under several ‘Employee of the Month’ slots, including the current one. He’s glad that he’s found honest work to be something to take pride in, instead of the number of wallets he could snatch by making his victim’s hips go numb with his quirk.

Before Bakugo takes out his wallet, Aizawa plucks the troll doll out of the pile to place in front of his student, handing his card to the cashier to cover the rest of the purchases. “Oi, I can pay for that shit-”

“You’re not spending your own money to feed my ward,” Aizawa interrupts, fully aware that several of those items were still meant for Bakugo. “Especially when he won’t eat any of this.”

Bakugo smirks at him, spinning the doll around by its hair. “Sure you can cover that, Mr. Lowest-Paid-Hero-In-The-Industry? Don’t want you breaking the fucking bank on some Takis.”

Aizawa seethes when he notices that Bokunto applied his employee discount. “It sounds like I need to assign a financial responsibility project, so that each of you can be prepared to make a budget with whatever income you find after graduation.” 30 pages. *At least* .

And a maximum of 50 for Midoriya and Iida.

He still makes Bakugo carry the purchases, his arms decorated with bulging plastic bags that look even more ridiculous when he shoves his hands in his pockets, out of habit it seems. The silence

doesn't suit him anymore, now that he remembers that the student who has the least quirk control will be in the same space with a ward who both knows how to trigger it, and will probably dissociate if he succeeds. "Present Mic will tell you again, but the moment you use your quirk, this study session will end."

Bakugo scoffs behind him. "It's not a fucking trigger. He didn't fucking flinch earlier."

As true as that was, Aizawa wouldn't trust it. "Regardless, that's my stipulation, and I expect you to not disappoint me. Don't take this as an opportunity to pry into the investigation either."

There's a falter in Bakugo's steps that worries him, but he doesn't have to wait long to know the reason for it. "He said some shit about bleach baths. You know about that, right?"

Aizawa regrets not having Shinsou's phone bugged, and wonders if it was possible to do so after the fact. Even if it contributed little to the investigation, he would at least know about these kinds of incidents, be able to help his students afterwards when he should have known to prepare them beforehand. "I do. How many of you know about that?"

"Everyone. All Might gave us the fucking rundown, how to handle trauma spills like a pro. Ashido cried, but she knows to keep that shit to herself from now on," Bakugo answers, his use of the term 'trauma spill' a good indication that some part of this Trauma Project was working as intended. "Is that useful information shit or-"

"Report it to me, and I'll determine that," Aizawa interrupts. As much as he wants to keep his students away from the investigation, if Shinsou did tell them something relevant, he needed to know. "Was there anything else said in the chat?"

He glances over his shoulder when Bakugo doesn't answer immediately, relieved to find his student cocking his head in thought. "He had a codename, '27.' And he might have shot someone, I don't know. Bitch talks too vague. He had gun training."

"Training accidents aren't usually fatal," Aizawa lies, and hopes that much is enough to keep his own students from feeling the sick mix of guilt and horror inside himself.

Shinsou might have killed people.

That was something that Aizawa hadn't allowed himself to fathom, stopping himself when he realized that he clearly knew how. Shinsou had been trained, he had been trained well and for a purpose. A purpose he chose to ignore, chose to focus on the lesser ways he could have been used for it.

He could have been used to kill. His quirk could incapacitate someone much like a paralysis quirk. By the time he had the weapon ready, he would be too close to the victim for them to fight back. The pain that would interrupt his control would be a fatal blow regardless.

It's very little relief to know that Shinsou had likely never made that choice on his own. That Shinsou had likely never done anything out of his own free will. But the blood on his hands would never be washed away, if anything, it would be more difficult for him to bear as time went on. As he further integrated into honest society, and found fewer and fewer people around him with hands that were still stained that way.

He hopes that he's wrong. That no matter what Shinsou had done, he had never been forced to go that far.

"Sensei," Bakugo calls, and Aizawa looks up to see the front gate of UA in front of him. "Zoning

out or some shit?”

“It’s been a long day,” Aizawa says, answering Bakugo’s unspoken concern. As the gates began to open, he plucked a bottled coffee from Bakugo’s bag, frowning to himself about the brand though he knew it was better than what the police station would offer.

“Oi, get your-“

“I bought it,” Aizawa reminds him, cracking the seal on the lid. “Behave yourself, or I’ll double your page count.”

Bakugo glares, then turns his head to the side with a hiss. “I’m not some fucking extra. You think the next number one hero can’t handle Shitsou? I’ll screw his head on so tight you’ll be begging him to shut up.”

As unlikely as that was, Aizawa would truly appreciate it.

Shinsou needed to talk.

*

Shitsou wasn’t stupid, and holy fuck, was that refreshing.

Kaminari wasn’t stupid either, but his dumbass made it seem that way because the little shit couldn’t focus right. Sero tried to distract him whenever shit got too hard for his bitch ass, and Ashido whined too goddamn much. But Shitsou *got* shit. Explain something once and he *fucking* got it.

“Six candies over ten, divided by two over eight. Reduce that shit too,” Bakugo ordered, setting up the next problem on the floor. Shitsou only had one chair in his room, and there’s no way in *hell* he’s sitting on that bed, there’s no telling what that freak was into. And holy fuck, was his room boring as *shit*. Too fucking organized, too much gray. It looked like the bedroom for a serial killer or some military guy who never got that shit out of their system.

As soon as Shitsou leaves to take a piss, he’s definitely fucking up his lights to spell out ‘dick’ or something. Give this place some kind of fucking personality other than the creepy fucking cats on his desk.

And the one on his bed, but that might be Eri’s. It’d be fucking weird if Shitsou slept with a stuffed animal. He couldn’t even bully him for it, it’d just be *that* fucking weird.

“*Two and two-o fifths. Or two hu-undred and fo-orty perce-ent .*” Shitsou’s creepy fucking Alexa app is going to give him nightmares if he keeps using it. It’s probably a good thing he hasn’t shown it to Kaminari, dumbass wouldn’t be able to handle himself.

“Oi, this shit too easy for you now? Talking shit about percentages?” Bakugo goads, but he’s fucking impressed. He mentioned that shit *once* and Shitsou has it down. “Fine, let’s start some fucking Algebra. Congrats on passing second grade.”

Shitsou’s still too stupid to know he’s supposed to eat the candy after Bakugo throws it at his face, but Sensei must know something about that. He just catches it and puts it in his pocket, but that’s

probably some kind of reinforcement shit going on. Fucking irritating that his reflexes are that good, even when he's talking shit on his phone.

It's *stupidly* fucking irritating that the bitch never cracks a smile. If Half n Half was the queen of resting bitch face, then Shitsou's the fucking emperor. He just stares with those creepy dead eyes and doesn't say shit, and that's probably why people thought he was stupid in the first place. It looks like there isn't a single fucking crayon in that box, but apparently, it's a fucking megapack in there.

Shitsou looks at the door, which Flaccid Mic said had to be open like he's expecting some gay shit to go down, then goes back to his phone. Fucker hadn't put it down the whole time, but he barely fucking used it. “*You kno-ow about my quirk o-or talki-ing shi-it.*”

Bakugo rolls his eyes. He's not about to catch some attitude from fucking *Alexa's* bitch ass. “It's ‘Do you know,’ I know you know that shit. Got this whole fucking library over here, so fix your fucking grammar.”

Shitsou keeps doing that creepy fucking stare while Bakugo opens another energy drink. This bullshit project was kicking his ass, and if he pulled another all-nighter he'd probably have more eyebags than Shitsou. He could use the study break anyway. As smart as Shitsou was, shit would stop sticking if they just kept at it.

“You've got to talk to use it, right? So it's a vocal type,” Bakugo pauses to take a drink. Even with the Alexa, Shitsou didn't say enough to have a fucking conversation, so he had to pick up the slack, and now he's fucking parched from all the talking. “Voice quirks are fucking weird with trauma. Sometimes they stop talking, but you talk too fucking much for that. So, instead of your trauma shit messing with your voice, it's your quirk messing with your voice. Got that?”

Shitsou's face twitches, which is the closest fucking thing he's gotten to showing a real fucking human emotion this whole study session, and keeps typing shit on his phone that he keeps deleting. Bakugo just waits, even if it's fucking irritating because apparently there's some processing shit going on, and he knows he can't interrupt that shit. “*Pa-art of quirk wo-orks. You're wro-ong.*”

Bakugo raises an eyebrow. “Part of it? The fuck does that mean? There's still some shit you can do without talking?”

There's another fucking processing thing going on, and holy fuck does Bakugo feel bad for therapists and shit. They must be bored as fuck at their jobs having to wait for people to talk instead of just making them say shit and shoving them out the door. “*Qui-uirk slips are a symptom of what you-ou're talki-ing about.*”

Bakugo groans, he's fucking *tired* of this bullshit. “Seriously, can you fucking talk right?! Ask a fucking question instead of saying this shit, I'm not gonna beat your ass for it, alright?!”

He can't tell if it's the energy drink or just Shitsou getting on his fucking nerves, but he needs to blow off some fucking steam before he blows something else up. Shitsou's used to this by now, he doesn't fucking blink when Bakugo gets up and walks through this creepily normal ass apartment to the front door. Seriously, he didn't think Shitsei lived in a place that had lightbulbs, but apparently the loudmouth civilized him or some shit.

It's just *so* fucking creepy to see Flaccid Mic doing something so fucking domestic like *cooking*. He figured he just screamed until a flock of birds dropped out of the sky and then started eating them off the ground or some shit. The fact that his teachers are so fucking *normal* is too fucking weird for him.

“Smoke break?” Flaccid Mic asks, and Bakugo only nods because he might lock him out if he doesn’t. Eri still tries to mean mug him before he even gets in the way of her Sailor Moon marathon, and the brat needs to stop because it’s *fucking adorable*.

He should feel bad for thinking that, since the brat can’t fucking smile and shit so she probably doesn’t know how to glare at people either, but he can keep that shit to himself.

And probably teach her how if Shitsou ever learns to calm his little sister complex down to a normal fucking obsession.

He fires off bigger explosions than he usually would, because if Shitsou wants to talk about his quirk being fucked, he’s probably going to get into what happened during the raid. And Bakugo’s going to be fucking *pissed* that he never got the chance to tear Overhaul’s bitch ass codpiece wearing face apart. After he did shit to Eri, did shit to Shinsou, nearly got Kirishima fucking *killed* with that bitch fucker Rappa, he hopes that he sees that trash bird ass bitch for himself. Hands or no hands, he’ll tear that fucker to shreds.

Shitsou does this creepy fucking thing where he never fucking relaxes. He hasn’t even fucking moved since Bakugo left. Shitsei probably has to give him permission to scratch his nose sometimes, and that’s just *fucked* up.

“Fuck it, you know what? I’ll give you a freebie but next time you have a question, *say that shit*,” Bakugo says, taking another drink while he flexes his hands, making sure that the nitroglycerin channels feel sore and drained. “I don’t have fucking research on that because no one’s fucking done any. No one’s figured out that it might be a fucked up quirk instead of a fucked up head, but if you’re having quirk slips, it’s probably a sign that it’s your quirk being fucked up.”

Shitsou doesn’t look up from his phone, apparently he knows where the letters are now. “*Your turn. Two que-estions.*”

Right, this shit. Fucking yakuza bastard needs to keep his books balanced. “What’s the fucking deal with you and eating shit? Shitsei said you can’t eat shit and you *won’t* eat shit, but you’ve got to be eating something.”

“*I do-on’t eat shit. I eat foo-od. Stra-ange concept for you-ou, apparently.*”

Fucking smartass. “That’s not what I fucking meant.”

Shitsou tilts his head, looking at his phone while he types, like there’s some big fucking revelation that he’s programming into Alexa to say. Like that villain school place trained him out of eating or some shit, and now he just photosynthesizes. “*Ca-an’t eat. Was fo-orce fed. Me-essed up no-ow, I gue-ess.*”

“That trash bird fucker force fed you?” Bakugo asks, and he doesn’t expect Shitsou to fucking *giggle* at that.

He looks fucking terrified for a second, then he huffs and covers his mouth with his hand like that’ll stop his shoulders from shaking. He’s fucking *giggling*, and it’s only half as creepy as it is when he’s trying to be a fucking robot.

“‘Trash bird’ really that fucking funny? Ask Deku to roast him sometime. I don’t know how Endeavor pissed in his Lucky Charms, but that shit was hilarious,” Bakugo decides candy isn’t big enough for Shitsou finally emoting and shit, so he grabs a grape soda that *was* going to be Sero’s, but fuck it. Shitsou deserves it.

And Shitsou still doesn't fucking get the whole reward system. He takes it, but it looks like he's trying to figure out how to put it in his fucking pocket.

"Pop the top and drink it, dipshit. Unless you're gonna break your fucking fingers, being all malnourished and shit," Bakugo tells him, and *finally* Shitsou gets with the program. Basic fucking instructions work with everything but candy, apparently.

He takes the tiniest fucking baby sip and nearly spits it out, hand over his mouth like he didn't fucking know....

Fuck, this bitch has never had a fucking *soda* before. "Oi, it's carbonated, so it's got tiny fucking bubbles in it. Is it too fucking spicy for you or some shit?"

Shitsou shakes his head, like it's a fucking ordeal to swallow the three fucking drops he's got in his mouth. He just stares at the can like it fucked his mother and shat on his Christmas presents, then picks up the phone to explain that shit. "*Ba-ad taste. Carbona-ation weird, but I do-on't hate i-it.*"

"Grape tastes like shit, I'll get something else next time," Bakugo thinks about handing him the bacon soda that Shitty Hair likes, but that'd probably put him off soda forever. "Answer the fucking question though."

"*Po-olice did.*" Well, wasn't that just *fucked* up? Villains fucked up Shitsou's head, hands, quirk and probably everything else, then the fucking *police* finished off his digestive system.

Shitsou doesn't look like that bothers him, but he'd probably look that way if someone was tearing his fucking toenails out and salting them in front of him. "They're investigating that villain school bullshit? And yeah, I know it's not a fucking villain school, but whoever fucked you up before Overhaul needs to go down. Whatever Stockholm bullshit you've got going on--"

"*My tu-urn. How o-old are you-u?*" Alexa's bitchass can fuck right off, that distraction is fucking *weak*.

"The fuck you mean--" Bakugo stops himself to grab a couple pink Starbursts to throw at Shitsou's head, the bitch fucking earned it. "I'm 16, same as you. Congrats on the question shit."

One of them goes into his fucking reward pocket, but Shitsou *actually* eats the other. He looks the whole thing over first, like he fucking believes those razorblades-in-candies hoaxes, but he still eats it. Fucking progress. He throws another one at him after Shitsou doesn't spit it out immediately.

"They really didn't tell you shit," Bakugo says, mostly to himself, because he's the only fucker in this room that knows Shitsou doesn't know anything he's supposed to. He doesn't know how fucking old he is or when his birthday is, probably doesn't even know his address and every fucking toddler on the street knows that shit about themselves. Shitsei and Micsei just fucking put him in this boring ass room and figured Shitsou would ask for shit, but he fucking *doesn't*, because he has issues about that shit. And how the fuck is he supposed to know what he doesn't know?

"*Chewy. I mi-ight have eaten the-ese before. A-and they di-idn't te-ell me much. They thi-ink I'm trau-umatized.*" Shitsou keeps staring at the other candies on the floor like he doesn't have 50 of them in his fucking pocket.

And he's fucking *stupid*.

They're all fucking idiots, this is the idiot dorm, fucking *Eri* is the only one who should shower alone, holy fuck.

“Okay, *bitch* ? You’re fucking traumatized. If you came out of that shit without some screws rolling around, that’d just mean you didn’t have any to begin with,” Bakugo explains, and starts counting down the reasons why Shitsou’s fucked for him because now he knows the fucker *can* count. “You’re jumpy as fuck, you probably don’t sleep and if you do, you have fucking nightmares, you fucking ascended to a whole new stratosphere because Ojiro grabbing your hair freaked you that fucking bad, you probably get sweaty and pissed off for no reason, and it’s not the fucking hormones, it’s because *you’re fucking traumaumatized*. ”

He sees the fucking lightbulb flicker on before Shitsou throws a cinderblock at it. “ *Eri i-is traumati-ized. I’m no-ot*. ”

Bakugo throws his head against the bed - fuck it, Shitsou probably got bad-touched and can’t do shit anyway - and tries doing that massage-thing on his forehead that Shitty Hair said would help. And it fucking *doesn’t*. “You’re both. Fucking. Traumatized. Dipshit. PTSD isn’t a fucking sharing stick that only one of you gets to have, you both went through shit and you both need fucking therapy.”

Shitsou *seriously* doesn’t get the reinforcement shit, because he starts tossing candies at Bakugo while he’s trying to have a fucking *moment* before he quirks out. He swats one back at Shitsou and he still catches it, the *fucker*.

“Fine, answer these questions and it’s fucking interview hour starring me, I don’t give a shit. You got beat to shit, right?” Shitsou nods, and it’s fucking *creepier* because he doesn’t look bothered by that shit at all. He was more fucking bothered by *carbonation* than getting beat to shit. “They used their quirks while they were beating you?” Bitch fucking *rolls his eyes* like he’s saying ‘What else are they gonna do?’ and nods. “Yelled at you and called you names? Targeted your emotions and shit? Didn’t feed you?” Nod, shrug, nod. The shrug is probably a fucking nod because emotions are still fucking alien to the fucker. “They do shit that you fucking had to show on a doll or some shit?”

Shitsou doesn’t understand that, and he *hopes* they fucking asked those questions at the police station. He wears enough hoodies for Bakugo to start thinking shit went down, but he’s not fucking sure. One of those mafia fuckers might have just tattooed dicks all over him after they put that giant fucking logo on his back. At least someone took that shit off of him over the weekend, wearing their fucking label like a billboard for the bird fuckers probably fucked with his head even more.

“Did someone touch you in your.... Like, your fucking-” *Thank fucking god* , he shakes his head. People don’t get over that shit easy, and sometimes it perpetuates and shit. And whether he thinks Shitsou’s cool or not, if he perpetuates any kind of shit on Eri, he’s fucking *dead* . “Did a mental quirk get into your head a lot?”

Shitsou *freezes*. Not even fucking breathing, and that’s probably some fucking dissociation shit going on. It must have been fucking awful if it was worse than all that other shit, all the shit that Overhaul could have done and probably did since he was a fucking necromancer.

“It’s fine, don’t fucking answer that,” Bakugo tells him, looking at Shitsou’s feet to see if he took his socks off, and he didn’t. He’s not sure if he’ll eat the Takis, eating is apparently a fucking process, and that naming shit in the room thing probably won’t work either. “If you can hear me, take off your fucking socks, I don’t wanna touch that shit-”

Shitsou comes out of it, doing something with his hand like he has a specific fucking sign for ‘I’m logged the fuck back in, what happened?’ which is just fucking great. Dissociation is some heavy fucking shit, and he does it so regularly that he has a fucking code for it. Fuck therapy, bitch needs

some institutionalization shit going on.

“Cool, we’re back now,” Bakugo says, trying to play it off but *fuck*, what kind of quirk got into his head to do that shit? “There’s some grounding shit I can tell you to do when that shit happens. Don’t know if it fucking helps, sure as shit doesn’t for-”

“*Mental qui-irks. Why ask?*”

Shitsou doesn’t look like he can handle that shit, despite what Alexa says. He still looks like he’s about to piss himself, and Bakugo is trying to project that neutral, calming bullshit to help, but he knew it fucking wouldn’t. It’s fucking unnatural. “I’m not fucking answering that. You’re going to log out again and I’m not dealing with that shit. Ask something else.”

Shitsou talks some shit with his hands, then gets up, and Bakugo’s fucking surprised he can do shit like that of his own free will. And then he just fucking leaves.

And Bakugo doesn’t even feel like fucking with his lights anymore.

He can hear Shitsou talking to Eri, so he knows he’s not taking a piss or anything. He can’t hear what they’re saying until the brat says ‘Chewy.’

And then he remembers that Shitsou’s not fucking stupid.

He kept putting shit in his pocket for *Eri*. Bakugo probably should have told him there’s a whole fucking bag for the brat, but it probably wouldn’t have made a difference. It’s not even fucking creepy anymore, it’s just *sad*. They need to make a whole new fucking disorder for this fucking Eri Obsessive Compulsion bullshit, and Shitsou is patient zero. He’s fucking terminal at this point, and hopefully Deku’s next. Hopefully Deku actually dies from it.

Bakugo starts pulling out his phone to see if Shitty Hair ever texted him back about Ashido’s bitchfest. Apparently she had some fucking grand scheme to fix Shitsou with high fives, and he ruined that shit, but she can get over it. But when he grabs it, his hand fucks up and his phone goes flying under the bed.

Bakugo groans, and hopes Shitsou doesn’t hide some fucked up shit under there, then he realizes he’s *so fucking tired*. He needs some fucking sleep because this carpet feels fucking *plush*. UA seriously fucked over the student dorms if they had this shit on hand for teachers.

He slaps at his phone and manages to grab it, even if he has to drag himself halfway under the bed, and then he sees it.

Shitsou has a diary.

It’s probably fucked up that he wants to read it. People need to keep some shit private, but he also knows Shitsou is fucked in the head, and someone needs to know how bad it is. He might be thinking about doing some stupid shit like hurting himself, and if he is, he’d write about it in his secret fucking diary. And Bakugo could find *someone* to help him with that shit, because Shitsei and Micsei don’t seem to be doing shit for him.

But as soon as he grabs it, he realizes that shit might be too fucking late.

There’s a *huge* fucking knife sticking out of the pile of crap under there. He grabs it to see if there’s some kind of sign it’s been used for that shit, but there isn’t. It’s warped and burned, with the serrations folding in places and black marks around the end. Fucking weird, but there’s a lot of weird shit under here.

He grabs the Tupperware next, wondering if Shitsou has drugs or something, but instead it's moldy cookies. *The fuck.* A knife and cookies and....

Shitsei's goggles .

Bakugo grabs them because *there's no fucking way.* There's no fucking way Shitsou actually *stole* these from Shitsei. Even when Shitsei sleeps, he uses some sonar detection bullshit to know where everyone is, but Shitsou must have hacked that shit and snatched them off his head. But why the fuck would Shitsou want them? Why the fuck does he have this shit-

Someone grabs his ankle and pulls him out from under the bed so fast his chin gets rug burn, but before he can kick the fucker for that, they knee him in the back and pulls his fucking hair to go in for a chokehold.

Fucking *what the fuck fucking-*

Fucked up hands too close to his face and someone behind him and he can't fucking get out and *he's fucking getting out just watch he'll destroy this whole fucking building he'll fucking destroy it all tear it to fucking pieces he's getting the fuck out they can't keep him here*

“-of Bakugo.”

Flaccid Mic.

He's up. Shitsou let him go. There's something burning his hand.

Sensei's goggles. He melted the shit out of them, black all over except for the bits that are sticking to his skin like microwaved putty. He shakes his hand so it fucking drops, maybe it takes some skin with it, he doesn't care.

Flaccid Mic looks like he doesn't know if they should have some fucking heart to heart bullshit or if he needs to keep Shitsou from going postal, keeps looking between them, but Bakugo makes that decision for him. “I'm fucking leaving before you murder my ass over some moldy fucking cookies.”

Brat doesn't even try to mean mug him, and he wishes she did because she's fucking *crying.*

Fuck.

Fuck.

He can't even quirk that shit out of his system when he gets outside.

Overwhelming Emotion

Chapter Summary

27 breaks down after the events of the previous chapter, but Togata has a surprising solution. Yamada makes a desperate call, and Eri finds that having her quirk at UA is still unpleasant, even if it isn't as bad as at the 8 Precepts.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Suspicion of self-harm

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou hid items that were important to him such as a clump of his hair from getting a haircut in Chapter 5, Aizawa's goggles, and Yaoyorozu's note from the first day of school. Bakugo found part of his stash in the previous chapter, and after Shinsou attacked him, drew Yamada's attention to it. Eri's horn has been growing, indicating that her quirk has been building up, and her horn grows in moments of pain. Bakugo asked Shinsou several questions to determine how many traumatic experiences he had gone through, and Shinsou dissociated after learning that mental quirks "getting into your head a lot" was one of them.

Trash trash trash he doesn't care he doesn't it doesn't hurt trash trash it's trash he doesn't care

"Shinsou," Yamada doesn't even know where to *start*. He's not as good at this as Hari, or maybe the things he's picked are just that stupid just trash trash trash.

He doesn't even know about the things he's pulled from the trash he'll laugh he'll make him eat some of it it's trash he'll laugh it's stupid it's trash he's trash

"Yama, don't say mean things!" Eri whines, she's crying, she shouldn't. She knows it's trash, she's more important. It's trash trash trash trash

"I-I'm not, I just--" knocking. Something more important. Someone to mock him, ' *Look at what our little trash collector has this year.* '

"Twenny," Eri whines, holding onto one of his legs. Holding him there. Her toes are curling into the carpet, she's unbalanced, she might fall, she's important, shouldn't worry about him, worry about trash.

"It's fine," 27 says, his voice is odd. He's odd, he doesn't care. Eri's worried. "I don't care. It's trash."

Trash trash trash trash trash trash

“-not wo-orking *please* Mi-irio!”

27 turns around, he still can't breathe, can barely see but if Mirio is here he'll *kill* him taking Eri taking her while he's away *he knew* never doubted Mirio is

Is holding Eri while she cries.

Weak useless weak *useless useless useless* . Eri doesn't need him anymore she has heroes he gave them to her he's nothing he's trash they'll get rid of

“-reathe, just like this,” Mirio says, he smiles he still *fucking* smiles he hates that smile it's not right it's abnormal it's

Kind.

He hates it.

27 is crying. Has been for a while, he wipes his tears away with his still unreal hands, still without any weight, without sensation, tries to hide it. Breathes, he was told to. In. Out. *Stupid* , so stupid he needs to be told how to *breathe* .

“In. And out,” smile. That smile he doesn't trust, doesn't understand. Threat. Where's Eri? “Eri's in her room with Mic-sensei. Let's just do a few more breaths together. In. Out.”

In. Out. In. Out. In. Out.

“Good.” Training word. Mirio looks around, doesn't look down but he wants to. He's waiting for Yamada to come back so they can go through it together. “It's probably really frustrating for you, isn't it?” He doesn't say it the right way, the way he means it, just like he doesn't stop smiling when he should. “You know, Tamaki showed me a really neat trick for when you feel really overwhelmed. Do you want me to show you?”

Anything. Anything to make him less useless. He can't afford to be, and if it's anything like the tricks that Nemoto taught him, the way he pinched and pulled at his flesh to demonstrate how to inflict that same mind-numbing pain on others, he'd be grateful. Pain, he wants pain, it will clear his mind and make him remember.

“We'll use the laptop, I'll just...” Mirio stops, hands hovering over the laptop before he pulls out the chair, knocking into the food and drinks that Bakugo left. “Just take a seat and turn on the laptop, so we can get started.”

Long orders. He's not used to giving them, but 27 doesn't care, he obeys. Watches the logo for the computer appear, goes to the places that Mirio tells him to click. Blank document for talking. He wants to trick him into talking about The Miasma.

“Now, you can just start typing whatever comes to your mind. Everything you're feeling right now, you can just type it out and get it out of you. Right now, you probably feel like a balloon ready to pop, but eventually you'll feel like the air is getting let out, you know?”

He doesn't know, but he knows this is a distraction. Mirio looks at the door, thinking he's won, thinking he can use Eri now for her quirk, force her to use it. He turns back and sees that 27 saw, that he knows, they both know, they can stop playing this game. 27 will kill him, he will, he's going to use Eri if he doesn't and he needs to protect her, even from the heroes that were supposed

to save her.

Mirio crouches down on the balls of his feet - bad move, limits his mobility, if 27 takes out his knife right now he'd be dead in minutes, but 27 doesn't. Should, but doesn't. Useless. Useless *useless* - "You know, I never told you why I wanted to be a hero," Mirio says, picking at the hair next to his ear. Embarrassment, maybe, but that doesn't suit him.

No. It's pain. Painful for him to talk about, but he's distracting himself from that.

"I picked the name 'Lemillion,' as a promise to save one million people. That's not all that much, considering how many people All Might has saved, but I wanted to have a goal. And honestly, I kind of thought I'd beat it," Mirio laughs, barely a huff of air as his smile turns to a grimace for a moment. *Pain*, it's that painful for him. "But that doesn't really matter now. Even if I saved a *billion* people, I couldn't call myself a hero if I had to use a little girl's pain to do it, you know?"

It *hurts*.

"But, it's not so bad! I can do a lot of things even without my quirk! I'm sure I can even find ways to still be a hero. But I'm not really worried about it." There's a real smile, not that mask, and he knows it's the real one because it hurts Mirio to wear it. "I think that saving you two is enough for me. And I think that Sir Nighteye would be very proud to see that."

It hurts because he's not lying.

Mirio is a hero. And 27 hurt him. He's hurting him. He could save him from that, but 27 isn't a hero.

27 is trash. Useless. A criminal.

He's alone. Mirio left.

27 types.

*

Yamada is trying not to lose it.

He's also trying very hard not to blame himself or Shouta. Shouta didn't really think Yamada would agree to have Bakugo over for this study session, and even if he wasn't entirely on board, there was no way he could say no.

First, Shouta should know Yamada is *not* going to be the bad guy here and tell Shinsou he can't have friends - *that's* Shouta's job. Second, Yamada knows that he and Shouta are absolutely *terrible* at math, and Bakugo isn't. Third, *Eri wanted to learn JSL*. From *him*. How could anything bad happen after something that he's wanted for so long just came out of the blue like that?

Shouta should have known better. That pessimistic streak of his is great for avoiding situations like these.

Shinsou seemed a little nervous when they got home, which was understandable given that this

was a pretty big step for him. Even if Bakugo wouldn't be Yamada's first choice as a friend for Shinsou, he could tell that Shinsou liked him. And Bakugo did know a little JSL, which probably made it easier on Shinsou, especially after he spent the entire day as a mute without his phone, unable to talk to his friends in 1-A like he had all weekend.

But when Bakugo finally arrived, it turned out a lot better than he expected. Bakugo didn't yell half as much as he usually did, and whenever he or Eri spied on their little math lesson from the hallway, it seemed like it was going well. Shinsou was learning a lot, and Bakugo was behaving himself as much as he could. Things were going well.

Then he heard screaming. And explosions.

And saw Shinsou holding Bakugo to his chest with a forearm around his mouth, a hand around one of Bakugo's wrists while Bakugo's free hand was trying to reach for Shinsou's face, his quirk muffled by whatever he was destroying in his hand.

Shinsou wasn't dissociating but he was panicking close to it. It took Yamada a while to convince him to let Bakugo go, but once he did, Bakugo snapped out of his rage between one breath and the next.

Then he dropped Shouta's goggles, and Yamada realized there was a *knife* on the floor. His missing bread knife, the one he thought Shouta got rid of after Shinsou tried to burn himself with it.

Shinsou was getting closer to the edge, and Bakugo wasn't that far off from his, but the sight of the knife kept Yamada from protesting too much when Bakugo decided to leave. They needed to talk about that, *now*, and Yamada should have known, should have kept a better eye on it. Shinsou wears a lot of hoodies and there's no telling what he could have done to himself by now.

But then Eri threw her arms around his legs, begging him not to be mean, and Yamada remembered the goggles. The cookies that Bakugo mentioned.

And he *really* should have known about this beforehand.

Mirio, the hero that he was, came just in time. Eri was upset, Shinsou was having a meltdown, and as much as Yamada wished he had a cloning quirk, he didn't. He thought that Mirio could calm Eri down while he talked to Shinsou, but it didn't work out that way.

Shinsou wasn't coming out of it. Eri could only get him to say a few words before he shut down again, and when she started begging Mirio to fix Shinsou because 'it's her job,' Yamada's heart *broke*.

They had encouraged that. They relied on Eri to keep Shinsou grounded, and she picked up on that and took it to heart. They put that weight on a 5 year old girl, and now they needed to undo it. They were the adults, they were the caretakers, and Eri had enough to worry about.

Her horn grew again before it finally took its toll, and between the tears and exhaustion from her quirk, she finally found a fitful sleep. While Yamada had been hoping Mirio could just keep an eye on Shinsou, make sure he didn't hurt himself during that spell, he was surprised to hear the sound of the keyboard coming from Shinsou's room and the sight of Mirio sitting on the couch.

Mirio had gotten through to Shinsou during that spell. As much as Yamada loved and appreciated the young hero, it kind of felt like a slap in the face. But Yamada needed the wake-up call.

And with both wards taken care of and Mirio ready to let him know if that changed, Yamada went to his bedroom to make a *very* belated phone call.

'Hi Mom! Been a while! Life is crazy.' Yamada signed. As much as he prefers using JSL, PSJ was easier to slip back into than any other language he learned. It always came from a special place for him.

'Hi-Hi! Sweet baby, how are you?' His mom signs back, her signs far more fluid from everyday use.

Yamada smiles, but he still has to blink back a few tears. It really has been too long since he called her. *'Doing okay! I have very big news for you! I feel bad that I didn't tell you before. Me and Shou have wards!'*

Instead of the big smile and a conversation about how his mom doesn't *technically* have grandkids yet, she gives him a sly grin, slowly signing, *'I figured. You're on the news for radio show. Had to listen. I knew it already, Hi-Hi. Hiding from your mother, tsk, tsk.'*

Yamada covers his face with his hands, part of it because he must have been embarrassingly obvious on his show. And part of it was to let a few tears out, because his mom *never* listens to his radio show anymore.

She used to listen to every podcast, and she tuned in to every big event, but as she got older, her hearing aids became too painful to wear all the time. She never wears them now, and never listens to his shows, except the Christmas special. But out of any show she could have tuned in for, he's glad it was that one.

He's probably not hiding his tears very well when he wipes them away, but his mom doesn't comment on it. She just gives him that same look she always did right before she hugged him tight enough to squeeze the rest of his tears out. And he wishes that she could.

'Not hiding, just busy. Kids are a lot of work!' How his mother managed to have *eight kids* still amazes him. Eight kids, some with issues not too dissimilar to the two he has now, and not a single one of them ever doubted that she loved them. *Dammit*, he really should have called her sooner. *'E-R-I, or Eri is five. Picked her own sign name. VERY sweet, adorable, cute, and smart-'*

His mom starts nodding her head with a knowing look in her eye, and he sighs. This really might turn into the 'No, legally, we kind of have to give them away' conversation if he's not careful.

'S-H-I-N-S-O-U is the boy from the show. So smart, learning JSL really quickly. He's 16, fibbed on radio show. He's not HOH or anything, he's...' Yamada curls his fingers in a bit before he puts his hands together, taking a much needed breath. *'Mom, they've been through a lot. I don't know if I'm doing it right. I need advice.'*

His mom reaches up a hand to pat her phone, and despite the distance, he can feel it on his shoulder, before she pulls her teacup into view. He called at just the right time. *'I'm all ears, Hi-Hi.'*

He can't help but crack a smile at that old joke. *'S-H-I-N-S-O-U has a stash.'*

His mom smiles, holding her face with her hands before she signs. *'I love stash-ers! So many stories. How did you handle it?'*

'I haven't, he was having an episode,' Yamada frowns, running his hands through his hair to make a loose ponytail before he realizes he's just stalling. *'He had a knife. Last week he tried to burn himself with that knife. I can't take it from his stash. I can't let him keep it. What do I do?'*

His mom nods, taking a sip of tea while she looks off in thought. *'Hard. Can't let him harm, can't*

violate stash. '

' I think he had stashes found before, ' Yamada explains, frowning as he remembers how upset Eri had been. How convinced she was that he was going to 'be mean' to Shinsou because he had a stash. ' The situation he was in was bad. REALLY bad. He didn't have a lot, so I kind of expected stash-ing, but Eri said something that makes me think that people found his stashes and made fun of him for it. '

His mother shakes her head, full of pity for a boy she's never met. *' Very bad. Awful. Stashes can be the heart. All the things he loves. Can be control. Tell me about burn incident. '*

' Shou caught him, no harm, ' Yamada explains, pressing his hands together again before he decides that his mother should know this, even if he's not really supposed to disclose this much. It's his mother, and if she were a part of the criminal underworld, he would know by now. He's also pretty sure that the criminal underworld would be a lot smaller and better behaved if she was a part of it. ' A quirk put him inside two other people. Came out with patch of their skin. Tattoo. They were abusers to him. He tried to burn it off. Didn't tell anyone that it was there. Don't know if he harmed other times, but he might. '

' Shou close to him? ' His mother asks, bumping into that little sore spot that still hurts, even if the situation seems to be improving.

' So-so. Rough going. Not Shou's fault, Shinsou afraid- '

His mother sign-whispers his sign-name for Shinsou with a knowing smile, and he tries not to blush.

' Shinsou is afraid of him, sees threat. Getting better though. '

His mother nods, and the look in her eye tells him she already knows the answer. *' I don't think he will harm. Leave in stash. Could be control. Could be heart. Tell me about stash. '*

' I didn't see a lot. Cookies he made with other people. Shou's goggles. They were damaged. Should I replace? Ask to look through- '

' No. Invite only. Invite to take things, don't look without invitation. Show him your stash. Memory books. Tell him it's normal to keep things to remember. ' His mother smiles softly. ' Heart. I think it's heart. Control a little, because heart is frightening thing. Shou protected, may not understand, but he knows it's a feeling. He wants to keep it safe, to himself, own it. Understand it. '

Yamada smiles. He thinks she's probably right. He's not surprised that she knows Shinsou that deeply, even if she's never even met him. She's loved a lot of kids like him. *' Eri worries me. Shinsou and Eri were in bad situation together. Kept each other safe. Eri keeps Shinsou level. Helps from dissociating. She noticed. Eri thinks it's her job to wake out of dissociation. Guilty. I relied on Eri. How do I help her? '*

His mother's eyebrows furrow, sadness creeping into her smile. *' Very sad for you all. Very sad for Eri. No control over situation. Very scary. Good helper? '*

' VERY good. LOVES helping, ' Yamada brags, smiling to himself about every little chore Eri had assigned to herself with pride. But the more he thinks about it, the more tainted those memories become. ' Helps a lot. Too much? Eri was told she was helping at bad place. Perpetuating that. Stressing her out. My fault- '

' No, ' his mother signs, shaking her head. ' Happy helpers want to have reassurance. Yes, they're

good. Yes, they're useful. Not bad thing! Learn confidence! Sometimes, can't help. Helpers feel bad. Helpers need tasks they can do. Not ones that fail. Job not to wake Shinsou. Job to help Shinsou help self. Then good job. Reassure. Eri walk away as good helper. '

Yamada feels like the world has been lifted from his shoulders as he sighs. It was *that* easy. Eri could help and not have that burden, Shinsou could keep his stash. His mother hadn't even met his wards and she knew how to help them far better than he could.

He knew she would, she had fostered and adopted a lot of kids and dealt with the issues that came up from that enough times to be an expert. That's why he called her. But, still...

' Hard, mom. ' Yamada signs, try to fight the tears with a smile. It's a fight he's won plenty of times, but it hardly ever works with her. *' I'm a hero. Want to save them. It's hard. Slow, I know. Process. Want them to be happy. They're not. '*

His mom shakes her head, her eyes becoming a little more glassy, and now he really can't fight it anymore. He's an awful sympathy crier when it comes to his mom, and they've broken down sobbing in enough movie theatres to get banned from a few of them. *' Hi-Hi, you love. Your heart is so big. They feel it. That's enough. That's what I tell myself. Now tell yourself that too. '*

Yamada sniffs, wiping away his tears again as he laughs. *' This is not my style, mom. Making my mom cry. Awful villain. Never showed you pictures! You need to see my wards! Eri poses, so cute! Will kill me. Will die of cute overdose. Not lying, mom, she is too cute I can't stand it sometimes. '*

His mom laughs, the same loud and boisterous laugh that she's always had, while she wipes away her own tears. *' Will see! You can't hide them now! You win Christmas lottery. I will cheat. '*

She gives him a sly look that suggests that all the Christmas lotteries have been fixed, and he doesn't doubt it. They've always tended to favor whichever sibling had the youngest children for her to spoil, or whoever had been going through a rough patch.

He feels a little guilty for being so excited about that. His mother had a lot of obligations during the holidays with every family she had to visit. Since he and Shouta didn't have kids, and usually worked through Christmas anyway, they were fine with whichever day worked out best for his mom. She always seemed so frazzled when she arrived, but by the time she left she was swearing that their Christmas was her favorite, because everyone was fluent in sign.

He hopes that Shinsou would still be with them by Christmas.

He tries to ignore that thought, and everything that comes with it. He's crossed a line with the way he thinks about the wards, and he knows it could come back to bite him, especially with Shinsou. Eri wasn't likely to gain control of her quirk for a few years, but Shinsou's investigation couldn't last that long. He wouldn't be surprised if Naomasa was putting the pressure on Shouta right now, even though it's only been a week.

He knew that he should want that, he should want to catch the people who hurt Shinsou, the people who were creating Nomus out of hundreds of other victims just like him. But he didn't want to lose Shinsou either.

Yamada shakes his head, smiling at his mother. He wouldn't be able to hide this from her anyway, and he's pretty sure she's already figured it out. *' I'm excited for you to meet my kids. '*

He hasn't even admitted that to Shouta, but he was right. His mother just smiles at him like she already knows.

*

Eri doesn't like her quirk.

She really wishes she didn't have a cursed quirk. People tell her it's not cursed, and she knows she should believe what the heroes tell her more than anything that He told her, but the heroes don't know what her quirk is like.

It hurts sometimes, a lot. It makes her really tired. It makes her really mean sometimes, and that's the worst part. She's really mean to Twenny sometimes, and she doesn't want to be. Even when she's being mean, she's scared that she'll be so mean that he leaves, but she can't stop being mean because her quirk makes her mean. She really hates how that feels.

And she really hates how people look at her because of her quirk. She makes Yama scared sometimes, and she makes people pretend that they like her because they're scared that her quirk will start working if she gets upset.

And she doesn't like that they're right.

Twenny said when she gets hurt, her quirk starts working, but he might be a little wrong. Eri hasn't gotten hurt at all, and her horn is already too big. It's bigger than both of her hands, and it makes her head tilt to the side if she doesn't try to keep it up. She doesn't like that at all. Her horn makes her look even more ugly.

Eri hopes that Twenny doesn't think she's ugly.

She's been really bad, and she couldn't do her job right. Yama or Mirio saved Twenny while she was asleep, and even though they're heroes, they need Eri to save Twenny because it's her job. She was really good at it too, but her quirk makes her really bad at it now.

Eri stops at the door to see what Twenny is doing. If he's busy on the computer, then she probably shouldn't bother him because he might be doing investigation stuff, but he's cleaning his room up after Bakugo left it so messy. Eri hopes that she can help Twenny clean up, so he won't hate her so much for being so bad.

Twenny is a really good TV mom, because he has eyes in the back of his head, like TV moms do. Eri didn't even say anything, and he knows she's there. He stops putting things in the plastic bag and looks at her, and his face does a lot of weird things before he sits down on the floor and lifts up his arm to her.

Eri runs to hug him, and his arm wraps around her and his hand is on the back of her head. She sniffs and tries to breathe really deep, because she doesn't want to cry anymore. It really hurts to cry when her horn is this big. Twenny hugs her, and that means that he still likes her, even though she's ugly and bad.

Twenny is the best TV mom, because he knows all about Eri's horn. She doesn't even have to tell him it's hurting, but he pulls her back and starts rubbing around the bottom of it so it starts to feel better. And he tries to smile at her, but it's a whole lot like when she tries to smile, and it makes him look really tired. "I need to teach your heroes how to do this, just in case I'm not around when it starts hurting."

Eri shakes her head and throws her arms around Twenny again, and she's trying really hard not to cry, and stomping her feet kind of helps. "Mom, please don't leave, I'll be really good-"

"Eri, shh," Twenny starts rubbing her back and hums while he holds her really tight, and when she sits down on his lap he curls his legs up behind her. It makes her feel really warm, and safe. "Eri, I'm not going to leave. I'm sorry I scared you. I just think that other people should know about your horn tricks."

Twenny gives her a napkin to blow her nose into, and then gives her another before he flicks her horn really hard, hard enough that a lot of snot comes running out of her nose and her eyes get really watery and full-feeling. But after she blows her nose, she feels a lot better, and her head doesn't hurt nearly as bad as she thought it did.

"Now you feel better." Eri nods, because Twenny's voice gets kind of low and weird sounding when he asks questions now, just so Eri knows it's a question. "That's good. The heroes should know how to do those things if they're going to take care of you. If you're on a date with Mirio and your horn starts hurting, he needs to know how to make you really snotty."

"No!" Eri whines, and her face feels really hot. "I don't wanna get snotty on Mirio! Don't tell him!"

Twenny kind of laughs at her, but she *really* doesn't want him to tell Mirio. Mirio is a really cool guy, and everyone tells him that, but if Eri snotted on Mirio, then he would think that she's not cool at all. Even if Mirio wasn't mean, and didn't laugh at her or bully her, she'd still be really embarrassed.

"It's okay if you get snotty on me, Eri!" Mirio says, and Eri really wishes she was a TV mom so she would know he was standing in the doorway. "Tamaki always gets snot on me anyway. There was one year his allergies got REALLY bad, and every time he hid his face in my shirt, snot would get all over it. By the time I got home, my shirt was so snotty and crusty-"

Eri hides her face on Twenny's shoulder and whines, hoping Mirio would stop talking about gross stuff. This must be why Jirou and Momo always complain about boys being gross. Even Twenny is acting like a gross boy because Bakugo is a bad influence on him, so he definitely needs to stop being friends with Bakugo and start being friends with girls.

Twenny just pats her head, and Eri wonders if Kendo knows how to do that with her kids too. Maybe Kendo would be a really good friend for Twenny, because at least she wouldn't leave his room all messy after they hung out.

Eri looks up to tell Twenny that he should invite Kendo over the next time he needs to learn math, but he's looking at his phone. Before she can turn around to read what he's saying, his phone talks for him. "*An o-overwhelmi-ing emo-otion cau-uses the build u-up. I-it could a-also be the tri-igger. Tra-ash bird didn't te-est that tho-ough. Cou-uld be wrong.*"

Twenny bites his lip like he's really worried, but he shouldn't be, because Mirio was here to protect him. Eri looks up at Mirio, and he's smiling but it looks a little weird. "It could be overwhelming happiness?"

"*Cou-uld be wrong. Do-on't get yo-our hopes up.*"

"Well, that doesn't really change anything for me," Mirio said, smiling at Twenny like he really wants Twenny to see that it's okay, so he'll stop being so worried and shrink-y. "I already wanted to make Eri so happy that she can't stand it!"

Eri tilts her head, because that sounds kind of mean. “I don’t wanna be so happy that I don’t like it! I wanna be happy and like it.”

“It’s not like that, Eri,” Twenny says, and he starts rubbing her horn again before it even starts hurting. “You know how you get a lot of snot when your horn gets-”

“*Twenny*,” Eri whines, and she covers her face. She’s getting really mad that Twenny keeps being gross around Mirio.

“Your horn grows because it stores feelings up, kind of like that. If you start hurting too much, your horn grows to store some of that pain, but if you get too happy, it stores it up the same way,” Twenny explains, and he’s not as good at explaining things as Zawa, but Eri still kind of understands. “So, you might be able to make it start growing by being really happy, the same way hurting too much triggered it.”

“And I think that makes a lot of sense,” Mirio says. “It’s just like in *The Prettiest Unicorn Princess!* The unicorn princess’ tears only helped a few people, but her smile saved the whole kingdom! So, I think that if your quirk was full of your happiness instead of pain, my quirk would be even better than it was before!”

Eri doesn’t think Mirio knows that her horn doesn’t make her a Unicorn Princess, and he really should because it looks so ugly now, and it’s full of snot. But she doesn’t want to be mean and make him sad, so she tries to smile at him. “I’m gonna work really hard on being happy, Mirio!”

“And we’re all gonna help!” Mirio promises, and Eri’s really glad he will. It’s really hard for Eri to try to be happy sometimes, but the heroes and Twenny make that easy a whole lot of the time.

“Don’t worry so much about it, though,” Twenny tells her, but his voice gets kind of shaky like it does when he’s trying to talk to other people by talking to her. “It will take a long time for it to work like that.”

Mirio smiles at Twenny, and Eri kind of likes the way he smiles now. It’s not a really big smile, but his eyes look different in a way that kind of makes her feel funny. “I don’t mind that at all.”

Eri doesn’t think it will take too long, though. Her horn is already really big, so it should start working again soon, and then she can fix Mirio. She just needs to be really happy a few times, but that shouldn’t be too hard. Especially because Twenny seemed like he was trying to be friends with Mirio, and if Twenny and Mirio were best friends, that would be even better than living on a TV show.

Maybe, if her TV mom and TV dad and other TV dad and two big brothers were all friends, she would really feel like a unicorn princess.

*

27 felt hollow.

It was unnerving. After he typed out his thoughts, placing all of those painful words onto the screen, he started feeling like he should keep some of them. Something to fill this gaping wound in his chest.

He tried to ignore it, tried to clean his room to see if getting rid of any trace of Bakugo's visit would settle him, but when he started, he realized this was his chance. Just like he had thrown away those distracting thoughts by typing them out, he could throw away his collections, and avoid learning what Yamada thought of the items he hadn't found yet.

He felt stupid for hesitating, for wavering with each item. He knew he needed to move quickly, that he didn't know when Yamada would return. But he kept turning Creati's note over and over in his hand.

'It's not fair that you can't talk to Momo. You used to talk to him.'

Momo tried to talk to him through this note. She could have just talked, she wasn't broken like 27 was, but she talked like he had to. Talking without talking. He still doesn't know why she did that, but it doesn't matter anymore. The heroes all know he's stupid, that Eri was smarter than him. Creati would never try to talk to him like that again.

It's harder to throw it away, but he does.

He finishes collecting everything, every piece of trash he's tucked into his pockets or utensil he's hidden in his sleeves. He leaves the knife, the cookies, and his owner's goggles out. There's no point in hiding them and if they went missing, Yamada would find the rest of it. And he'd much rather eat moldy cookies than a clump of his own hair.

When he sees Eri, the guilt threatens to overwhelm him. He worried her over this, over all of this trash, and hurt her enough for her horn to double in size. He hurt her with his broken mind, with his trash, with his *quirk* most of all. Everything else that Bakugo asked about were ways that children could be abused, could be traumatized. Mental quirks must be a form of abuse too.

He abused Eri with his quirk.

He tries to hide it. He tries to calm her down, to soothe her, but when she calls him 'Mom' again, he nearly breaks. She *trusted* him, she believed in him more than anyone else, and he *abused* her. There were scars inside her mind that were all Chisaki's doing, but there were also some that were his. What he did to her with his quirk.

She still needed him, for now, and after what he had done, he wouldn't dare let her suffer even the slightest amount of pain.

But Eri had her heroes. And some of them were pure, they could be trusted. He thought that way about Mirio the first time he laid eyes on him, and he was stupid to allow himself to forget that.

Eri had Mirio. There would come a time that she wouldn't need 27 anymore. There might even come a time that she didn't want him, when she realized what he had done to her. And 27 wouldn't fight when that time came.

He would let himself be thrown away like the trash he was.

Yamada surprises him when he returns. He asks Mirio and Eri to finish cooking while he helps 27 clean his room. 27 figured he would want an audience for this, he was a radio show host after all, but he was at least kind enough to spare Eri from watching him go through 27's collection.

27 remains seated on the floor, and Yamada joins him. It's an odd choice, especially when there was so much power that could be conveyed just by looming over someone, but Yamada was acting odd already.

His hands were already signing before he started talking, and he didn't usually translate and speak unless something truly worried him. "So, I know that today has been pretty rough for you, and if you don't want to talk about it right now, that's completely okay. You just say the word and we can drop it. But I wanted to talk to you about your stash."

Of course he did. 27 had known that this was coming the entire time. He knew it would come when he picked up the goggles to start this stash. But despite what he knows, he finds himself feeling sick, his stomach knotting around a black and bitter feeling. He's cried too much today, but he feels like he will again if Yamada's words are as sharp as he expects them to be.

"I'm really sorry that Bakugo found it."

Those aren't the words that he was expecting.

27 looks up, because he must have misheard Yamada somehow, or Yamada must have chosen those words just to confuse him so that 27 will watch him sign, and his words and signs could tear him apart twice as efficiently. But Yamada just gives him a bitter smile before he looks to the side, scratching the back of his neck. "I haven't really told you guys about my family, but I have an older brother, Ueno. And he had stashes too! He collected a lot of really neat stuff, and all of it meant a lot to him. There were some things he didn't want to share, but he did show me a few, and I really enjoyed hearing him talk about them."

Yamada truly is the Master of Anticipation, but he doesn't need to be. What he's asking 27 to do is cruel enough and he certainly doesn't have to make it crueler by dragging it out.

Not even Hari asked 27 to talk about the things he hid. He didn't need to. All Hari had to do was pick up a few things and wave them around, laughing all the while, and 27 would begin to break. 27 tried to avoid it, tried to prepare. He knew it happened every year, but there were still things that he couldn't bring himself to throw away. Eri's drawings. A button or scrap from a fight he was proud of winning.

The dog treat.

Hari went still when he found that, and for a moment, 27 felt like he won. He found himself tilting from a sickening apprehension to vicious glee, feeling like it hadn't been a mistake to forget that one. He thought that Hari might feel satisfied, feel like Dog had been broken enough and now it wouldn't be worth his time, but then Hari started laughing. Full, gasping laughs that turned sharper and louder before he grabbed Dog by the mask and forced the biscuit through the slot, forcing him to eat it or choke. Still laughing all the while, as Eri cried.

It was funny. 27 had kept it because he thought it would remind him of the worst thing Hari had forced him to do, and then Hari used it to do something worse.

"It's okay, what I meant to say was—" Yamada stops, folding his hands into each other as they both sit in this unnatural silence. "You don't have to tell me, you know? Because I know that this is really personal to you."

27 is too tired and worn and *hollow* for this. If Yamada doesn't know how to start it, 27 will, just to get it over with. ' *Trash. I know. Trash.* '

Yamada starts shaking his head, glancing at the tied up plastic bags. He's probably figured out that's where the rest of it is. Maybe it will help 27 to keep from breaking if Yamada finds Eri's used tissues when he digs through it. "I don't think it's trash. I think it's a pretty neat way of keeping 'pieces of happiness.' That's what Ueno and my mom called it, 'pieces of happiness.' I

keep my pieces in scrapbooks and pictures, and a lot of people have stashes like that but... That kind of wasn't an option for you. So, I don't think it's weird or bad or anything to have stashes like yours, you know?"

27 is impressed. He doesn't even collect *trash* the right way. He doesn't collect happiness, he collects anything that interests him, and none of it makes him happy.

"I'm not going to be mean to you, Shinsou, or make you feel bad about it," Yamada says, his voice dropping lower and softer, becoming an odd thing. Something 27 doesn't understand. "And I really hate that someone did. That someone would try to take away your happiness."

27 feels his lips twist against his will, and before he can miss the way the mask would have hidden that, miss being able to understand the people around him, miss not feeling so *stupid*, he reaches for the plastic bag.

If Yamada doesn't understand what he means, he will show him.

The glove from the tattooist's trashcan. ' *Trash.* ' A sticker that was on Eri's apple. ' *Trash.* ' A piece of chalk from Yamada's classroom. ' *Trash.* '

"Shinsou," Yamada calls sharply, but 27 refuses to look up. He waits, he waits for it to begin, *when will this be over?* "It's not trash."

It is. All of it is trash. Freedom from Chisaki, being able to feed Eri her favorite food, the first time he was proud to know a skill that wasn't useful to a Number - it's all trash. It's his, and *he's* trash.

Yamada sighs, and points to the sticker that he dropped on the floor. "Tell me about this one."

27 had been so afraid to do that when this conversation began, but now he was too frustrated for Yamada's command to come across as anything other than relief. ' *On apple. Took it. Trash.* '

He should know better than to sign the way he did, with sweeping and sharp gestures that betray too much of his own irritation, but Yamada doesn't seem to notice, smiling softly at him. "Eri's favorite food is apples. So when you took the sticker, it was a way to keep that piece of happiness."

His words sting, but not like they should.

They ring in the hollowness inside of him, in a way that almost fills it. He's too tired to stop himself from chasing it, even if his hands move stiltedly through his signs.

' *Made for E-R-I. At hero dorm. First.* ' His hands curl in on themselves and he tilts his head further down, just in case the wet stinging in his eyes overwhelmed him. ' *First time. Made food for E-R-I.* ,

He doesn't look up, doesn't have enough energy to be awed by how skilled Yamada must be to make him admit this, to make him bare his own wounds to be salted. No one had played him this well, had made him so hollow and raw and desperate. "That's really beautiful, Shinsou."

27 doesn't feel as hollow anymore.

Yamada smiles at him when he risks looking up, that kind yet wincing smile that he can't quite figure out. "That's a really beautiful moment, and I think you should keep it. I think it would be a real shame to let something like that go."

Yamada always confuses him. He twists him up too often, and right now, it's horrible. 27 is torn in

so many directions, to hide these things, to show them, to bury his face in his hands and cry, but Yamada doesn't let him.

"I ordered a box online that should be coming in a few days. It has a lock on it, and you'll be the only one with a key. You can put it anywhere you want, and put pretty much anything you want in it. If there's something that me or Shou really need, we might ask you to give it back, but there's a lot of stuff that we can replace. Even if it's part of our hero costumes," Yamada says, eyes glancing on the goggles before he looks away.

27 finds himself touching them again, trying to ignore how stupid he feels to be so attached to a piece of plastic, something so easily destroyed. *'Sorry. I won't do it again.'*

Yamada frowns in an oddly playful way, tilting his foot in 27's direction. "Aw, come on! You haven't taken any of my hero gear! You know, I'm starting to think you don't like Present Mic. First the name calling, now you don't want any of my gear. Next thing you know, you'll be calling in to my show to call me a washed up, loudmouthed has-been."

Despite himself, 27 raises an eyebrow. *'Can't. I'm mute.'*

Yamada freezes up, then slaps a hand over his mouth as he leans forward, curling in on himself almost as though he were in pain. "Ugh, me and my big mouth. I just--"

'Joke.' 27 signs, and repeats it when Yamada glances up at him, just in case he hadn't seen it. *'Joke. I don't care. Learning sign. Talk to Eri. It's fine.'*

It is fine.

27 is fine with being quirkless, with being weak. He hasn't lost all of his teeth, and his quirk was a liability in a fight more often than not. He doesn't need his quirk. He doesn't want to use his quirk ever again.

He never wants to hurt someone like that.

Married, With Children

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of 27's stash being discovered, Yamada tries to show him his own "stash" over dinner. A trip down memory lane has some new revelations for 27, and new plots begin to form because of it.

Yamada looks so happy as he points to the pictures in his scrapbook, his 'stash' as he keeps calling it. Eri leans over the table, staring wide-eyed at this glimpse into the past, and Mirio leans over her to offer his own comments from time to time, though he often goes back to the kitchen to keep cooking.

"That's me when I was Shinsou's age! I had a podcast instead of a radio show, and I just finished recording my 1000th episode!" Yamada says, tapping a picture of a younger version of himself throwing up peace signs in front of a messy desk covered by various pieces of equipment and a laptop.

His hair makes him look like a duck. 27 can't stop thinking about that, and his fingers twitch at his sides because he knows the sign for duck. It might be funny to call him that, or it might be hurtful. Yamada likes his jokes even less than Eri, and 27 is beginning to wonder if he knows how to make jokes the right way.

He wishes this were easier to understand, that it was simpler. He doesn't even know what he's supposed to feel when he looks at these pictures, but Yamada is clearly looking to find some kind of reaction. He doesn't know what it is.

Eri looks at him, then to Mirio, before she looks at the picture again. He doesn't know what she sees, what she looks for. If she understands that he doesn't look like them because the mask left scars on his face, or if she thinks he was born with those scars the same way he was born with purple hair. If she wants him to look more like Mirio and Yamada, if she's disappointed that he doesn't.

Yamada turns the page, and he can see that the next two pages are black - black backgrounds and black shapes with a sharp contrast of white - before he flips past them. But Eri puts her hand on the book, her thumb trying to turn back to what Yamada wanted to hide. "Yama, you're skipping! You can't skip pages in a book!"

Yamada turns to her with that wincing smile, a hand keeping her from turning back. "Oh, those are kind of sad pictures. I'm not sure if you guys want to see them."

Eri pulls her hand back, sitting back in her chair in a way that's almost a pout, but the tilt of her head betrays nervous curiosity. "I kinda want to. I like seeing pictures from when you were Twenny's age, even if they're sad."

Yamada's smile becomes something more fond while he pats Eri's head, nodding after he glances at 27. "Well, Shou and me had a friend named Shirakumo Oboro. This is what he looked like."

Yamada's finger points to the young man with wild white hair who smiles widely at the camera, arms wrapped around younger versions of his owner and Yamada. His owner stares off to the side, seemingly uncomfortable with having his picture taken, which seems to be a theme so far, but Yamada seems more enthusiastic than usual. The picture's color has been stripped away unnaturally, to match others on the page. People wearing dark suits on a rainy day, the blue sky turned light gray and somber.

'It will always be the three of us.'

27 wonders if that's true. If there has been a ghost living between Yamada and his owner, unnoticed before now. If Yamada still felt that way, after the years that had passed, and the funeral.

"He passed away before we graduated. He was going to be an amazing hero, and I kind of wish you guys could have met him," Yamada says, his eyes half-closed to look beyond those pictures, to memories made vivid in his mind that couldn't be shared with anyone else. "He was a really great guy, and always had a way of making everyone around him smile. Even Shou, as grumpy as he was back then."

'*I'm sorry for L-O-S-S.*' 27 signs. He thinks that's what people are supposed to say, though he's only heard it with a mocking edge tainting those words. Numbers weren't supposed to mourn each other, they weren't supposed to get close enough because the pain when someone didn't come back from a job could be a distraction in their own work. Hearing those words was meant to be a reminder of that, that it shouldn't be a loss. That a Number shouldn't get attached to anyone, to never lose them.

Yamada flashes a somber half-smile at him, then shows him how to sign those words correctly. "Thank you, Shinsou. I think you two would have really gotten along."

27 doesn't know if that's the response that's supposed to be given. If there is something that's supposed to be said. Maybe that's why no one talked about 50 after 98 told him that she died, because they knew he wouldn't be able to give them that response, his mask kept tight for months before Bug allowed him to train with his quirk again.

He wishes that someone did. That someone else remembered her here. In this place that feels too much like their shared dream at times, that sometimes feels like their escape. He knows it's not, he's not young and naive enough to believe in escaping The Miasma anymore. But he finds himself missing her now more than ever, wondering what she would think of all of this.

If she liked coffee. If she would go to school with them. If she would joke with Yamada, or even with his owner. If his owner would own her too.

If he would fall asleep with his head resting on her arm, while Eri slept on his. If her other arm would cover them both, keeping them safe in a way he's never been able to do for Eri.

He's always known that she would have liked Eri, and he used to dream that she had lived, that he could see 50 holding Eri in her lap the same way she used to hold him. That she could give Eri that same fond smile that he's never forgotten, even if he's not sure if he remembers the rest of her correctly.

'*I want you guys to feel safe.*' Yamada wanted that. He's sure that Yamada wants Eri to feel safe because she deserves to be, that he wants 27 to feel safe so he'll slip up and tell them about The

Miasma.

27 hasn't felt safe since 50 died. There were a lot of things that he lost with her, and that was one of them.

Mirio places a large bowl in front of him, and 27 looks up to see that everyone else has been served the same steaming, broth covered noodles. The scrapbook is still open on the table, as though Yamada still intends to keep showing it.

27 looks at the broth, trying to find an appetite for it. Trying to reason with himself. Eri's hands never changed his food. He was able to drink the coffee that she didn't give him. They haven't poisoned him so far, he hasn't given them enough information for him to be disposed of yet. Mirio might give him that same nervous wince that Toshinori did when he didn't eat the cupcakes. He might be insulted, or hurt.

He tells himself that it smells nice. That it looks delicious. It does, on the surface, but the back of his broken mind keeps twisting it into something different. Something dangerous.

Eri slurps at her noodles with gusto, and he flinches as he waits for the droplets of broth to land on the scrapbook, but Yamada pulls the scrapbook to stand up at the head of the table, so that everyone can see it. "Here's me and Shou after we graduated! I had to wrangle him into letting me style his hair, but I cleaned him up pretty nice, I think."

"Pretty!" Eri cheers, leaning over the table to get a better look. His owner's hair was longer than it was in the other pictures of him, but it seemed straighter and smoother, pulled into a half-braid at the top. His owner didn't look pleased, but the solemn way he faced the camera seemed to be deeper than being forced to look nice and have his picture taken. "But your hero clothes are wrong."

Yamada laughs, and he should. As impractical as his hero costume was as Present Mic, the clothes he was wearing in that picture were absolutely *garish*. Bright red streaks in his leather jacket and huge speakers on his shoulders, a fishnet shirt screaming to every villain he faced 'Hey! Stab here! I don't have any protective gear!'

27 hadn't been on a job in years, and he's never truly faced a hero on one, but he found himself picking apart how easy a target this costume made Present Mic.

"Yeah, my first agency was a little wild. Shou *hated* that look. And Shou..." Yamada trailed off, his hand twisting his chopsticks away from the bowl, probably unable to sign while holding them. "Shou didn't have an agency lined up, so he just wore some sweatpants and a sweatshirt. But the look kind of stuck, I guess."

Mirio's chopsticks click as they drop into his bowl. "Aizawa-sensei didn't have an agency? Even if he didn't have any offers from internships, with his quirk and graduating from UA - how could anyone have turned him down?"

Yamada scratches the back of his head, laughing nervously. "Well, Shou decided that he'd rather do his own thing as an independent underground hero. It was kind of rough for him at first, with no money and no coworkers, and definitely no one teaching him the ropes of hero work post-grad. But, he definitely made it work out for him!"

27 notices Mirio's glance, and tries to make it seem like he had just been distracted by the conversation. He picks at the pieces of meat and vegetables, as though he's trying to decide which one to eat. His uncoordinated left hand makes stalling a little easier.

“Oh! I made ramen! It’s my favorite thing to eat, so I kind of couldn’t help myself,” Mirio admits nervously. “I didn’t think to ask if you liked that, though.”

His favorite. Now 27 has to eat it, he has to eat all of it. It would be insulting if he didn’t. He lifts his hands to sign, careful to set the chopsticks on the side so they don’t fall in. ‘ *Thank you. I don’t know if I like. Never eat.* ’

“Shinsou said ‘Thank you.’ He’s never eaten ramen before, so you better have done a good job,” Yamada translates, pointing at Mirio accusingly.

“I did my best! I should definitely take you guys to the best ramen spot in town, though. It took two years of searching, but Tamaki and I finally found one that we agree on, so that has to mean it’s the one!” Mirio says, his smile waning at the edges. “The one in Osaka might be better, though.”

Yamada sees something that 27 doesn’t in those words, and flips through several pages while Eri is distracted by her meal. 27 brings himself to pull a few noodles to his mouth, telling himself that this might help. That Mirio wants to see him eating his favorite food. “Here’s the pictures from me and Shou’s wedding! I cleaned him up a little better this time.”

27 has long since learned not to choke and cough from that long sickness, but the broth trickling down his throat catches him by surprise. He manages to close his mouth, keeping the noise to an odd, strangled sneeze, hand curling around his mouth as he looks up to see those pictures.

They were *married*?

“So pretty!” Eri says, entranced by the sight. His owner and Yamada both wore suits, both looked at each other with a fondness that 27 was unsettled to see. It felt too private to look at, as though he was intruding here even with Yamada’s invitation. There were *flowers* braided into his owner’s hair.

His owner. With tiny pink *flowers*. In his hair. Smiling softly while he looked at Yamada so intensely, so reverently. It betrayed something that 27 wasn’t meant to understand.

“I, uh,” Yamada trails off, the scratching at the back of his neck turned furious. “Did we mention that? Jeez, with the ‘Present Mic’ thing and the-”

‘ *Fine. It’s fine,* ’ 27 signs, even if it’s *not* fine. Yamada being a hero didn’t change things nearly this much, this.... 27 couldn’t *understand* this.

“Present Mic thing?” Mirio asks.

“Well, I was kinda dressed up as ‘Yamada’ for the first few days, and I guess I forgot to mention it, so it was kind of a shock to see me all done up as Present Mic for school,” Yamada explains, waving his chopsticks around as he waves his arms. “And - you know, me and Shou aren’t always really- it’s caught a few people off guard, I guess.”

“Oh. That was supposed to be a secret?” Mirio asks, laughing a bit. “I don’t think most of the first years have figured it out, but most of the upperclassmen know, or at least suspect. We just thought it wouldn’t be polite to bring it up.”

“Yeah, Shou had a few herolets that didn’t know the meaning of the word,” Yamada grouches.

Was 27 supposed to know this? Did his owner intend to hide it from him, to hide that expression he wore in that picture? Hide how Yamada was clearly his weakness, how much Yamada meant to him, how....

Yamada wasn't a right hand. He was closer than that, in an unfamiliar way. His owner cared for Yamada deeply, and Yamada cared for his owner. That wasn't something that owners and right hands did, that wasn't how power translated.

He had no idea who Yamada *was* anymore. Was he allowed to give 27 orders? Was he allowed to punish him? Was that why he hadn't?

Yamada was looking at him nervously, obviously wanting some kind of reaction from him. Something far more soothing than the confusion that was twisting inside 27, even as he tried to ignore it.

' *Cute* . '

Is that the right thing to say? Would Yamada think that he was mocking him the same way Bug did when he tried and failed to break out of her hold as they trained? That word meant that he failed in a safe way, an amusing one, but here it seemed to mean something different.

Yamada laughs, even if he didn't mean it as a joke. "I think Shou prefers 'handsome,' but we do look pretty cute here," Yamada stares at the picture, again finding memories that he couldn't share. 27 wishes that he could, that he could try to understand this if he saw more of it.

His owner and Yamada were in a relationship. A romantic one. They were married. There was a history there that 27 had never guessed, never expected, and he found himself more interested to know it with all the implications it carried. He didn't care how Hari and Chisaki met, that never mattered to how they dealt with him. He knew that Boss had worked with Memory in other business ventures before The Miasma, and that Memory had recruited Bug, but that didn't change how the Numbers were treated.

His owner and Yamada were married. Married couples usually had children.

His owner and Yamada took Eri in right after she was rescued.

27 recoils at the thought, even as the pieces slide into place, as what he always knew comes into focus with a blinding intensity. They didn't want to use Eri's quirk. They would have been able to trigger it by now, or there would be some evidence that they were trying to figure it out.

They gave her a room filled with softness. They knew her favorite foods. They read her stories, held her while she slept, looked at her so fondly and never *once* hurt her.

They wanted to be Eri's parents.

27 should be happy about that. He should tell them everything he knows, her night terrors, her quirk, how to take care of her horn, the fits that come after her quirk erupts. He should tell them about The Miasma, everything that they need to know, everything they're waiting to hear before he's disposed of, before he's taken from Eri again and *disposed of*.

But 27 is selfish. Selfish to the core, deep inside the rotting mess inside his mind, he's already figuring out ways to play against this for his own benefit.

They wanted to be Eri's parents, but 27 was Eri's mother. That wasn't why they took 27 from the police station, they still wanted him only for what he knew about The Miasma. But Eri was a foothold.

He could make them want to keep him too.

This. This was the game he could play. He could manipulate them. He could cleave onto them, he could amuse them, he could make them pity him. He could prove himself worthy of the space he made for himself here, dragging out the investigation until it was forgotten entirely.

He didn't deserve it. After everything he'd done, *especially* to Eri, he didn't deserve to be here. He didn't deserve to want this place.

But he wanted.

He ate half of his food, and that pleased Mirio, enough to draw promises to find which flavor of ramen he preferred. He signed his own censored opinions to each picture that Yamada showed him, though that didn't keep the man from being upset that his mother had removed the pictures of herself from the wedding photos.

He sat in a chair he didn't belong in, stomach full and warm with broth, and tried to pretend he was someone who deserved to be here. To sit at a table with Eri and drift in this strange, warm happiness.

He wanted to stay here.

He wanted to become someone who deserved to.

November 8th

Chapter Summary

27 and Eri receive their missions from Yamada, and try to perform to the best of their abilities in such a high stakes environment. Monoma makes his move, to surprising results. 27 tries to gather information, and to do that, must reveal a great deal of it to Aizawa.

Chapter Notes

Previously on Wards of UA: Toshinori provided nutritional supplements for Shinsou to take with food to help with how underweight he is and how little he eats. Eri's horn has grown twice, and now requires "Horn tricks" to help her blow her nose. Ashido has a plan to try to give Shinsou a high five instead of a hug, and Bakugo left the math tutoring session with Shinsou after revealing the existence of Shinsou's stash. Bakugo did not see the resolution of that situation, but did know that Eri was extremely upset. Bakugo had been calling after Monoma at lunch the day before. Shinsou was able to speak to Bakugo during their fight, and while he was dissociating after fighting Ojiro.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aizawa doesn't look up when Sansa places another cup of coffee on the desk, but he can see the officer shaking his head from the reflection of the screen. "Happy birthday, Eraserhead."

Aizawa rubs at his eyes, looking down at the sketch again to make sure he hasn't forgotten what that face looks like after hours of searching for it through various databases of human traffickers. He glances to the side to see that Sansa didn't just hand him another dose of the station's brew, but something from the coffee shop down the street. It really is his birthday.

Sansa sighs, settling into a chair behind him, and intentionally bumps into the Aizawa's chair to convey how unhappy he is to lose access to his computer. "You know, most people spend their birthday with their families. They spend time with their loved ones, looking back fondly on another year well spent, or just drinking themselves sick to forget that old age is coming for them. You could try doing something like that. Something that will get you away from my desk."

Aizawa waits until Sansa starts sorting through his paperwork, lifting the papers up off the desk, so that they spill out of his hands when Aizawa pushes his chair back against Sansa's. The cat officer glares at him, but Aizawa ignores it. "What did she know?"

"Nothing, just like we knew she wouldn't," Sansa snaps. Aizawa would like to doubt that he even

met with that informant, but he knows Sansa well enough to know he wouldn't douse himself in glitter just to make that lie believable. "A big fish like that one wouldn't travel in the grey. The informants can't help us here."

"If it's a big fish at all," Aizawa mutters, picking up the sketch again. Large, jagged nose. Blue and green lips. Short, stubby limbs and rounded torso. This could all be a meaningless figment of the imagination, and the way it was so easily given to them only makes him doubt it more.

"Naomasa has to chase it anyway," Sansa says, staring at the sketch over Aizawa's shoulder. "Look, you know you have time. His lawyer is gunning for a full pardon, and as big as this is, it's not big enough for that. But it'll take a while for the greedy bastard to realize that."

"I don't have time," Aizawa grouses, turning back to the mug shots of convicted human traffickers from the Ukraine. "Shinsou won't talk, and I won't let them--"

He already knows who's calling when he hears his ringtone, but he still has no idea what to say to him. "*Babe, come home. I don't know what Naomasa said to keep you out this late - and by the way, I SHOULD know - but you need to sleep. We can tackle it on Wednesday. Together.*"

Aizawa leans his head forward, closing his eyes. He could fall asleep like this. Just a few hours to rest his eyes, then turn back to this impossible and desperate mess. As much as he wanted to, that wasn't logical.

He needed his husband for this.

"I'll be there soon. There's been a--"

"*A break in the case, I figured. I might be blonde, but I'm not stupid,*" Hizashi laughs, and Aizawa can tell by how quiet the sound is that both the wards are asleep. They should be, considering that it was after midnight, but after reading the keylogger he didn't think that Shinsou would tonight. "*Tell me when you get home, alright?*"

"Alright," Aizawa sighs, closing out of his searches then standing to gather the sketch and his birthday gift from Sansa. "I love you."

"Aw, Eraser-" Sansa gushes before Aizawa kicks his chair to push him out of his way.

"*I love you too, Shou,*" Hizashi answers, and he can tell by his tone that he didn't miss how irregular it was for Aizawa to say it first.

He hoped that would make him more reasonable when they talked about this.

*

Yamada was upset by something.

27 knew that Yamada wasn't as open as he first thought. Yamada had a lot of tells that pointed in opposite directions at times, and he tended to smile to hide his true feelings and intentions. He didn't use it as well as Mirio did, and he dropped it too often for it to be effective.

He dropped that smile again when he turned to the rice cooker with a glare, gathering a serving in a

paddle with rough and jerky movements. Yamada was angry about something.

27 looks back at his breakfast. He ate half of the omelette, and didn't pick around the parts that had gone cold from the ketchup's chill, even though he wanted to. He took the supplement, even though he faked doing so last night, tucking the pill under his thumb when he took a drink to swallow it. The memory of Yamada smiling so gratefully at him after being lied to made the thought of repeating the action too bitter.

Despite his best judgement, he doubts that Yamada is angry because the pill was poisoned, and didn't take.

He takes Eri's finished plate and his own to the sink, then stands behind Yamada, still unsure whether he should approach. Yamada was angry, and even if 27 hadn't done anything to make him angry, he could still pay the price for it.

Yamada turns around and jumps back with a gasp, the rice paddle pressed against his chest leaving white grains behind on his shirt. "Oh jeez, you and Shou. Nearly gave me a heart attack, little listener!"

' Need help. ' 27 frowns when he sees Yamada straighten, eyes widening in slight concern. *' Do you need help? '*

Yamada smiles at him, flickering into that softer, smaller smile he still doesn't understand. His hand rises, but he drops it back to his side, looking around nervously. "Thanks for offering, but I think I'm pretty much done here. Wait, what time..." Yamada winces as he looks at the clock on the stove, dropping the rice paddle back into the rice cooker before he waves for Eri to come to him.

27 notices the tilt of her head when she walks towards them, and grabs a paper towel for her to use once Yamada is done with whatever he needs from them.

"So, I probably should have told you guys earlier, but today is Shou's birthday," Yamada whispers, caught in a half-crouch as he tries to find the right height to talk to both 27 and Eri. 27 finds himself leaning down a bit to make it easier for him. "Birthdays are really special days-"

"Yama, I know what birthdays are," Eri grumbles, and 27 presses the paper towel under her nose, ignoring her glare. She whines and stomps when he flicks her horn, and though he should cater a bit more to her new-found embarrassment about this, her apologetic eyes meet his before they glance at Yamada, and she blows her nose to find a bit of relief. "I'm sorry."

Yamada's smile twists a bit, probably finding this small taste of Eri's Quirk Grumps adorable. "It's alright, little bean. I just didn't know if you knew, so I got all explain-y at you."

' Books. ' 27 signs after he throws the used napkin away. *' I tried. I don't know day. I know now. Floaty told me. '*

Yamada grins at that, giving him a thumbs up. 27 thinks it's directed more towards the promise that Eri's birthday now holds, rather than his failed attempts to give her one at the 8 Precepts. "Shou doesn't know what we're doing, so we've got to keep it a secret. We'll just pretend that we're not doing anything for his birthday while we're at school, and at the party after school, so when we get home, we can surprise him."

Eri's eyes gleam at the opportunity to be involved in such a scheme, curling her hands in front of her chest. "Is it a present for Zawa?"

Yamada nods. “Sure is, little bean! You’ve definitely got this birthday thing down, so I know you’ll do a great job! Your part of the present is to make Shou a birthday card, just like the cards you made for Midoriya and Mirio. I made sure to put a lot of paper in your backpack, so you can get it just right.”

Eri beams at that, while 27 tries not to think about how he hasn’t received a single drawing from Eri since they began living here. He might stoop to asking for one at this rate, even if the heroes are far more deserving.

“And your present,” Yamada says, drawing his attention back to him, just in time to see that nervous flutter in his hands. “You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to, but if you want to—”

‘*I want to.*’ 27 signs, staring at his hands in the hopes that his worry won’t become apparent on his face. This project was clearly important to Yamada and Eri, and he wouldn’t want to ruin that by failing whatever task Yamada assigned to him.

“You can make a name sign for Shou,” Yamada says, smiling as though it were an easy task. “I know he really wants—”

The sound of a door opening from the hallway causes Yamada to stop, then shoo them back to the table with one hand brushing them away from this gathering, and a finger pressed to his lips, to remind them to keep their silence.

27 sits, glancing between his glass of water that promises a temporary distraction, and Eri who threatens to bring undue attention to their plans with her excited fidgeting. Even if she was only a few years younger than he was when he went on his first job at The Miasma, she handled pre-mission nerves far better than he ever did. He feels those nerves more acutely now than ever before.

A *name* . Yamada wanted him to name his owner.

27 knows that this is his mission, that it’s instrumental to whatever Yamada has planned. It’s a job, he shouldn’t think too much about it, he should be able to complete the task that was asked of him like a professional.

Naming his owner . He can’t get over how unnatural that feels.

That’s just not how it worked. Owners gave names, clients gave names. Names were ownership and power and expectation. Meaningless and meaningful. Names were utterly confusing to him now, in a way that made him miss only having to answer to one, ‘27.’

Yamada said that his owner wanted to be given a name by him, and he was trying to trust Yamada. Yamada had so many opportunities to hurt him and never took a single one, and that had to mean that he could be trusted. 27 was trying to be rational, to believe that he might have been wrong to doubt some of the heroes that he knew. He was trying to believe in Eri the same way she believed in him, because he owed that to her.

But *naming his owner* was an impossible task. Especially when it was meant as an offering, a gift. The name he picked needed to please his owner, and 27 had never picked a name meant to please. He picked names to irritate, to insult, and that was all he knew how to do. If he didn’t pick the right name, if he insulted his owner, he wouldn’t just face his vengeance.

He would hurt and disappoint Eri. Again.

His owner sits at the table and smiles softly at Eri, who has probably made him suspicious with her

intense gaze. When his owner sips at the coffee Yamada wordlessly places in front of him, his eyes meet 27's, and he finds himself glancing back at his water, trying not to read too much into that brief stare.

Nerves. He gets them before every job. He just needs to run through what's expected of him enough times, plan for every way it could turn out. Focus on the job.

It's probably the most difficult one he's ever been assigned.

*

Aizawa's favorite birthday was the day he turned 19.

Everyone forgot about it.

Hizashi was busy as a sidekick, and working himself to death trying to find a better agency, to start his radio show, to change everything that he hated about his current situation to better fit the dreams he had when he graduated. Kayama relied on Hizashi to remember, and Tensei was quickly becoming Idate's pack mule to prove himself worthy to inherit the agency from his father. Aizawa had already changed his phone number and address to keep his parents from contacting him, and his grandfather didn't own a phone out of paranoia that the government could use it to track him down.

Aizawa treated himself to a cup of coffee after he woke up that afternoon, petted one of the friendlier strays that called his crappy shoebox apartment complex home, and went back to sleep. It was everything he ever wanted from his birthday. It was peaceful.

This was not going to be a peaceful birthday. It wasn't even going to be a good one. Aizawa didn't particularly care, he's had 30 other birthdays that weren't good or pleasant to endure, but if it had fallen on any other day, he might have been able to endure it a bit better.

If it had fallen on a weekend, he would stop feeling so resentful every time he had to glare down his students to keep them from bothering Shinsou. He could have done another training exercise, but this was one thing he would allow himself for his birthday. He was going to take a nap in homeroom, and Class 1-A needed to allow him to do that.

Yaoyorozu's signed greeting was fine. Shinsou seemed surprised, but repeated the 'Good Morning,' back to her and took his seat. Yaoyorozu didn't press any further.

But Ashido was another story.

Everytime his eyes began to close, or he glanced at another student, he saw her move. She seemed to have a plan to bolt as soon as he was distracted, choosing opportunity over strategy. He's certainly *tried* to teach her better, but he's beginning to wonder if she forgets everything he says when she goes to sleep at night. He's told her the consequences, but he doesn't want to enforce them, especially not today.

Bakugo seems more sullen than usual. Hizashi hadn't told him much about how the study session went, especially when he was too eager to know about the lead in Shinsou's case. It went well until it didn't, there was an altercation that wasn't quite either of the teens' fault, but the way Bakugo frowns when he glances at the wards suggests that he doesn't see it that way. He feels guilty over

something, and Hizashi hadn't told him enough to know, and probably wouldn't until this odd 'I Want To Give You The Cold Shoulder But It's Your Birthday' silence boiled over.

Aizawa would prefer if Hizashi did give him that angry silence. Hizashi had a unique way of making even silence seem loud and unbearable. But at least he knows what to expect from his husband tomorrow.

But he doesn't know what to expect from his wards.

Hizashi planned something with them. Eri made that obvious, and he expected little else. She seemed to be working on a picture, and he was highly tempted to slip out of his sleeping bag to look at it, to judge by her reaction whether it was for him, but he imagined that she wouldn't be happy if he did.

Shinsou also seemed to be distracted by something. He had his test on the desk, but he was reading a book instead of working on it. Hizashi must have roped him into this scheme as well, hopefully finding something that Shinsou could do more easily than drawing a picture.

He knows it's not what he wants from Shinsou. The only thing that would save this wreck of a day would be if Shinsou gave him information about the Nomu Organization. Real, credible, actionable information. If not that, then information about Eri's quirk.

But he knows Hizashi wouldn't tell Shinsou to do that, because Aizawa is the only one who's rational enough to.

He didn't remember falling asleep, but the chime to end the class wakes him into a panic. He bolts up, sure that he'll see Ashido trying to smother Shinsou into another disastrous embrace, or Bakugo attempting to resolve whatever issue he had with Shinsou the same way he deals with any interpersonal conflict - explosively.

Instead, he sees *Koda* of all people startling under his glare, leaning away from Shinsou's desk before he bolts for his own. Shinsou's blank stare reveals nothing as he sorts his items to place in Eri's backpack after she finishes putting away her own supplies.

That was promising, at least. He had a nap, and none of his charges caused any problems to deal with while he did.

He didn't have high hopes for the rest of the day, but at the very least, this was bearable.

*

27 doesn't want to do this.

He stares at the phone, willing the information he wants to simply appear on the screen, but he knows it's hopeless. He knows that he has to play this game again, that it's naive to think he could avoid it when he's surrounded by these hero students every day.

Koda had been helpful to a point. He had noticed the hero student looking at him while he tried out a few sign-names, and invited him to his desk with a confidence he didn't truly feel, slipping into another mask that wore it. Koda read the section of his JSL Handbook that went over name-signs, and immediately asked who 27 was trying to name.

He needed the information that Koda had, so he answered by pointing at his owner who was sleeping on top of his desk. Koda seemed flustered by that, and downright terrified when he asked if Koda had a name for him already. And he didn't.

Koda didn't have the information that 27 wanted, but it was possible that the other hero students did. Yamada certainly did, but 27 didn't want to give him the impression that 27 was unfit for the job he was given.

He just needed to open that chat, and ask for it. Piston and Zappy both owed him, and Piston especially would know.

It just seemed odd to ask this way, when the hero students were in the same room as he was. It made him feel broken, in a way that he shouldn't. He should find relief in not being able to speak to them, that his quirk couldn't be used. That he was quirkless. That whatever swallowed his words before he spoke them was a kinder mask than the ones he was used to.

Yamada zeroes in on Kaminari again, and the phone seems less frightening with the possibility that none of the hero students will see his message until they leave the room. He opens the chat, scrolling through the more mundane messages that weren't meant for him to see, that they still sent regardless, until his new name caught his eye.

Ya Good Boiii: Sooo is anyone else kinda scared that Shinsou was talking to Aizawa-sensei while we were training?

Ya Good Boiii: @Koda pls tell me there's not going to be a training exercise where Shinsou kicks all of our asses

Slappy Tail Boiii: Please tell me the prayer circle worked.

Pastry Boiii: Bonne blonde, you have a masochistic streak in you, oui?

Sparky Boiii: SENSEI IS GOING TO USE SHINSOU'S VILLAIN TRAINING ON US I CALLED ITTTT

Sparky Boiii: @Shinsou pls handle me gently I'm baby

Palpitation Projector: ew.

Provost Piston: Shinsou, Koda has informed me of your observations regarding my current combat abilities. While I am in the process of adjusting, it is a stark reminder that my efforts in this area are lacking for that weakness to be so easily recognized, and I thank you for pointing that out to me. Also, I believe there was a joke that Koda did not explain, and I hope that you wouldn't mind telling me. -Iida Tenya

Slappy Tail Boiii: @Shinsou Do you prefer elbow locks? You seem very practiced.

Slappy Tail Boiii: I don't know if I have information that you want, but do you like a certain food? Is there something that you want? I just kind of want to know more about your fighting style.

Quiet Boiii: @Sero ?

Ya Good Boiii: Nah, him and Hagakure are kind of a thing??? I think???

InvisiCutie: We're

InvisiCutie: IT'S NO

InvisiCutie: MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS. OJIRO ISN'T FLIRTING WITH SHINSOU OMG

Ya Good Boiii: See?

Quiet Boiii: Got it.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: @Shinsou What about me??? Is there something I should do differently???
Can you train with me??? Please?????

More messages that weren't meant for him. Ashido seemed quiet on the chat, her only contribution being to tell the hero students that he didn't have his phone yesterday, and that they shouldn't bother him.

Then an odd message.

King Explosion Murder has removed themselves from the chat.

InvisiCutie: What?

Crimson Boiii: It's a thing, don't ask.

Mighty Boiii: @Shinsou, I know you check this chat more often than the others and if you want to talk about it on another one that's okay but can you tell me what happened? Kacchan just seems really upset and

Mighty Boiii: FUCKING IGNORE THAT. AND THE REST OF YOU EXTRAS BETTER
FUCK RIGHT OFF AND MIND YOUR OWN FUCKING BUSINESS

Sweet Boiii: Even if I know Bakugo stole Midoriya's phone, it's still weird to picture Midoriya saying that

Choppy: Ochako wouldn't react well if he did.

Ashi: Shinsou are you and Eri ok?????

#1 Eri Enthusiast: WHAT HAPPENED

Genesis: Everyone please calm down.

Ashi: Bakugo went to Shinsou's place to tutor him but he won't really tell any of us what happened.

Ashi: But he's kind of worried about Eri?

Mighty Boiii: Togata-sempai visited them, they're ok!

Pastry Boiii: Brouyant is a poor tutor, no?

Ya Good Boiii: Aoyama don't.

Pastry Boiii: Violette, vous pouvez me dire ce que vous pensez vraiment et ces imbéciles ne sauront pas mieux.

Pastry Boiii: Ce sera notre secret ;)

Palpitation Projector: Google translate exists.

Pastry Boiii: *~**

Palpitation Projector: @Shinsou avoid Monoma.

Slappy Tail Boiii: @Jirou What's that about?

Palpitation Projector: Something stupid.

Ya Good Boiii: Solid advice anyway. Monoma's kind of a jerk.

27 noted the suggestion, and still found himself glancing up at the hero students while he typed his messages, as though they would instinctively know that he was trying to communicate with them.

Mysterieux Boiii: @Piston it wasn't that funny the first time.

Mysterieux Boiii: @Excess Vertebrae it's not a preference, it just works. And no, I only want information.

Mysterieux Boiii: @Floaty Many things. I don't know if Aizawa plans for that to happen, but I'm not opposed to it. It would be easier to show you what you're doing wrong than telling you here.

Mysterieux Boiii: @French Non.

Mysterieux Boiii: @All of you Tell me what you know about Aizawa, specifically things that he likes or positive aspects of his personality, and in exchange I will tell you what happened yesterday.

Mysterieux Boiii: And tell Blasty he's an idiot and to come back to this chat. He doesn't seem like the type for silent tantrums.

27 stared at the pages of his book while the chimes drew Class 1-A to leave and 1-B to enter. He looked up as soon as he heard Monoma's voice, and kept an eye on him as he took his seat, but found that the manic blonde didn't return his stare.

Beat Dropper was right. He was definitely planning something.

But 27 had time before Monoma could make any moves. The Red Haired Bug would keep him from interrupting class, and Monoma only seemed to approach him after 1-B's English class ended.

Eri drew his attention when she huffed and pulled out another piece of paper to start her task anew. He wasn't sure what she found issue with on the first three pictures that she drew, but he itched to take at least one of them from her backpack to keep in his stash.

It was pathetic. It wasn't even a 'piece of happiness,' like it should be. He just wanted a picture from Eri.

Every picture used to be his. Even if he never gave her blank paper, his favorite pictures were the ones that had plenty of blank space around the parts she was supposed to color. They contained more of her doodles on the edges, more of her personality. More of *Eri*.

He hated the ones where she drew him. He shouldn't have, and he knew to never let her know that, never let her suspect. But the pieces of himself that he hated the most were the ones she drew the largest. His ruined, matted hair depicted in messy scribbles larger than his face. His scars from Bug drawn in red as though they were still bleeding. The dog-like snout of his mask made even more apparent. She even added a dog's long red tongue once, during one of those spells where *The Pokey Little Puppy* was her favorite book.

He wonders how she would draw him now. If she still sees him that way, even if his appearance has changed. If the scars from the mask would still be bleeding when she drew them.

He would treasure it even if they were. Even if he didn't deserve it.

It takes a while, but as he suspected, Zappy responded first.

Sparky Boiii: CRYPTID SIGHTED

Sparky Boiii: @Iida LET BAKUGO IN. LET HIM IIIIN

Sparky Boiii: Uhhhh stuff about Aizawa-sensei is kinda hard to know. He likes to sleep? I think?

Mysterieux Boiii: Not useful. Give me something else.

Sparky Boiii: He likes traumatizing us.

Mysterieux Boiii: Not that I've seen. I need positive aspects.

Pure Boiii: Most name signs just come up naturally, and I'm sure that Aizawa-sensei knows enough about JSL to understand that. You don't have to worry about it so much, Shinsou!

Mysterieux Boiii: I need to have a name by the end of the day. This was my assignment for his birthday.

Sparky Boiii: wat

Sweet Boiii: WHAT

Pastry Boiii: QUOI

Sweet Boiii: WE HAVE A CALENDAR FOR A REASON WHY DIDN'T ANYONE

Ya Good Boiii: MIDORIYA WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US???

Mighty Boiii: I DIDN'T KNOW THAT'S NOT PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE KNOWLEDGE

Ya Good Boiii: HAGAKURE WHY DIDN'T YOU HACK THAT KNOWLEDGE????

InvisiCutie: THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS OMG IT'S HIS BIRTHDAY

Provost Piston: You should not be on your phones i

Provost Piston: We have a great deal of work to do in very little time. @Everyone Please disregard your usual seating arrangements at lunch so that we can meet to rectify this situation.

Mysterieux Boiii: I've given you a lot of information. Valuable information. It doesn't seem like you're returning the favor.

Sparky Boiii: @Midoriya DO THE THING.

Ya Good Boiii: COMMENCE THE INFODUMP

Mighty Boiii: I don't know how name signs work but that sounds really nice of you Shinsou Aizawa-sensei likes coffee, cats, sleeping, he has a very particular smile when he tricks someone so I believe that deceptions are fun for him

Mighty Boiii: I don't really have anything else?

Mysterieux Boiii: Barely useful.

Soba Boiii: You should call him a cat.

Sweet Boiii: You kind of live with Aizawa-sensei, though, so you probably know him better than we do.

Mysterieux Boiii: I don't.

Sweet Boiii: What kind of cake do you think Aizawa-sensei would like? I hope it's something that we have, I don't have a lot of time to work with.

Crow Boiii: It seems we have taken for granted that which has become a common presence, and found that we lack the knowledge to truly appreciate it.

Crow Boiii: Truly a mad birthday of darkness.

Ya Good Boiii: Maybe he likes frogs? He seems to like Asui better than the rest of us.

Choppy: I think that's due to how little I cause trouble for him, compared to the rest of you. I doubt my appearance has anything to do with it.

Mysterieux Boiii: Amphibian Fibber, tell me what you know.

Choppy: That's an odd choice for a nickname, Shinsou. I can add that Aizawa-sensei is a blunt and honest person, and that his family name means 'Swamp.' If name signs have anything to do with legal names, perhaps that might help.

Mysterieux Boiii: Decently useful. I know that you lied about the picture in the hospital. You were part of the raid, and you saw me.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: Do you remember that?

Mysterieux Boiii: No. You're not a convincing liar.

Choppy: I apologize. Aizawa-sensei made it seem as though we shouldn't tell you.

Mysterieux Boiii: But he's an honest person.

Genesis: I can add that the phonetics of Aizawa-sensei's given name can mean 'Fly' or 'Big.' And taking apart the syllables of his family name, Ai can mean 'Affection,' 'Indigo,' or 'Mugwort.' And Zawa can mean 'Murmur.'

Mysterieux Boiii: Useful.

It was. He hadn't considered breaking apart his owner's name to reuse it, to take the meaning to guide his selection of the second sign for his name. It would seem more clever if he did, it might carry across how much effort he put into it.

But now he had to carry through with his promise to tell the hero students what happened yesterday with Bakugo. Certainly not everything, he didn't want to talk about the stash or the questions Bakugo had asked him. He didn't particularly want to admit that he had struck first while Blasty was still under the bed.

But he had to. It had to be an even exchange.

Mysterieux Boiii: Blasty was being nosy. I overreacted. He overreacted. It's fine. Eri wasn't really involved. If she was, Blasty wouldn't have hands anymore.

Ya Good Boiii: That is. The vaguest thing I've ever read.

Ya Good Boiii: Shinsou, I know that's kind of your thing? But Bakugo's my friend and he's seriously not okay right now so I kind of need more detail.

Mysterieux Boiii: He tried to look through my stuff. I tried to put him in a sleeper hold without really thinking about it. He tried to explode my face. It's fine.

Ya Good Boiii: Sleeper holds are just a normal overreaction???

Mysterieux Boiii: He reminds me of Rikiya. Maybe that's why. That was the only way I was ever able to take Rikiya down, even Rappa could be flipped when he overextended himself.

Crimson Boiii: what whatwhathefuck

Sparky Boiii: holy shit you FOUGHT THEM????

Slappy Tail Boiii: You faced the members of the 8 Precepts in combat?

Provost Piston added Bakugo Katsuki to the chat

Provost Piston: I believe it would be more conducive to organize our preparations in this chat, so that Shins

Provost Piston: You don't have to answer these questions, Shinsou

Bakugo Katsuki: WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN YOU SHITFACED MOTHERFUCKER I'M THE FUCKING FARTHEST FUCKING THING FROM THAT FUCKING

Bakugo Katsuki: I WILL MURDER YOUR ASS FUCK FACE I'M. NOT. FUCKING. PLAYING. AROUND. WITH. YOU.

Mysterieux Boiii: It's the swearing. Rikiya never had your temper.

Bakugo Katsuki changed their name to Shitsou's Reaper

Shitsou's Reaper: FUCK YOU. YOU'RE FUCKING DEAD. I'M NOTHING LIKE THOSE MOTHERFUCKERS, GET THAT THROUGH YOUR DENSE FUCKING SKULL BEFORE I SMASH IT IN

Mysterieux Boiii: It's not that insulting. Rikiya was nice. He was my friend.

Shitsou's Reaper: SAY ONE MORE FUCKING WORD AND I WILL LOG YOUR ASS OUT PERMANENTLY

Ya Good Boiii: @Shinsou I'm your friend now. You kind of need better ones.

Sparky Boiii: Sending friend request

Soba Boiii: We're friends now. I will fight you at your convenience to make it official.

Mighty Boiii: Can we be friends? Please?

27 closed out of the app and ignored the subsequent buzzing. He needed to focus.

Class 1-B's English class was coming to an end.

*

Monoma Neito wasn't one to do any favors for those Class A swine, despite the impression that he gave the ill-tempered knave yesterday.

He always intended to do this, but Bakugo's request simply inspired him to move his plans up a bit. It had still been deliciously amusing to see him grovel as Monoma forced him to wheedle and attempt to charm.

And, more alarmingly, show Monoma a face that didn't suit the barbarian of Class A at all.

' His quirk's fucked, that's why he can't talk. No one's doing shit about it, but if your bullshit quirk can figure some shit out, fucking tell me. Corpse face can't do therapy if he doesn't fucking talk. '

Vlad King had been rather sparse with the details of Shinsou's wardship, despite how much Monoma pried.

' He's selectively mute, yes. That means that you should represent Class B's superior

professionalism by respecting the rules that are set in place. I know that you want to help, and I know that it comes from a good place, Monoma, but part of being a hero is trusting a fellow hero's word over your own instincts. And trust me when I say that the best way to help him is to ignore him. '

Monoma respected Vlad King, and of course he trusted him. But ignoring Shinsou simply wasn't something that he could accomplish, even for his teacher.

Shinsou was captivating. Enthralling, even. When he saw him that first day, still under the impression that he was a transfer student, he chose his words specifically so that Shinsou would be enthralled back. Even if it started in anger, in insult and even rivalry, he wanted those eerie violet eyes to look at him. He wanted to pick apart a history made apparent and mysterious all at once. How did he get those scars? How did he come here? Why was he so attached to the small child that seemed to be hoarded by those Class A gremlins?

Monoma always had an irritating itch to know someone far more intimately than most were comfortable with. It was comforting to know how the people he surrounded himself ticked, and he's often heard that he comes across a bit prickly to those that he hasn't dissected.

And there was nothing closer to a person's heart than their quirk, was there?

He agreed with a popular theory in Quirk Studies that a quirk was either a manifestation of it's user's personality, or that a quirk could subconsciously affect that said personality. Kendo had a heavy hand, literally and in most of her interpersonal relationships. Shiozaki was a creature out of mythology, a goddess of nature forced to live among mortals as punishment for some long forgotten sin.

Monoma liked to steal things, and creep under people's skin. It was an itch that he's never needed to resolve, and knew that it wouldn't help to try. It was a manifestation of his quirk in his personality.

And he wanted to use it to hold a manifestation of Shinsou.

Tetsutestu performed his role admirably, becoming a far better actor than he was on stage. "Hey. Fight me."

And Kendo was caught off-guard, like she should be. She knew that Monoma was plotting something, and had been watching him like a particularly hungry pit bull would eye a steak on the edge of its fence, but she couldn't ignore Tetsutestu's declaration. "Tetsutestu!"

While she rushed over, Tetsutestu leaned back from Shinsou's desk, admitting the smallest amount of defeat. That was fine, he would still have plenty of time to make his move. "Kirishima said Shinsou can talk if he fights someone. We just need to fight him so he can talk."

Sweet blank-faced Shinsou nearly betrayed nothing, but the line of his shoulders relaxed just a bit at those words. Monoma could feel bad for scaring him later, but for now, he had to focus on creeping along the wall to slip past the child and get close enough to touch Shinsou.

Kendo's quirk was usually reserved for Monoma, but Tetsutetsu had received his fair share of blows as well. This one played out just like the others, a heavy chop met an instinctively iron-clad defense. "Kendo! I'm sorry, are you hurt?"

Kendo was, but she wouldn't show it any further than shaking her now deflated hand. "I'm so *disappointed* it hurts. Out of all the bullheaded ideas you've had, *why* on Earth would you want to

fight Shinsou? He's a ward of UA!"

And Shinsou, unfortunately, was very perceptive. Monoma had kept his eyes away just so Shinsou wouldn't feel his stare, but as soon as he crept behind the little girl, Shinsou's head whipped around to face him.

Those eyes betrayed a suspicion that his face didn't. How utterly enthralling.

He knew the proper strategy would be to exit stage left. Make some unimportant remark and strike again when Shinsou's guard eventually lowered. But Monoma *itched*, and he never learned how not to scratch.

He was aiming to place his hand on Shinsou's shoulder, close enough to his neck for an 'accidental' caress that Kendo would no doubt catch immediately for what it was. But that wouldn't matter, not when he would have 5 whole minutes to explore a part of Shinsou's ever-so-secretive personality.

But his hand barely drifted towards Shinsou before it was grabbed, and he felt an explosion of pain.

Not from his hand. He could see how far his finger was pushed back, more than he could feel it, and he knew that a broken finger wouldn't wrack his *entire* body with agony.

Monoma had stolen enough quirks to be able to sort out any sort of mystery bag just by touch. Duds fell into him with the hollowness of a Faberge egg, transformation quirks had an ache and sharpness like a tooth breaking through the gum.

This wasn't any quirk that he was familiar with. He was loathe to agree with any member of that inferior class, and especially to use the language of that uncouth delinquent, but this quirk?

This was a *fucked* quirk.

Not mutant, not emitter, not transformation, not a dud and *certainly* not quirkless.

This was a quirk that *hurt*.

"MO-NO-MA!" Kendo's chop didn't carry much weight, probably because her hand was still sore, and Shinsou hadn't let go of him yet. It wasn't until Present Mic approached that Shinsou finally did, and Monoma flexed his fingers more for show than to carry out any evaluation, still unable to feel them through this sea of pain.

"Present Mic-sensei, I sincerely apologize-"

"Kendo, it's fine. You and Tetsutetsu let Vlad know that Monoma will be running a little late," Present Mic said with a thumb jabbing at the door. Monoma didn't know who's glare was fiercer, Kendo's or Present Mic's.

No, it was definitely Present Mic's.

"Is your hand alright?" Present Mic asked, probably more out of obligation than concern, while he crossed his arms and almost seemed to grow *taller* to become more intimidating. It was wholly unnecessary. Monoma shook his head, still biting back against another wave of pain. "Do you have his quirk right now?"

Shinsou, as a rule, didn't seem to move much. Didn't seem to emote either, but he spun to face

Monoma with an expression caught between rage and *terror* in a way that Momona didn't have enough space left in this haze of pain to parse though. "I don't, Present Mic-sensei."

He couldn't keep his tone even enough to hide the agony, and he imagined that his skin was flushing into a lovely white pallor as the seconds dragged on. But Shinsou, as pale as he already was, seemed to lose his own color while his hands began to move with more words kept hidden from Monoma.

But that mysterious terror seemed to translate more clearly in his trembling hands.

"Shinsou, it's alright, he would only have it for 5 minutes and he *won't* try to copy it again," Present Mic said, tone changing from oddly soft and paternal to sharp for the words addressed to him.

That was a familiar song, though he never liked to hear it at UA.

He's been struggling to do it for quite some time, but right as Present Mic's eyes widen into an unsettling display of worry, asking if he needs to see Eraserhead, he manages to unclench the metaphorical hand that had grabbed on to Shinsou's quirk. Monoma sighs in relief, waving off Present Mic's concern while he fixes his hair, more than displeased to find his brow dewy with sweat.

"I'm sure that the hero tasked as a zookeeper for those animals in Class A has more important matters to see to," Monoma said, flexing his fingers again to find a pinch of soreness, but nothing broken. Shinsou glares at him, and while he's aware that most people would find that kind of anger off-putting, Monoma positively *preens* under it. "I do apologize for taking liberties, but I was simply overcome with concern when the most uncivilized of Class A requested my expertise. Even a rabid dog might bark in true alarm."

Present Mic scowled, and beckoned to follow him outside of the classroom, closing the door afterwards. Monoma awaited a dressing down of epic and ear-bleeding proportions, and tried to focus more on the vengeance coming swiftly for him from Vlad King and Kendo combined more than the sickening trickle of guilt lingering along his spine.

He might have gone a bit too far this time.

Present Mic sighs, possibly warming up his quirk, before he crosses his arms and looks down on Monoma. "Did you notice anything with Shinsou's quirk?"

It had been impossible not to. "Something is very wrong with it," Monoma answers, unable to hide his own concern when Present Mic can so clearly wear his.

Neito's father was a quirk specialist, and in preparation for his hero training, he had become a veritable nuisance at his father's office. It might be a bit arrogant to say, without any true passion or training for the occupation, but Monoma was nearly a quirk specialist himself. He had held thousands of different quirks, and with the appropriate amount of time, he could pick out the frays of an ailing one, or feel the strain of a quirk factor gone too wild for its host.

He's never held a quirk that was *painful* the same way Shinsou's was, though the chest ache of a rejected one was close. "He certainly needs to see a quirk specialist. My father is a very busy man, but with a case as interesting as Shinsou's, I believe I could convince him--"

"Monoma," Present Mic interrupted, hands raising then falling back to his elbows, glancing around the hall. "I appreciate that, but I already have someone in mind. Just tell me what you saw about it

that made it ‘wrong.’”

Monoma couldn’t help but chuckle a bit, that the agony so apparent to him was so carefully hidden from everyone else. He sobered when he wondered if Shinsou felt that agony constantly, if part of his allure was an instinctive pull to save him from it. “I couldn’t even determine what type of quirk he had. As soon as I stole it, it began to hurt. And I’ve handled my fair share of unpleasant quirks, but nothing even approaches his.”

Present Mic nodded grimly, and as quick as a costume change, shifted back into a scolding teacher. “Then, I trust that you won’t do that again! Using your quirk against a ward is a pretty serious offense! Even if your quirk isn’t offensive, you’re using it against a civilian, which could be grounds for assault, not just expulsion!”

Monoma played his part as recalcitrant, knowing he’ll have to repeat it at least three times before the day is out and Kendo and Vlad King both have their pound of flesh.

“But, I know that your heart was in the right place, little listener. Shinsou probably won’t be too happy with you for a while, but I think he might appreciate it if you tried picking up a bit of sign language. I’m sure it’ll be a breeze with your language skills, and honestly,” Present Mic winced, looking back at the door. “Shinsou’s kind of lonely.”

Lonely?

Of course.

Those uncivilized, moronic, barbarous attention-mongers that called themselves heroes only to stain UA’s pure reputation in Class A wouldn’t *possibly* fathom that Shinsou would feel left out like a sad, wretched puppy in the rain watching them do something so insulting as *talk* in front of him. Or talk *to* him, as though to do something as abominable as rubbing his nose in the fact that he *couldn’t*.

“Well, of course, being raised trilingually has given me a natural talent,” Monoma preened, hiding a hatred that he didn’t think could build any farther, as it did so *exponentially*. “I’m sure that I can assist you where *Class A* seems to have fallen short. In fact, I do believe all of Class B can make the effort to be conversationally fluent before the end of the month.”

They would become fluent or die trying. Monoma would make sure of that.

Class B couldn’t afford to take a loss here, not when Class A had so clearly failed their ward.

*

Eri was on her fifth paper.

27 wasn’t even allowed to look at it. Every time he tried to peek, she huffed and pulled it away. He was so sorely tempted to slip his hand into her backpack now, to take one of the rejects to know what she was working on, to *have one*, but he bit back against that thought.

It would be reckless to steal something in plain sight of a pro hero.

His owner was working on something, and the subtle way the screen was tilted from 27’s usual

seat before he took it made him suspicious that he was working on the investigation. As much as he ached to know what Eri was working on, he *needed* to know what his owner was looking at.

Perhaps that necessity would make this plan a little less terrifying to play out.

27 stared at his owner's hands, working up the courage to move to his shoulders, then to his ear. Not his eyes, there was a lot of power in his eyes and it wasn't just from his quirk. It was uncomfortable to look at. He signed, still unsure whether he wanted his owner to see it or not, and what he would have to do if he didn't. '*The like game.*'

His owner turned to him, slightly raised eyebrows betraying a mix of surprise and confusion. "The like game?"

He needed to play it, even if it was embarrassing, and even if his owner didn't seem to want to play it by pretending he didn't know what it was. '*You play with E-R-I. I like. You like.*'

His owner paused, then nodded, turning his chair around to face 27 fully. He wished he didn't. 27 wished he didn't bother him, that his owner would go back to ignoring him. His full attention was *terrifying*. "And you want to play that game with me?"

He didn't. At all. And he still hated that his owner's words didn't tell him whether his response would be the correct one. '*Yes. I like coffee.*'

He could probably still manipulate Yamada into giving him coffee, even if his owner tried to stop him. "You can't have coffee," his owner mutters, half under his breath as he glances away and twists the ends of his hair. He seems nervous for some odd reason, before he turns back to 27. "I like cats."

27 knew that, and he hated that he picked one of the few responses that wasn't useful at all. Apparently, his owner's love of cats was as commonly known as his name. '*I like cats too. I like using sign.*'

Yamada certainly wouldn't allow his owner to take that from him. Something odd flashed over his owner's face, too quick for him to catch, before he raised his hands to sign what he spoke. "I like using sign too. I like working."

27 didn't know whether his nerves were tinged with relief or guilt, but it seemed that this awkward game was finally over. '*I am sorry. Will study.*'

"No, it's fine," his owner said, a bit too fast and with a rare tell of a waving hand, a plea for his earlier words to be ignored. "I meant that I like working. You're not interrupting anything."

27 knew he was lying. An honest person indeed. '*I like learning.*'

"Hizashi says that you're a very quick study," his owner says, somewhere between praise and observation. His eyes glance back at his computer screen, then to Eri, before they fall on 27's hands. "I like Eri."

"I like Zawa!" Eri chimes, still focused on her work, unaware that the game has twisted again.

27 knew he wouldn't like playing these games with his owner, already knew how little he could anticipate the turns. He didn't need to read him to know that what he said wasn't what he meant, and there was a question there that didn't need to be asked.

He didn't know if he would win anything by surrendering without being forced to, if his owner

would spot it, if he would think 27 was clever if he did. If this risky play would work out the way he wanted it to.

27 slipped into a mask that shouldn't tremble to approach his owner, that should be able to slide his chair closer to his desk without feeling his heartbeat thudding in his throat. The mask cracked at the edges, he knew, and the play nearly failed him entirely when his owner closed the program he had open before 27 could see anything more than rows and columns of indiscernible faces.

All of that was *almost* for nothing, but 27 wasn't playing a simple game anymore. He had two goals here, and one was still available to him.

He willed his hands not to shake, for his eyes to be able to look at his owner instead of at Eri, and failed both. ' *Type to talk.* '

The flash of whiteness on the screen drew his attention to the keyboard, and he tried to convince himself that this was a good play. It was an offering, a show of trust. It would tell his owner that 27 was loyal to him, and loyal to Eri. That 27 trusted Eri to him.

27 tried to convince himself that he did.

'Eri's quirk is triggered by pain, but builds through emotional responses that pass over a certain threshold. I can't remember the names for the chemicals associated with those emotions, but the mixture of the emotions that forced the build up affect the quality of what was,' he pauses, swallowing hard as he tried not to think of a sight that was all too common for him just a little over a month ago. 'harvested.'

His owner says nothing, and 27 forces himself to continue.

'Chisaki didn't test her quirk directly. I don't know if the emotions affect how it works. It's rare that happiness is an emotion that causes the build, but it could be a possible trigger. Mirio seems to think it would improve'

"You told Mirio about this?" his owner's voice cuts through. Again, too neutral, but tinged with something slightly sharper. Something he still doesn't know.

'Yes. I shouldn't have.'

His owner waits, letting him sweat under the pressure. A familiar play, and not one of his favorites. "No, it's fine. I was just surprised."

27 isn't sure if those words are honest either, but he continues after erasing his previous words. 'the quality of her quirk. Like a unicorn princess. I told him it would be a longer process, but I'm not sure if it will work at all. Her quirk causes her pain at a certain point, even without stimulus, so it will never be completely purified. At 12 centimeters in length, the cartilage separating the horn from her sinus cavity begins to dissolve, and mucus begins to build up in her horn. The sinus pressure causes pain, and sometimes the horn needs to be tapped to release enough of the mucus to be drained. Usually three times a day. And she's very emotionally volatile after the eruption.'

Please let me deal with her , he wants to add, but can't find the courage to ask.

He'll make sure that they don't see it. He'll isolate her in one of the rooms with him if that's what it takes, so that whatever reaction she has - Blank, Crying, Rage - he'll be the only one who sees it. They can have the brighter parts of Eri, the ones that they wanted to keep, that drew them to taking her in in the first place. He wouldn't risk her future here by letting them see the painful pieces, they were meant for his eyes anyway. They were the punishment for his crimes.

“Thank you for telling me this, Shinsou,” his owner says quietly, and 27 can see out of the corner of his eye that his hands fold in on each other, but he doesn’t have the courage to look for any other tells. “I really appreciate it. But I want to know something.”

What did he leave out? Did his owner want to know how many times that Eri had been harvested? 27 counted many things, but he’s never tried to keep track of that painful number. Did he want to know how he could control Eri’s quirk, bring it up to the surface? He didn’t want to tell him that, he would refuse, no matter if he lost the game or whatever else his owner did to him, he would *never* tell him.

“How do you know all of this? The chemicals, the exact length,” his owner trails off, waiting for 27’s answer.

It’s not one he particularly wants to give, but it’s far easier to admit than the other questions he was afraid of. ‘Chisaki told me to copy the test results. Not often.’

It was one of Chisaki’s better plays.

He never truly understood the way Chisaki looked at Eri, but there was a piece of it that was clear to 27. He was possessive of Eri. He wanted to own her fully, but as long as 27 was in the picture, he never could. 27 had part of her that he couldn’t take.

But Chisaki thought he could change that. He could separate them, and he thought that 27 would either jump at the chance for his own room, or be cowed into submission when Chisaki insisted on it. 27 refused it, even when his limbs shook and ached and broke and splintered and fused again, cycling over and over until Chisaki realized that a dog’s will was stronger than the hour-long quirk training session, and had to allow 27 to stay with Eri by his own word.

Then, he tried to torment 27 with the heart he had recklessly laid bare by that. He tried to wrack 27 with guilt to see when he broke, when he couldn’t stand the sight of Eri because it reminded him too much of the pain.

He made 27 copy the reports while Eri was still in The Chair, only releasing her when he was done. He forced them both to play that damn tea pot game that he called ‘Sakazuki.’ He started reducing their food portions and making 27 pay for trips outside with his meals, betting that eventually, 27 would turn on Eri like a starving dog for her food.

But 27 wasn’t a Dog.

He endured, and he played Chisaki back. He hated that play, he hated that he stooped to involving Eri in it, something that he promised himself from the beginning that he would never do, but it worked. He flaunted that Eri cared for him, and Chisaki made a reckless move. He took her outside, probably thinking that Eri would cling to him, be curious about the world she’d never seen instead of being terrified.

She slipped away, and put into motion a plan that he had long since given up on. Calling down a dream, a childish wish that there *were* heroes in this world, and to his surprise, it worked.

The irony doesn’t go unnoticed. In his last game with his last owner, he used Eri as bait, to make Chisaki want to steal her, so that she could escape. In this game, with this owner, he’s using Eri as bait so that he might keep them both.

He doesn’t know if it’s working. Chisaki hid half of his face and most of his tells, but he still knew how to read him better than this owner. The silence drags on, to the point that it’s no longer a

power play, it's just confusing.

"I'm sorry that you had to do that," his owner finally says, almost too quietly for 27 to hear.

He wonders if that's the way people are supposed to say 'I'm sorry for your loss.' He wonders what tell slipped beneath 27's mask to prompt those words, whether he's inspired the pity that he wants to earn from Yamada, but hadn't been as hopeful to gain from his owner.

"I like talking to you," his owner says, a bit closer to his normal tone of voice. A change in subject, a distraction. A rather poor one, but it betrays how deeply unsettled his owner is. "Especially about how Class A needs to improve."

It's not useful to the most pressing game he has, to find a name for his owner, and it's not useful for his game to find out what they know about The Miasma. But it's a good indication of how the most important game is playing out.

His owner doesn't like him, not the way he likes Eri. 27 expected that, and he hoped that his best efforts would bring him close to it. But his owner liked something about 27 that wasn't relevant to the investigation. He saw something useful in 27's advice.

That was a foothold he would be stupid not to take. *'I like talking about hero students. They need work. Can help.'*

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the twitch, his owner's carefully constructed mask pulling into that smirk. Not the fond smile, not that he would expect it, but a smirk meant plans, and 27 was part of them. "I think we can work with that."

27 certainly would.

Chapter End Notes

Username for Class 1-A Chat:

Ya Good Boiii: Sero Hanta
Slappy Tail Boiii: Ojiro Mashiro
Pastry Boiii: Aoyama Yuga
Sparky Boiii: Kaminari Denki
Palpitation Projector: Jirou Kyouka
Provost Piston: Iida Tenya
Quiet Boiii: Shoji Mezo
InvisiCutie: Hagakure Tooru
#1 Eri Enthusiast: Uraraka Ochako
King Explosion Murder: Bakugo Katsuki
Crimson Boiii: Kirishima Eijirou
Mighty Boiii: Midoriya Izuku
Sweet Boiii: Sato
Choppy: Asui Tsuyu
Ashi: Ashido Mina
Genesis: Yaoyorozu Momo
Mysterieux Boiii: 27 (Shinsou Hitoshi)
Pure Boiii: Koda Koji

Soba Boiii: Todoroki Shoto
Crow Boiii: Tokoyami Fumikage

Need Lunch

Chapter Summary

27 has dealt with the side effects of Eri's quirk building up often enough, but UA makes it impossibly difficult to manage them. When Eri plans to challenge him during lunch, he finds that he can't quite rise to the occasion.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Mentions of 50 and her death being compared to a weight, self-deprecating spiral, mention of anorexia used to describe Shinsou's eating habits, severe anxiety attack

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri's horn growing causes mucus to build up in the horn, necessitating a tap to release the sinus pressure, which is referred to as a 'Horn trick.' Today is Aizawa's birthday, and Eri was told to draw him a picture as a present. When Shinsou was having a mental breakdown after his stash was discovered, Mirio encouraged him to use the laptop to type out what he was thinking, which the keylogger recorded. Aizawa and Naomasa are the only ones who have access to the keylogger. Shinsou accidentally informed Class 1-A that Aizawa's birthday was today, and Iida called for all the students in that class to gather together during lunch to make plans to celebrate it. Eri calls Shinsou 'Mom' sometimes, which is a recent development that began after they were reunited at UA. Monoma tried to copy Shinsou's quirk at Bakugo's request. Shinsou's name-sign for Bakugo is "Blast chan."

27 liked Eri, in a way that really couldn't be contained by such a small and meaningless word.

But 27 hated Eri's Quirk Grumps.

He knocked on the door for the women's bathroom again, still seething that bizarre social etiquette made an unlocked door into an impenetrable fortress. "Eri, come out."

"No!" Eri yelled, still in the middle of her fit though the anger would fall into tears eventually. "Go play The Like Game with Zawa 'cause you like him so much, and leave me alone!"

27 tipped his head back, trying to remember how to de-escalate this kind of fit. He had calmed her down from pain, stress, fear, and exhaustion too many times to count, but jealousy was a new one. He's not sure if he ever read that section of the book, it seemed too ridiculous to imagine that she would ever be jealous of him. And it was incredibly ridiculous now.

He was tempted to tell her that she *told* him to be friends with his owner, but he knew that would only make her shut down. She didn't want a rational explanation, and he struggled to find a way to play into this fit so that he could control it.

"Okay, I'll never talk to Aizawa again." He waited, and there was no response. He tried to push the door open, social rules be *damned*, but he felt her push it back. "Okay, I'll leave. I'm going to go away, forever."

He backed away from the door, just to test her, sure that she would come running out with tears in her eyes now that he had called on one of her worst fears.

And it hurt that it didn't work.

She didn't care. He should be happy about that, that she needed him less. That she had the heroes, and if he lost all of his games, she wouldn't be sad to see him go. She wouldn't carry that weight that 50 gave him. She would be taken care of.

He should be happy instead of feeling like he was spiraling into a fit of his own, frustration and hurt and disappointment that made it nearly impossible to hold himself back from kicking the door in and holding her close, and hope that she didn't thrash away from him because if she did he would *break*.

"Shinsou?" Floaty calls to him, one of many students in this hallway but the only one that's stopped to notice. "Do you need to, um."

She trails off, turning her head between him and the bathroom door, and he realizes that she must think that he's an absolute *idiot*. That he doesn't even know which bathroom he's supposed to use.

He sighs, unwilling to dig out the phone for this, and knocks on the door again. "Go away!" Eri, predictably, answers. She's getting close to the end of the fit, rage bubbling in her voice, and pretty soon it will boil over into tears.

Floaty looks shocked, then twists it into some form of nervous amusement, scratching the back of her head. "Oh, you and Eri are kind of having a fight, I guess. Do you want me to try to talk to her?"

Floaty seems a bit too enthusiastic about that, and he's starting to wonder if her attachment to Eri is some sort of neurosis. And he doubts that it will really be able to withstand the full force of Eri's Quirk Grumps.

27 points at the door, then places his fingers together in imitation of Floaty's quirk, and sweeps his hand to mime the image of Eri floating right out the door and into the hallway. Floaty seems a bit uncomfortable with his plan. "You want me to use my quirk to make her come out?"

He nods, even though he wished that Floaty could have just *done it* instead of letting Eri know. As much as he hated his quirk, if he used it on Floaty, Eri would be out of the bathroom by now. And as he predicted, Eri whined miserably, "I'm not coming out! You're gonna make me snotty!"

At least with a door between them, 27 can roll his eyes. "I won't make you snotty if it makes you upset. We can figure out how to do your horn trick later. If you want, you can teach Yamada or Aizawa-

"No!" Eri whines, kicking the door to prove that she's found the fuel to spiral back into the angry part of her fit. "I'm not doing horn tricks! Never ever ever EVER!"

“Eri,” Floaty calls, her voice soft as she knocks on the door. “Can I come in? It’s just me.”

27 bristles as that works, Eri opening the door to glare at him and pull Floaty inside. In fact, the glare and subsequent tug were probably *meant* to hurt him.

She’s gotten very good at that over the years, as her eruptions allowed her to release built-up anger and hatred instead of just fear or sadness. And she showed him just how much she hated him during those fits, even if she hid it all too well when she was calm and soothed.

Even if he deserved it, it *hurt*.

“Eri, I know you’re kind of upset right now,” Floaty says, both of them are still close to the door, making it too easy to overhear. “But you know that Shinsou really cares about you. He wouldn’t do something that would make you upset, or hurt you. I don’t know about your horn trick-”

“*Don’t!*” Eri whines, sniffing afterwards. “It’s *gross!* I don’t like it! I don’t want to!”

“Do you want me to come out with you? If Shinsou tries to make you do the horn trick, I can stop him!”

She absolutely *could not*, but 27 wasn’t going to try it anyway. If Eri was intent on getting a horn ache, he would just have to let her, and deal with the fall out later. And judging by Eri’s watery eyes and tilted head, she was going to get one soon.

Floaty beams and gives him a thumbs up, which he half-heartedly returns. “Eri, I’m not going to do the horn trick until you ask me to. I promise.”

Eri clings to Floaty’s leg, pouting at him. “Ocha, I wanna stay with you!”

Floaty keeps turning her head between the child clinging to her leg and 27, unable to tell Eri ‘No’ but unsure whether 27 will allow her to keep Eri. And 27 absolutely will *not*.

He crouches down to Eri’s eye level, and hopes that he doesn’t become a casualty of those reckless speed quirks by reducing his ability to dodge. “If you ask nicely, she might walk with us back to the staff room, but if you stay with Ocha, you won’t be able to eat with Aizawa. And that would make him very sad, especially because it’s his birthday.”

27 *should* feel bad for manipulating Eri like this, but her continued rejection stings just enough to keep him from that. She turns her head away, pressing her face against Floaty’s leg. “I want to stay with Ocha! Zawa can eat with you, ‘cause he likes you better!”

“He doesn’t,” 27 argues, still baffled that Eri would think that. “He likes you a lot better. He might even be crying right now because he misses you so much. Or he might be looking at the picture-”

“No!” Eri yells, stomping her foot before she grabs onto Floaty’s hand, intent to drag her down the hall. “He can’t! He can’t look!”

27 follows behind Floaty, knowing he should *definitely* feel bad for making Eri worry about her project being discovered, and he does. But it was also an effective strategy, and he could make it up to her later.

He’s not sure if he can make it up to Floaty for dragging her into this fit, and he’s not sure if he wants to. She’s still a liar. But the way she goes stock-still and nervous in the doorway of the staff room makes him feel a little bad for her. This might be a room that the students were punished in, and he’s very familiar with the way that a room like that can carry echoes of long-healed wounds.

Yamada and his owner seem surprised to see Floaty, but their attention is quickly captured by Eri when she shrinks in on herself, apparently disappointed that his owner isn't crying or rooting through her things. He's just sitting at his cubicle, turned to face a blank screen that 27 doubts was blank before they entered.

"I wanna eat lunch with Ocha," Eri declares, shaking the hero student's still captured hand to demonstrate exactly who she means.

Yamada glances at his owner and 27 in turn, hoping to find some sort of explanation, before he looks back at Eri. "Are you sure? I know it's a little boring in here, but I think Midnight and Toshinori were planning on stopping by."

Eri doesn't even consider changing her mind, too set on this course of action, too intent on whatever she plans to gain from it. "I want to eat with the heroes today. Can I?"

Yamada folds, only looking to Floaty to make sure that would understand her task now that Eri has indirectly assigned it. "Think you can keep an eye on her, listener?"

"Of course!" Floaty cheers, that neurosis flaring back to life as she brightens at the prospect of having access to Eri for the entire lunch period. "I'd be happy to!"

'*E-R-I going. I'm going.*' 27 signed, unable to care if this was reckless, if it was allowed. Even if he lost the game here and now, he *refused* to imagine leaving Eri in the care of those hero students without his supervision. Especially with the odds of her horn causing her pain.

"Uraraka is capable of-" his owner begins to say, before Yamada cuts him off.

"Sure! You guys can have lunch with the students," Yamada says, grabbing two bento boxes to hand to 27. "And if you want something from Lunch Rush - *not* coffee though, we sent out a memo - don't be afraid to ask! I'm a pretty decent cook, but he's definitely got me beat on a lot of dishes!"

Eri shoots him a far weaker glare, then runs to grab her backpack, having already packed away her work. She wavers when she looks at his owner, tilting from one foot to the other. "Is it okay, Zawa? I don't wanna make you sad."

"No, it's fine," his owner reassures, and probably finds it odd that she darts away under his outstretched hand, running back to Floaty's side. 27 realized then that this was not just a fit.

And he has no idea if he can fix it.

*

He can practically hear Hizashi straining to hold back his irritation, but between his birthday and Eri's skittish rejection, there's no way he would let it loose. He would rather that he did. He doesn't need pity from his husband.

Aizawa sighs, turning back to the United Kingdom database, wishing that Naomasa could have pulled together the resources to have a team of human eyes doing what technology could not, but the detective seemed resigned to The Commission's plan. He picks at his bento box more for show than any desire to eat it. As much as he enjoyed Hizashi's cooking, jelly pouches were far more

efficient.

"I'm going to ask Toshinori to see if there's anything he can do," Yamada declares, stabbing at his rice more than eating it. "I don't care who is on The Commission right now, they can't just ignore it if All Might himself tells them to bug off."

"It's the best lead they have so far," Aizawa argues half-heartedly. He knows it's the rational course of action, but half of him only says that just to see if his words are enough to provoke Hizashi into being honest with him.

It almost works. Hizashi glares at him, lips becoming a firm line that *should* be the precursor to one of their louder arguments, but he looks back at the door, forcing himself to relax in a shuddering breath. "Shou, I know that. And it's still messed up. We became heroes to stop this kind of thing, not be accomplices in it."

"That's why *you* became a hero," Aizawa counters, and he knows he's cutting a little too deeply here, but it needs to be said. "You haven't dealt with investigations like this as much as I have. There are times that the system works like it should, and there are times that it doesn't. Naomasa probably kept you out of the loop because he knew you wouldn't be familiar with that."

"So, what's *your* excuse?" Hizashi hissed, almost too quietly for Aizawa to hear, but he's spent too much time around teenagers for his ears not to pick on up words muttered under someone's breath.

"Maybe I agreed with Naomasa," Aizawa snapped, the faces on the screen now completely unimportant, even though he still stares at them. "Maybe I wanted to keep you out of it because I knew you would react this way."

The dam that Hizashi had built up started with a crack, but now it crumbled. "Oh! Of course! Why should I know what's going to happen to *my* ward when everyone else has that covered! It's not like I have a responsibility to Shinsou or anything! No, I just need to play babysitter and let you guys do the investigative work, a dumb blonde like me belongs in the kitchen after all!"

Aizawa looked up in time to see Midnight's face through the window in the staff room door, wincing before she turned and walked down the hall. "Maybe that's what Shinsou needs from you. If one of us has to do this, I'd rather have it on my hands than yours."

Hizashi shook his head, his mouth twisting over words that he didn't have the fuel to say anymore, before he sighed, pulling his chair closer to Aizawa's. "Fine, I get it. I get why you did that, but you *can't* do things like this, Shou. Shinsou is my ward and you... you need to *act* like you trust me."

Hizashi didn't need to use his quirk to make his words into a weapon. Aizawa reeled as they stung and struck true, closing the distance between them to lean his head on his husband's shoulder. "I trust you, Hizashi. I just don't want you to have to see this."

Hizashi leaned his head against Aizawa's, before he patted his cheek playfully. "Too bad, babe. If this is my ward and your investigation, then we're *partners* in this, just like everything else. So stop hiding things from me, and read me in."

Aizawa shook his head. "I don't know anything else. We might have a week, we might have a month. We were told the head of the organization is an undocumented foreigner, but the databases can't run a search based on a sketch." He sighed as Hizashi ran a hand through his hair, trying not to find comfort in the gesture when he felt like he didn't deserve it. "Shinsou needs to give us something better."

Hizashi sighed. “Yeah, and that’s not going to happen in a week, or even a month. He’s still pretty shaken by what happened with Bakugo.”

Aizawa noticed. He would have liked to take those friendly overtures that happened during the free period as something other than a drowning child trying desperately to find a friendly port, and still hated that he had taken advantage of it. He still didn’t know what caused the spiral, but the keylogger told him how deeply it wound into Shinsou.

‘ Trash trash TRASH USELESS dispose they’ll dispose of you TRASH USELESS hurt everyone you hurt your own WORTHLESS WORTHLESS you HURT ERI everyone CURSED YOU’RE CURSED should die die die death too good for you should suffer hurt deserve TRASH USELESS STUPID STUPID STUPID CURSED YOU’RE CURSED cursed existence cursed quirk dispose of you should die death too good suffer deserve it dispose of you USELESS TRASH TRASH TRASH TRASH STUPID STUPID STUPID .’

He read all seven pages of Shinsou’s mental breakdown, hoping to find something useful to the investigation to justify his intrusion, and found nothing. Nothing but seven pages of reasons to find something to offer The Commission. The kid couldn’t handle a bad day at school, and he certainly couldn’t handle what they had planned.

“Read me in on that,” Aizawa asked, straining to pick at his cold tofu so he could eat while Hizashi explained.

“Nah, I’m handling it,” Hizashi said flippantly, patting his head still resting on his husband’s shoulder.

“It involves my student...” Aizawa trailed off, then rose to level a half-hearted glare, which Hizashi countered with a toothy grin. “You can’t be mean to me on my birthday.”

“Babe, I can be mean to you every day,” Hizashi said, a finger hooking into the chain that he wore under the capture scarf to pull the ring hanging on it out of his shirt. “It’s one of my favorite husbandly duties.”

Aizawa rolled his eyes, but honestly?

He wouldn’t have it any other way.

*

Loud loud loud loud loud too many people too many how are there this many people here they’re all so loud.

Breathe. In. Out. Eri.

Breathe. In. Out. Eri.

27 was grateful that Eri decided to sit on him instead of the seat that Floaty had pulled over for her, even if he was still irritated that she *forced* him to come to this unbearably noisy, excessively populated area.

Full of hundreds of powerful quirks and he hardly knew any of them, his back had to be turned to

several of them. He *hated this* .

Breathe. In. Out. Eri.

At least his mask seemed to be intact, or the hero students were too preoccupied with making their plans to celebrate his owner's birthday to notice. Piston was trying, and horribly failing, to gain control of the conversation, but his underlings ran wild knowing that he was unfit for his role.

Eri would probably make a promising head of Shie Hassaikai, if she ever wanted to claim her birthright. She didn't have to make a single demand of these heroes, and they continued to offer her tributes of apple slices and other sweets. Floaty in particular seemed to be making a play to become her right hand, though she would be wholly unfit for it. A right hand needed to strike fear into the hearts of the underlings, and that face would never be able to do it.

"Hey, why don't we ask Aizawa's other kids, since we're all here to plan his birthday bash," Sparky says, interrupting the loudest shouting match concerning what cake his owner wanted. Sparky grinned expectantly, and 27 didn't even have the energy to taunt him for expecting him to answer verbally.

Eri kicked her feet, too slow to be excitement, just a sign that she was thinking hard about something. "He likes the red cake, but I don't remember what it's called."

"Red velvet?" Creati asks, offering payment for Eri's intel by sliding her yet another juice box, as though she didn't have two unopened ones already.

"Yup! Yama gets him cupcakes like that when he doesn't get hurt at his job for a whole month!" Eri says, swinging her feet back and forth proudly.

"Hatsume said she'd help, but are you sure you want to do this, Sato?" Beat Dropper asked, looking up from her phone with the faintest traces of concern as she looked at Sucrose Processor. "You know what she's like. It's probably safer to wait until we get to the dorm."

"I know, but I might be able to have it done before homeroom," Sweets Dealer answered grimly, breathing in as though he were facing a suicide mission rather than baking a cake. "You guys better appreciate this."

Several heroes bowed or gave him a salute as he stood, walking away with a stiffness that he should be trained well enough to hide. Even if his job was that risky, even if it would cost him his life, he should know better than to show it and rattle his comrades. He should be a professional, and die with pride.

27 glanced over at Blasty, who had dragged Crimson Shark into his self-imposed banishment to another table. Even if his tantrum made the table a bit quieter, it grated on his nerves, and Blasty didn't seem skilled enough to have intended to do that. Which only made it more irritating.

The hero students went back to arguing over a gift. Their lack of preparation meant that Genesis' abilities were limited, but some were against using her quirk entirely, arguing that if she created the gift, then it was an offering from her alone, rather than a group effort.

If Genesis didn't press her advantage here and use one of their better ideas to separate herself from the pack, he would be severely disappointed in her. She could probably overthrow Piston's position if her gift carried favor from his owner, but she might be too soft to risk that. Piston might end up being killed as an example to the others, teaching them not to fail to live up to expectations.

27 could see why she didn't want that pressure, even if it was easily within her reach.

“What about a coupon book, kero?” Amphibian Fibber asked the group, eyes glancing at each of her peers in turn. “Each page could have a redeemable coupon from each of us to avoid a behavior Aizawa-sensei dislikes, kero.”

“Like the coupon books that you make for your mom on her birthday or mother’s day,” Ashido says, entirely too enthusiastic about the idea. 27 wonders if she ever made a coupon that promised not to melt anything with her quirk. If she had ever made good on that coupon’s promise if she did. If he had made his mother one too.

“Yeah! Like, Midoriya can promise not to break his bones or go on a mumble rant!” Tape Joint adds, and while he sounds like he’s trying to be helpful, Izu-Midoriya kicks off into a muttering spell as though he was trained to do so.

“I believe that is a very good idea, Asui! Let us take a vote to decide whether to take this course of action. All in favor, please raise your hands,” Piston shouts, his own hands moving in amusing half-signs before he raises his own, soon followed by the rest of the hero students, including Crimson Shark. “That would be 17 in favor of a coupon book. Each of us should endeavor to have a coupon ready before homeroom. I will send a text message to Sato to inform him of this new development, and I have no doubt that he will be able to prepare his coupon as well.”

“I can create a cover page and book binding materials to make it look more professional,” Genesis adds, and 27 doesn’t miss the way that she gains more attention from the underlings than Piston does.

“We should also include a few coupons from the whole class,” Zappy says, spreading his arms out to gesture to his peers. “Like, we can have a coupon saying he can sleep during all of our classes, and we’ll still do our work, or something.”

“As long as there’s a coupon saying you’ll stay off your phone,” Beat Dropper jabs with a smirk. “But Present Mic-sensei will probably try to steal it from him.”

27 was still curious what Sparky was trying to do when he couldn’t recite the alphabet, but he didn’t want to draw any attention to himself by trying to ask. Unfortunately, Eri was doing that for him.

“Twenny,” Eri called, finally ending her tantrum to look up at him, tugging on his sleeve as well. This must be an important question. “Do you want a coupon book?”

27 struggled not to let his face reflect the feeling of his stomach dropping, hoping that these heroes were too stupid to connect the dots. Midoriya’s startle wasn’t helping, *at all*. “Not really,” 27 answered, and was disappointed in himself when he quietly added. “I’d rather have a picture.”

Eri found something to be upset by in his words, frowning before she reached for her backpack laying next to his feet. “Momo, are you a good draw-er?”

Genesis gave a pinched smile in answer. “No, I’m afraid I’m not a very good artist. I focused on improving my penmanship in my free time, while others might have pursued art to relieve stress.”

27 catches Eri’s hands before she can do it, shooting a glare at Genesis. Even if she didn’t know, and she *should*, being one of the heroes Eri must have spent a lot of time with during that month he was away from her. She should choose her words more carefully. “You can say ‘draw-er’ Eri. It’s not wrong.”

Eri didn’t seem entirely convinced, but she trusted him enough not to do it when he let go of her

hands. Instead, she hugged her backpack to her chest, squirming nervously. “I need help with my picture. I am not a good dra- artist.”

27 bites down on the inside of his cheek to keep himself from reaching for the knife to take it out on Creati. He hated when she talked like this, like Chisaki wanted her to.

He never should have gotten sick. And when he did, he should have shown Chisaki that he could still do his job, that he could control Eri without speaking. Even if he had to go back to having his jaw wired shut, the mask only opening for him to eat, it would have kept her from doing this.

It would have kept Chisaki from taking another piece of Eri. A piece that he still had.

“Izuku is a pretty good draw-er!” Floaty offers, while Midoriya nervously disagrees. 27 appreciates her choice of words enough to give her a nod, which she returns none too subtly.

“Hagakure is really good at drawing too! Her doodles are so cute!” Ashido gushes, wrapping her arms around the floating uniform beside her, who also tries to protest that she only doodles, which doesn’t make her an artist.

Eri seems to be indecisive, torn between Izuku - someone she’s familiar with - and Focus Imperceptible - someone she isn’t as comfortable with, but has the skillset she requires. She shrinks in on herself as she continues to waver, looking at each of them in turn.

Then Izuku makes it worse. “You don’t want Shinsou to help-”

“No!” Eri yells, kicking her feet back into his legs. It doesn’t hurt the way she means it to, but she might be pleased to know it hurts him all the same. “Twenny can’t help! He can’t give Zawa *two* presents!”

Divided Temperature looks up from his notebook, blinking slowly at Eri after her outburst, before he mutters to himself, “Sibling rivalry.”

Amphibian Fibber cocks her head to the side. “Eri, Aizawa-sensei wouldn’t mind if Shinsou helped you with your present, kero. It would still be from you.”

27 glances at Koda, making sure to catch his eye. ‘ *It’s fine. Bad anyway. Tell them to stop.* ’

“Shinsou said he’s not a good artist,” Koda translates, pressing two of his fingers together in front of his chest. “But I’m sure that you could be if you tried! Or wanted to....”

‘ *I don’t.* ’ 27 signs. His unmade hand would make that impossible anyway.

“Hey, Bakugo, you’re pretty good at-” Zappy begins to say, turning to track Blasty as he stalks towards 27, his usual scowl a bit thinner and deeper set before it curls into a snarl when he slams a tray on top of 27’s unopened bento box.

“Eat, dumb shit,” Blasty growls, hand curling into its usual position for his quirk to fire off before he clenches it into a fist. “It’s fucking pissing me off to watch you turn into a fucking skeleton. If anything’s going to end your shit, it’s going to be me, not anorexia. Dumb fuck.”

‘ *Look away. Dumb fuck.* ’ 27 signed, glad that Eri was too upset with him to want to copy his words. ‘ *Plan failed. M-O-N-O-M-A. Stupid. Try again. Blast chan.* ’

Blasty grinds his teeth, then lifts his hands to sign. ‘ *Eat. Dumb shit. Fuck you. Fuck M-O-N-O-M-A. Shit chan.* ’

27 couldn't stop the beginning of a grin, biting his lips together to keep it from spreading any further. ' *Congratulations. Learning new words. I have hope for you. Blast chan.* '

"Kacchan! Eri needs help drawing a picture for Aizawa-sensei," Izuku says, drawing Blasty's glare from 27 towards himself. "Since you're pretty good at--"

"I'm *great* as fuck at art," Bakugo hissed, a bit less heat behind his words than usual. He eyed the empty chair behind him warily, only sparing a glance at Eri before he pulled it between 27 and Floaty, kicking a foot onto his knee once he sat down. "What the fu-frick do you want help with?" Even though his words were directed at Eri, he still didn't look at her, glaring at the table instead.

There *was* hope for Blasty.

Eri tried to glare, but after Izuku's endorsement, she couldn't do much else. She huffed, pulling out the pictures that she had drawn, keeping them rolled in on themselves so that 27 couldn't see them before handing them to Blasty. "I can't make Zawa look right and the cats need to be cuter."

Blasty flipped through the pictures, still keeping them angled away from 27, as though he was also aware of how much 27 wanted to see them. "The cats are cute as fuck," Blasty muttered, tilting his head to the side as he examined the drawings with a serious look on his face. "I'll show you how to do that stipple sh- stuff, for his scraggly ass beard. Is Sensei supposed to be quirking out or are his eyes supposed to look demonic?"

Eri kicked her feet together a few times, tilting forward towards the table. "They're just red in the picture," she muttered under her breath, and 27 could hear the sad pout without needing to see it.

She was being *ridiculous* .

"Eri," 27 begins to say, intent to tell her what she hadn't already guessed, what he had only parsed out last night. That Yamada and his owner *wanted* to keep Eri as their child, there was no reason for her to be insecure about her position. She had her place, and it was with them, and his owner would be happy to see that she wanted it too, enough to pretend that they had the same red eyes. That she already saw him as her father.

But 27 doesn't say any of that because it's cold and it's loud and he's drifting and there's fog and it's so *loud loud loud loud*.

Eri. Standing close to Blasty, watching him draw, that technique *loud*. Speaking, it's not that loud but it's *loud* there's no words no air either just sounds too much noise for there to be air *why don't they realize there isn't any air in this place it's too loud for air*.

She looks at him when he stands, her head tilting, she still needs her horn trick but she'll find him, she'll ask, she's safe, she has her position *no air*.

She's not upset, not yet, but she hates when he leaves the room for a trip outside, so he signs her another promise, one that Chisaki's camera can't overhear. ' *Heroes.* ' He leaves, his lungs aching. This sickness is going to kill him, it will probably kill him before he gets outside but at least she won't see it, won't see his body.

He can't breathe, his lungs have stopped working. He needs to make it outside. He can't let her see.

Why is it so loud? Chisaki hates noise, he doesn't let the underlings get this loud, it's so loud, too loud, too busy. He doesn't recognize any of these underlings, they're wearing odd clothing. None of them have masks. Chisaki is going to kill all of them, he needs to keep his head down, not associate with them, he doesn't want to remember any of them when they're dead.

Loud loud loud no air can't breathe starting to hurt can't breathe just past those doors, don't let Eri see when I'm dead don't let her remember me don't let me be like 50 to her don't let her carry that with her.

“...o I'm okay, Aizawa-sensei. I'm way more worried about Shinsou.”

Something moving his hands. Tendons working against his will. He remembers what they look like, Chisaki showed him. Maybe Chisaki is playing with them right now. He should probably open his eyes to see. “...oming around, I think.”

Not Chisaki. Woman. Familiar. He should open his eyes.

His body comes back to him with an odd ache. Every muscle is tensed, as though he tried to hold himself inside his body. It didn't work. It must have been bad. He must have been away for a while. Maybe days. That shouldn't happen.

He tries breathing. His lungs are cleared, he remembers that they stole the sickness. He thinks he's been breathing for a while, but when he concentrates on it, when he makes it less instinctive, his eyes open oddly. Like they were open, just covered. It's odd.

Witching Hour is moving his hands, Yamada hovering at her side, looking at him. His owner and Crimson Shark in the doorway, Crimson Shark seems nervous about his owner's proximity. He might have done something wrong.

No. 27 did something wrong.

He pulls back his hands, realizing that he might not have been given permission to use them yet as a secondary thought, but he needs them to sign. ‘*I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*’

What did he do? He did something. He did something wrong, something crept into his skin while he was away and did something with his hands. Witching Hour kept looking at them like something was still inside of them, something that wasn't him.

“It's alright, Shinsou,” Yamada says, hands flying up before he tucks one behind his neck. “The lunch room might have been a little too much, you know. I should have warned you about that.”

Midnight hums in agreement, cutting her eyes to Yamada sharply. “It can be a *little* overwhelming with over a hundred students in one room.”

He looks at Crimson Shark, trying not to look at his owner. He doesn't think he could withstand it if he knew what his owner thought right now, not with the fog still so close. Crimson Shark smiles and gives him a wave, and 27 breathes a sigh of relief.

He knows that sometimes, something creeps into his skin while he's away, and does something unsettling. He's seen it on the faces of the underlings, the way they refuse to look at him, instinctively pull away when he approaches. It's a sickness that inspires pity and horror, and he might not have been cured of it when they took his other sickness.

“Thank you, Kirishima,” his owner says, a clear dismissal that the hero student takes appreciatively.

“It was nice eating lunch with you, Shinbro! I think it was super manly that you came by!” Crimson Shark says while he crosses the boundary of the doorway, turning down the hall after he finishes. 27 could appreciate that Crimson Shark didn't expect him to answer, but he's too concerned right now with trying to avoid his owner's gaze while trying to pick up any tell that he

was angry.

His owner only seems tired when he walks back to his usual seat, settling behind Midnight and Yamada. But he doesn't cast a single look in 27's direction.

He's angry.

'*I'm sorry.*' 27 wants to sign more, but his words can catch here too, like they do when he tries to speak. He did something reckless for Eri's sake, when she didn't want him to, and failed anyway. He left her unprotected. He fell out of his head and troubled an underling for it.

And it happened on his owner's *birthday*.

All of his efforts to complete his job are worthless now, that hopeless game is over. There's no place for him here, not when he's insulted his owner that thoroughly. He doesn't know what will happen to him, but he knows that he won't like it. But he also feels like he deserves it.

His owner grunts, and 27 looks up to see Midnight's arm pulling away from him. He doesn't have time to wonder if he's supposed to retaliate against her for striking his owner, before his owner's eyes meet his, forcing him to look away instinctively.

"Shinsou, I'm not angry," his owner says, an odd lilt to his tone as though he's confused, but 27 knows that can't be right. He just doesn't know how to read his owner. "I... feel responsible. My students are overwhelming at times."

27 looks up to see Midnight turned towards his owner, her arms crossed and body language hostile. He never considered that she might be ranked high enough to do that.

His owner glances at 27 again, and he realizes how unnervingly demure he looks, slouched in his chair with the bottom half of his face obscured by the scarf. 27 doesn't like it, doesn't understand it.

'*I'm sorry. Trouble. Birthday. My fault.*' The words come easier, pleading for his owner to react in a way that he understands. But again, his owner doesn't, snorting as though he would have laughed if his words were more amusing. As though he wasn't used to finding amusement in the way 27 is too broken to speak.

"I honestly don't care that it's my birthday," his owner says, and he's not sure if it's a lie, if it's a trap. "And my students make *far* more trouble than you do, regardless of what day it is."

'*Hero students trying not to. Plan-*' 27 wants to see if giving him this information might make his owner forgive this slight, but Yamada starts waving his hand to cut him off.

"Ah! No no no, if the herolets have something planned, don't tell him about it!" Yamada pleads, but a rather sadistic grin betrays his true intentions. "I'm sure Shou is looking forward to being surprised."

If Yamada thinks that the hero students deserve the wrath of his owner if their now highly anticipated gifts don't live up to expectations, then 27 will have to trust his judgement. Though his owner seems to shudder at the thought, shooting a glare at Witching Hour. "You leaked that intel, didn't you?"

Midnight grins as she examines her red tinted manicure. "Me? *No*, never! What would make you think that, Eraserhead?"

27 appreciates that she seems to have a ploy to antagonize his owner, which draws suspicion from him. He's not sure if he would have been able to hide his own guilt if his owner so much as looked at him now.

But he's only truly relieved when he sees Eri run into the staff room, Floaty still hesitating in the doorway. Eri throws herself into 27's side, sniffing and watery-eyed when she looks up at him. "Twenny, I'm sorry! I was being mean and I don't want to be a rival and I like that you and Zawa are friends and my horn *really hurts* -"

27 pulls out a tissue from the collection in his pocket that he's already prepared, pressing it to her nose while he gives her horn a solid tap. She goes through three tissues before he uses the fourth to wipe away her tears, but luckily, they've avoided a horn ache judging by the way she doesn't wince when he massages the base of her horn.

"I'm sorry, mom," Eri whimpers, and her eyes start watering for another reason, her hands clenching tight on the hem of the hoodie she picked for him to wear. He doesn't care if Floaty or Witching Hour hear her say that, not when he's sickeningly elated to have Eri back in his sight, and over this first fit of many.

"I'm sorry," 27 says, smoothing a hand over her hair. "I shouldn't have left like that."

He shouldn't have left *at all*, however broken his mind was. If Eri had gotten a horn ache from his negligence, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself. And making a fool out of himself in front of the hero students was one thing, but he probably embarrassed Eri just by association. Embarrassing her in front of her friends.

Eri whines and pulls herself into his lap, wrapping her arms tight around his neck. "It's scary and loud. Even with the heroes."

He knows that she shouldn't feel that way. She shouldn't be broken like he is, and it's his fault that she is. He wraps his arms around her to help her feel safer, to forget that the lunch room was too much. He hopes that the memory of all those voices, shouting and screaming and laughing, doesn't still ring in her ears like they do in his.

But those voices fade further away the longer he holds her, and the easier he finds it to breathe.

He hopes Eri feels the same way. Mostly, because he wants her to feel safe, the same way he wanted her to more than three years ago when he had to train himself out of flinching away from her touch. He had to make that effort so that he could imitate the way that 50 had comforted him. He's happy that she doesn't remember that, doesn't remember how hard it was for him or how often he made her cry with those silent sobs when he jerked away from her.

But there's a selfish part of 27 that hopes she always needs him like this.

Because he'll always need her.

A Heroic Gift

Chapter Summary

Aizawa receives all of his gifts, and Shinsou's in particular is surprising. 27 is eager to know how well his efforts paid off, but machinations beyond his control may prevent that.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: PTSD related flight response

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou and Eri were told by Yamada to make a name sign and card for Aizawa's birthday. Shinsou asked for Class 1-A's help to get information about Aizawa's personality to make the name sign, and Yaoyorozu and Asui gave him different meanings of the kanji that make up Aizawa's name. Shinsou has asked for coffee on several occasions, and while Yamada has caved, Aizawa hasn't because Shinsou is supposed to be restricted from coffee due to his poor nutrition while in police custody and at the 8 Precepts. Yamada's name sign for Aizawa is 'Sho Sleep.' When Eri asked Aizawa about family names, Aizawa mentioned that he and Yamada kept their names unchanged after getting married because he didn't want to be Yamada Shouta, because he knew someone that he disliked with that name, and Yamada didn't want to be Aizawa Hizashi because it had too many 'z' sounds. Midnight told Aizawa to take his birthday party as a chance to model how to have a birthday for Shinsou and Eri, and specifically to act like a "Happy birthday boy."

“So, what have we got so far, listeners?”

27 has been dreading that question all day.

Yamada must have noticed it, because he looks over at Eri and probably sees the same reaction. She went through three more sheets of paper during the Hero Ethics class, and still doesn't seem to be satisfied.

He's not satisfied either.

He's ruled out using his owner's given name - he won't assume that they're close or familiar just because they live together, despite the hero students assumptions. He doesn't want to use 'Aizawa' because there's no way to make 'swamp' into something positive. 'Ai' has three meanings, and none of them are viable. There's nothing about his owner that can be associated with 'indigo,' he

doesn't know what 'mugroot' is used for or what it looks like, and he doesn't want to call his owner 'affectionate' when he only seems to be that way with Eri.

Hopefully she won't mind that he's stealing her nickname for his owner, but he has to. His owner likes being called that, even more than his hero name.

'Zawa' means 'murmur,' and his owner does seem to murmur things to himself. He seems to mutter a lot about how 27 isn't allowed to have coffee. He's not sure exactly how a name sign is supposed to feel when it's right, but 'Zawa Coffee' has a nice flow to it.

But his owner seems to be suspicious of him every time he signs 'coffee,' so 27 rules that out as well.

'Zawa cat' doesn't feel right. 'Zawa sleep' is too similar to Yamada's name sign for him. 'Zawa work' seems insulting, as though he's commanding his owner to work, and translated literally, he would be.

He hasn't gained enough information to do this job, but he doesn't want to let Yamada know that. Even if Yamada might be his best source of information, after knowing his owner so long and being married to him.

"I picked out Shou's hero name, you know," Yamada says, his smiling at 27. "So, if you need any help, I'm definitely the guy to talk to! Well, except for whoever came up with 'Delete Face.' I was so sure that Ms. Joke was behind that one, but apparently-"

"Yama, why didn't you pick out a married name?" Eri asks, kicking her feet under her desk. "Zawa said you didn't want to have each other's names, but you could've made a different one, like heroes make different names."

Yamada turns a bit red at that, rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh, Shou told you about that? Well, I guess we didn't really think about doing something like that. Some married couples hyphenate their names, and if we did we would be 'Yamada-Aizawa' or 'Aizawa-Yamada,' but then we'd have the same problems as before."

"What if you mash them up?" Eri asks, cocking her head to the side. "Ashi does that sometimes to people I don't know about, and sometimes it sounds silly. But maybe some married people do that too."

"That's a really good idea, little bean!" Yamada praises, though he clearly has no intention of following her advice, wincing after he smiles. "But, we'd probably still have the same problem. It's probably just better to keep our own names."

"But if you were 'Aiyama,' then it wouldn't be like that guy that Zawa doesn't like," Eri argues, oddly insistent upon this name change. "And it wouldn't hurt your teeth 'cause there's no 'z's in it!"

"That's...a really good idea," Yamada says, his head tilting as his voice becomes more strained. He seems to be uncomfortable with Eri's suggestions, and somewhat confused by her argument, but unable to refuse her directly.

'*Sounds like French Shine name,*' 27 signs, hoping the suggestion would help Yamada ward her off.

"But it sounds a lot like Aoyama, and that would be kind of confusing," Yamada says, a bit quicker than he usually talks. He gives 27 a thumbs up before he looks back to Eri, walking towards her

desk. “Do you need any help with the letter part, little bean?”

Eri is distracted from her former line of questioning, shrinking in on herself when she looks back at her card. “I should’ve asked Momo to help, she has really good pena-penma...”

“Penmanship,” 27 corrects, making sure to catch her eye when he smiles at her. “It’s a hard word to say, but you did a good job.”

Eri nods, then turns back to her paper. “I wanna have good penmanship, but I don’t, and Bakugo said I should make people who are good at stuff that I’m not do stuff for me, because I’m little, and I can get away with it.”

27 struggles not to laugh, and between Eri’s innocent voice and Yamada’s shell-shocked expression, he has to hide his mouth behind his hand to muffle anything that slips out. It was a good lesson for her, though, and one that he should have probably taught her more directly.

And a bit surprising, coming from Bakugo, but he might not be the temperamental idiot that 27 first assumed he was. At least the idiot part seemed to be wrong.

“That’s... kind of right,” Yamada says, probably wanting to correct her, but it was hard to argue against the truth. “But, I think Shou is really looking forward to seeing *your* penmanship, little bean. It doesn’t have to look like Yaoyorozu’s handwriting, or anyone else’s really, because it’s a special little gift from our special little bean.”

Eri fidgets nervously as she looks at her picture, then hands one of the pages she had been working on to Yamada. “Is it okay if I write that, Yama?”

Yamada holds his chin in one hand, reading her draft with a small and fond smile, before his fingers rise to cover his mouth, color rising on his cheeks while his eyebrows draw together. “OF COUR- Of course, little bean!” Yamada says, his quirk seeming to slip before he caught himself, handing the page back to Eri. “I think he’s really going to love that.”

Eri beams at that, and folds her picture in half to make it into a card, intent to finish the project before homeroom now that her draft has been approved. 27 can’t help but smile, pleased to know that whatever she wrote was touching for Yamada to read. He has an idea what it was, and Yamada’s reaction couldn’t have been more promising.

They would have to secure her place with them once his owner read it too.

Yamada looks back at him, reminding him that his own position here was tenuous, and his gift not as likely to please. He needed to do well, to have his own foothold rather than clinging to Eri’s. Yamada had given him a great opportunity to do that. If his name was well-received, he would be able to remind his owner that he did well at his task every time he signed it. It needed to be clever, and well suited to his owner. It needed to endear 27 to him just enough that he might waver when the time came to dispose of him. To consider keeping him.

Even if 27 had to be the family dog, it would be better to be a dog here than at the 8 Precepts.

Before 27 can ask, the chimes announcing the end of the period sound to cut him off. He had wasted his time, his own rough drafts unapproved. He had a few more names to choose from, none of them seemed to stand out enough, to strike the same way ‘Zawa Coffee’ did, but there was nothing for it now.

He could only hope that he had some time between homeroom and the party for Yamada to hear him out.

*

Aizawa had been dreading his homeroom.

He could deal with being bothered on his birthday with parties and social obligations that were exactly that - something he was obligated to attend, but had no real desire to. But the worst part of having a birthday was receiving gifts. There was no way to be comfortable with it, to be the center of attention like that, holding a present in his hand while the giver waited to earn some positive reaction from him. It felt like a trade that he didn't want to take part in.

He especially didn't want to do that with his students. It was unprofessional, first and foremost, and he suspected a majority of his class might hope that this will make him go easier on them for their midterms. But he also didn't know how to react in a balance of honesty and insincerity. Even if they prepared something truly nightmarish, he couldn't let them know his honest opinion, and he knew that if he acted too appreciative, they might be disturbed by his sudden change in personality.

But he knew that he couldn't let them know if he was disappointed, because of the new, incredibly uncomfortable dynamic that had begun to take shape after they moved into the dorms. He's not just a teacher anymore, not a future coworker, not a hero - and if any of them were fans of his work, he's relieved that he still doesn't know it.

He's something approaching a father figure to his students.

It's rational that they would begin to think that way - their own family histories laying a foundation for some, and the distance created by living away from home cementing it for the rest.

They're children, and they need that from him, even if it makes him uncomfortable. He can't brush it away as something that they need to overcome, to push them over the metaphorical cliff so that they learn how to fly - because this isn't an aspect of their hero training.

This is a group of children who need approval from an adult figure, who need praise and affection, and UA isolated them from getting that from their real families. As much as he wanted to ignore that, it wouldn't be rational for him to expect them to grow into exceptional heroes when their emotional development was stunted.

He's just as unyielding during training, but he does find himself offering praise more often than he did before. He finds himself patting their heads or shoulders, and he's overheard Kaminari refer to the gesture as 'The Good Boy Pat' in a way that's reassuringly fond, if not a bit overexcited to earn one. He knows more about this class than any of his previous ones - their favorite foods, hobbies, childhood memories - and he could blame that on his dorm shifts, but he can't blame Principal Nezu for the fact that he keeps track of those things.

It's uncomfortable and taxing, but when he enters the room, he pretends he doesn't suspect anything so that he can at least give them the thrill of surprising him. He's still not sure if he can give them approval in the way that they need, but surprising a hero who specializes in stealth should make them happy.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, AIZAWA-SENSEI!" 19 *incredibly* loud idiots cheer in unison, and he doesn't have to fake a startle as much as he planned to.

Half of them pull off the excitement and cheer, the other half are clearly trying. Todoroki doesn't

quite smile, but his eyebrows are raised in some approximation of an expression. Bakugo looks like he didn't cheer, scowling towards the window, but Aizawa definitely heard his voice. Tokoyami and Shoji can't wear their emotions as plainly as their peers, but he knows by the shape of their eyes and body language that they, just like the rest of the class, are all at once excited and desperate for a reaction from him.

But Aizawa is mostly concerned about Sato's injuries.

"Do you need to see Recovery Girl?" Aizawa asks, still taking in the busted lip, coin-sized bruises that indicate shrapnel, and scorch marks that have ruined the student's uniform. It's technically a dress code violation, but given that some UA classes are a war zone, he's never enforced it.

"I'm fine, Aizawa-sensei! It looks worse than it feels," Sato insists, wincing when he looks down at the somewhat cake-shaped object on the plate that he's holding. There was clearly an attempt to fashion it into a cake using copious amounts of icing, but it's still bulging and rough, with a crater in the middle of it.

He knew they wouldn't make this easy for him, but he didn't expect it to be this difficult. He meets their expectant stares, not quite able to smile, but he doesn't have to fight to soften his tone for them. "This was wholly unnecessary, but appreciated. Thank you."

He takes the plate from Sato, noticing the welted burns on his fingers and intent to send him to Recovery Girl for treatment, and sees that Asui is offering him a small booklet. "This was a group effort, and I hope that it's put to good use, kero."

Aizawa can't help the toothy grin when he reads the title, 'Aizawa-sensei's Coupon Book for Making Class 1-A Behave.' At least they were somewhat aware of what little shits they could be. "I'm sure it will be."

Iida thankfully takes over to direct his class to take their seats, and run through attendance. Eri stares at the cake when he places it on his desk, head tilting to the side, but thankfully doesn't comment on the odd shape. With his wards and students settled, and self-occupied in silence, Aizawa cracks open the coupon book to know what tools he has at his disposal now.

But it's not exactly a coupon book.

'We members of Class 1-A are heartened by the reminder to demonstrate our appreciation to you, Aizawa-sensei, and hope that our efforts do so effectively! Happy Birthday!' Iida wrote that, clearly, but every single one of his students signed their names around his message.

The first few pages are coupons to make Class 1-A do their work without any supervision from him. There are also some that aren't assigned to any student in particular, with vague commands to 'Stop.' He wishes there were more of those, but the capture scarf works just as effectively.

There's one redeemable from the girls of Class 1-A for a nondescript and utterly terrifying 'Spa Day,' which Ashido's handwriting betrays her as the creator. Kaminari must have read that and then been inspired to offer the boys of Class 1-A up as pack mules to carry him around in a palanquin for a day.

He's not using either of those coupons, but he might give the palanquin one to Midnight for Christmas.

Each student gave him a coupon to avoid a certain behavior, or do him a favor. Aoyama's is good for a traditional French meal, and he recommends Coq au Vin. Bakugo will 'talk like a fucking

nun' if he demands it, but only for one class period. There are quite a few students who added an additional coupon to watch Eri for him, and he doesn't believe that's entirely selfless of them.

But after the coupons, there's the notes. Letters of appreciation, and as much as this entire situation is uncomfortable, he can't deny that it's incredibly touching.

He only reads half of Asui's before he has to close the book, mind circling over ways to *get out of here*.

He can't afford to think like this, to go back to that place when he doesn't control it, doesn't predict it. It's not often, but this happens, his mind stutters and whirs and wants to find a path to a vague escape. Sometimes his scarf moves without his command, just reading his mind to react as though it's needed to make that escape, but he doesn't want them to see that. He doesn't want any of them to see that from him today.

He gathers enough of himself after going through his usual process. A headcount, five times. Aoyama, Ashido, Asui, on down the line. Again again again again. They're here. In their uniforms. They're safe.

"Class is dismissed," Aizawa says, drawing more than his fair share of surprised expressions. "I have a cake to eat, and you have better things to do."

That earns him a far louder cheer than the one that greeted him at the beginning of class, and in between well-wishes for him to have a happy birthday, he makes sure that Sato is going straight to Recovery Girl, and tries to tamp down on that still too anxious urge to *run*.

His students don't notice, but an irrational part of him worries that his wards can see through him too clearly right now. It's something he doesn't want, that they don't need, but Eri runs to pull herself into his lap in a way that makes him afraid that she can tell. She can see that they're too similar, that he looks a bit too much like Shinsou for her not to notice. "Zawa, it doesn't look like the red velvet cupcakes, but Sato tried really hard to make them for you!"

He finds himself snorting a laugh, looking between his ward and the misshapen cake, and wonders if the relief sinking into him can be explained because it's Eri. He didn't know Eri before USJ, and her presence, so clear and present, is the evidence he needs to remember that he's here. He's past that. "I could tell. Sato is a very good chef, so I'm sure that I'll enjoy it, no matter what the cake looks like."

Shinsou helps Eri into her backpack, having taken it upon himself to clear their desks while she ran to him. ' *H-A-T-S-U-M-E involved. I don't know that person. Might have caused injuries.* '

"She probably did," Aizawa answers, looking towards the cake a bit more warily. He hoped that he wouldn't also become a casualty of one of her 'babies.' "We can wait until Hizashi is done with class to eat it."

His husband could afford to be slightly poisoned before the party tonight, but Aizawa couldn't.

He had to act like a happy birthday boy.

27 is wearing a very flimsy hat.

He's also wearing an outfit that Yamada picked, rather than Eri. A button up shirt, brown leather jacket. It's supposed to 'look nice,' but this flimsy, uncomfortable hat doesn't look nice.

Everyone has to wear one, though. It's a bit like the masks at the 8 Precepts, but rather than enforcement coming from Chisaki under pain of death, the partygoers seem to police themselves by making a game out of placing another hat on whoever tries to take theirs off.

27 doesn't want another hat, so he keeps his on, even if the string under his jaw is uncomfortable.

His owner seems to be compelled by some mysterious authority over him to pretend that he likes being here. He glares at the partygoers when Eri is occupied, but she's attached herself to his side often enough that 27 can pick apart his fake smile, and find notes of other feelings that come through the strain of wearing it.

The mouse-bear, who asked how 27 liked being at UA, gave his owner a paper. The paper was evidence of his owner's sick leave and vacation days being doubled. His owner's jaw clenches, and there's a slight twitch in his eyebrow that suggests that this offering isn't useful to him at all.

All Might, who come up to ask 27 several times if he's enjoying the party, gave his owner another cake like the one that Class 1-A made. But his owner's smile isn't quite so fake, his eyebrows rising to carry through his gratitude when he thanks All Might for it.

Witching Hour, who has been glancing over at 27 often but hasn't approached, cackled under her breath when his owner opened her gift. He sighed in relief when he found a large yellow padded suit, similar to his sleeping bag. He must have been expecting something more dangerous.

Yamada told 27 that he could 'mingle' or 'hang out' at this party, and to let him know if he needed anything. If he wanted to talk to anyone, Yamada could translate or he could use the phone. He was welcome to talk to any of the heroes gathered here.

But 27 doesn't have the energy to attempt to comply with that half-command. He initiates no conversation, endures any that comes, and tries to stop picking at the string of his hat while he keeps watch over Eri and his owner. Both are the center of attention, even when they're apart, and this room isn't nearly as secure as the rest of the building that they live in. Two staircases, two elevators, and a large set of doors at the front, glass paneling everywhere.

With all these distracted heroes and environmental vulnerabilities, Boss would have made a lot of money to sell information about this party. Millions, just because All Might was here, but the other heroes probably pushed that value up into the billions.

27 seems to be the only person aware that this situation could turn dangerous, because he's aware of Provost Piston and his nearly identical twin long before they reach the edges of this gathering. The heroes seem surprised to see them.

"Tensei! I didn't think you were going to make it!" Midnight yells, running up to the older Iida to perch on his lap, taking advantage of his wheelchair to make a seat for herself. She must be regretting wearing those high heels in a place that didn't seem to have many seating options. She looks from one blushing brother to the other, her grin turning wicked as she addresses Provost Piston. "What a *naughty* student, breaking in to a teacher's party. This is a place for *adults only*."

Provost Piston seems to be vibrating in place, his face turning a disconcerting shade of red. "I apologize for the intrusion, I merely wanted to make sure that the staff dorm had the proper

accessibility features on behalf of my brother-”

“Tenya, it’s fine,” Tensei said with a wave of his hand, which he then uses to tap a finger under Witching Hour’s chin, his voice dropping to a deeper tone. “Don’t tease my little brother like that, *sensei*. Not when I want to have all of your attention to myself.”

Midnight seems to blush at that, before she bursts into laughter, jumping off of his lap while she tries to shoo him away with her hand. “Tensei, you’re *horrible!* ”

“TENSEI!” Yamada calls, his attention drawn to them after Midnight’s outburst. “And you brought the other Iida too!” Yamada glances in 27’s direction before turning back to Provost Piston, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Jeez, you really are a glutton for punishment. You see enough of us, and we see enough of you at school, so why don’t you hang out with Shinsou for a bit? I’ll be sure to keep this one out of trouble for ya.”

Tensei looks up at Commander Diesel, smiling playfully. “See? I told you not to come. My old friends are now your worst nightmares.”

“I hold nothing but respect for the esteemed members of UA’s staff,” President Exhausting insists, his usual hand-movements oddly missing while he holds the handles for his brother’s wheelchair. He glances at 27 before looking back at his brother, seeming a bit displeased to be parted from him. “Let me know if you need anything, Tensei.”

Tensei smiles widely back in the face of that discomfort. “I’ll make sure to meet your friend before I leave. Now, go have fun with kids your own age.”

Piston doesn’t react to Tensei slapping the back of his hand into his stomach, and seems to be avoiding looking directly at 27 while he approaches. But when he comes close, he smiles widely, in a way that 27 wishes were fake, but he knows it isn’t. It’s too similar to the one his brother has. “How are you enjoying the festivities, Shinsou?”

He doesn’t have a hat. 27 fixes that for him with his own, popping the string under his jaw a bit farther back than necessary, because he’s had to answer that question all night. And now he has to pull out the phone to answer Piston. “ *Fi-ine. Do-on’t take tha-at off. Punishment ga-ame.* ”

“I’m very aware,” Piston says, his tone oddly grave as he recalls something that must have been unpleasant to endure. He begins picking at the string as well, proving that it’s uncomfortable, though no one else seems to mind it.

Piston keeps looking at him as though to say something else, but never does. He shuffles awkwardly to 27’s side, and they both keep watch over the party. Piston doesn’t seem to be trained well for surveillance, he stares dead ahead and never checks the entrances. That’s surprising. With his quirk, build, and personality, he would be a good fit for bodyguard jobs.

“Eri seems to be enjoying the activities,” Piston says, his hand chopping in her direction.

There seemed to be a game made up with the few chairs that were available in the room. While the music played, the players paced around them, but when it stopped, they vied to gain a chair for themselves, resorting to trickery and physical violence to assure their win. Eri seemed to be unaware that the heroes not only weren’t taking her seriously as an opponent, but were ensuring that she always found a chair. She almost lost a few rounds before a hero either toppled themselves out of their chair, or were forced from it by a subtle attack from their colleagues.

He’s trying to keep his attention on that game, because even if the heroes didn’t intend to injure

Eri, she's less than half their size and a few of them could step on her easily. But Piston's nervous fidgeting and stilted arm movements are distracting him.

"You-u don't ha-ave to sta-and guard, Muffler."

Piston startles, his hands flying up before he adjusts his glasses and hat in turn. "I'm not standing with you to keep watch over you, Shinsou, though I can see where you might have gotten that impression. I simply seem to be at a loss to find a topic of conversation that isn't related to school matters, or wouldn't be considered prying, or otherwise unenjoyable for--"

"You-u talk a lo-ot. You-u sign mea-aningless things." It was a little amusing to translate his hand movements, even if 27 knew he didn't know JSL. 'Cut from you there to there cut' was a nonsense sentence that came up often.

"I have heard that same sentiment often, though I hope that those signs aren't insulting, as that wouldn't be my intention at all. I have considered learning JSL, but I believe that I may be ill-suited for it," Iida says, 'Cut cut from to from to cut from,' he doesn't intend to say. "It's a very difficult habit to break." 'Cut.'

27 didn't mean that he should stop. *"It's amu-using."*

Iida rubs the back of his neck, and 27 makes a note of how easy it would be to bully him, if the opportunity arose. "I'm curious about your progress towards the name sign for Aizawa-sensei."

27 tried to hide his glare as he noticed how stilted and awkward Motorist's words were. It was familiar. *"A-are you mo-ocking me?"*

His panic was amusing enough to ignore it. "That was not my intention! I noticed - or rather, assumed that questions seemed to bear a different meaning or connotation, or rather--"

"It's fi-ine." Piston was getting a bit too loud, and could draw unnecessary attention to them. *"I-I'm worki-ing on it."*

He still wasn't comfortable with it. Even if he knew his quirk wouldn't rise, couldn't activate through a phone or sign, there was still a sting of apprehension every time he asked a question. But he had to overcome that, he had to become less odd to these underlings so that they would be less fascinated by him. They would ignore him a bit more.

But he still needed them for some things. *"You-u know Aiza-awa be-etter than the o-others."*

Piston seemed to freeze up at that, tucking his hands into his pockets before they inevitably sprang out when he began talking. "I would prefer to avoid any suspicion that my position as class president was due to any improper relationship between myself and Aizawa-sensei, as there hardly is one. He and my brother were classmates, and they remained friends after graduation, but I've hardly met with Aizawa-sensei outside of gatherings such as this one."

27 was starting to feel his eyes glaze over. Useless information. Apparently, he needed to be direct. *"Te-ell me somethi-ing the chat di-idn't. I ne-eed the seco-ond si-ign."*

Piston cupped his chin, hopefully firing on all cylinders to give him something useful. "The second sign is meant to encompass Aizawa-sensei's personality, or the manner in which you relate to him. I don't believe I have much to offer in that regard, but my peers didn't mention that Aizawa-sensei can be quite passionate about the philosophy and ethics of his profession as a hero. He has a unique, if not blunt opinion that the entertainment aspect of the pro-hero industry is detrimental to the profession as a whole, which I and many others can agree with to a degree."

All that Piston could tell him was that his owner was a hero. As if that wasn't the first thing that his owner told him, as if he couldn't tell by his job as a teacher at a hero school, or the fact that this room was full of heroes. And that he had opinions about the ethics of being a hero, as if 27 didn't sit in that class almost every day listening to them.

Hero.

‘ *Zawa Hero.* ’ It didn't fit, at *all* .

It didn't flow, it didn't have meaning or cleverness. His owner wasn't a ‘murmuring hero,’ and he didn't seem to be a hero *at all*. Heroes had patrols, 27 knew that because The Miasma liked to sell that information, but his owner didn't leave the dorm often enough for him to have one. Heroes had merchandise and fans and gaudy, eye-catching costumes to bring more attention to themselves, and his owner had none of that.

27 has been trying to piece out more about his owner through other people's eyes, because if this party has taught him anything, it's that his inability to read his owner is intentional. He has tells with everyone else. They're small but they're there, but not with *him*. Not to him.

He doesn't know anything about his owner, and it's intentional. His owner is guarded around him, withdrawn in a way that's different from indifference, which is a far more familiar play. His owner doesn't want to share anything with 27, and hardly wants anything from him, but he *needs* his owner to want something from him. To be pleased by something.

‘ *Hero.* ’ The enemy of a Number, of a yakuza, of a criminal or villain. His owner knows enough of what 27 did to know that he's at least a criminal and yakuza. His behavior towards 27 is normal, it's almost kind that he isn't crueler, that he hides his animosity behind neutrality. It's a play to make 27 talk, to tell him about The Miasma. It's necessary, and that's the only reason that they live together.

‘ *Hero.* ’ To people like Eri, heroes are something different. They're saviors, rescuers. A childish wish and a childish dream, and 27 has never been cruel enough to take those things from her. She enjoyed living with heroes, being surrounded by them, and probably felt a bit awed by them at times. By their sincere smiles and affection, all of which she deserved in greater measure than 27 could give her.

‘ *Hero.* ’ The heroes saved Eri. He couldn't deny that. They did in two weeks what 27 had been struggling to do for years. Even those untrained children, even *Floaty* , had been a part of the operation that ended the 8 Precepts of Death. That had taken Chisaki down.

His owner was part of that operation as well.

His owner was honest with others and dishonest with 27. He smiled then turned into a blank face. He was clear with his expectations, then gave 27 none. He wanted nothing to do with 27, but the police wanted him to make 27 talk, and that was the only reason that they tolerated each other and ignored how unnatural it was for a criminal to live with a hero.

His owner was a hero that saved Eri, and 27 had never given him any gratitude for it. Never acknowledged it.

And this was a way to do that.

‘ *Zawa Hero.* ’

It didn't fit, it didn't flow, and it wasn't clever. But it was honest, it was the most honest sign he

could come up with. Whether it was a line drawn in the sand, an admission that 27 knew another piece of the game between them, knew that the boundaries of it had only drawn tighter and the prize he still sought to win further away, that kind of honesty could be dishonest in its interpretation.

And 27 wasn't too prideful to steal another foothold from Eri when he wasn't stealing it in the first place.

*

Aizawa had pretended to be a happy birthday boy until he was counting down the minutes until midnight.

He had endured this horrible, uncomfortable day with uncomfortable obligations and unnecessary attention, and for the sake of his wards, he had *endured*. But he knew that this day wasn't over yet, even if the most difficult parts of it were.

Eri's insistence to keep her party hat on for the rest of the night made his efforts worthwhile, and he was eager for her gift rather than dreading it, even as she seemed nervous to present it to him. She kept shifting from one foot to the other, her picture hidden behind her back while her bright red eyes sent a plea for him to be pleased by her efforts. He didn't need to see it to know that he would be.

"Happy birthday, Zawa! I really really *really* hope you like it," Eri said as soon as Hizashi had lit the final candle on the cake that Toshinori had made. Her eagerness had allowed him to avoid yet another round of singing, and that enough was a gift.

"Thank you, Eri," Aizawa answered, taking the picture to find that it was actually a card, the third one that she had ever made for a hero. But the front of it wasn't a portrait of himself in his hero costume, not like the ones that Midoriya and Togata had received.

His eyes were red, but his hair was in a ponytail, his stubble drawn around a smile that everyone else in the picture was wearing. Hizashi's hair was braided, and Eri was wearing the cat-themed outfit that he had bought for her when she was discharged from the hospital, further evidence in his ongoing argument with Hizashi that she liked it. She liked it enough to draw Shinsou wearing it as well. There's an abundance of cats drawn in every available space around them. Some are just faces or vague shapes, but four of them are black, white, yellow, and purple, hovering in the air over the heads of the people they were meant to depict. His cat is better than Hizashi's, in his opinion.

He opened the card to read her letter, and wasn't prepared for what it said.

'Happy birthday Zawa! I'm really glad that you were born, so I could meet you and live with you! It's the favorite part of my whole life, and I'm so happy that you saved me and Twenny. You're one of the best heroes in the whole world, and I hope you have a lot of happy birthdays, because you deserve all of them, and I'll work hard to make sure that all of them are the best, and that you get red velvet cake every year! - Eri'

Aizawa ignores the flicker of anxiety that rises when he remembers that they haven't told her that her wardship wasn't permanent. It's a conversation that they should have, eventually, but he

refuses to venture down that line of thought, and couldn't even if he tried.

She returns his smile when he looks at her, and that is another gift that he treasures. "This is the happiest birthday I've ever had. Thank you, Eri."

She clings to his leg before he pulls her into his arms, holding the card out for her to point at the cats that she worked hard on, and the stipple technique that she learned from Bakugo. He praises all of her efforts, and she beams at each remark he makes, but neither of them mention the red eyes.

It's another conversation that they don't need to have right now.

When Eri runs out of steam, Hizashi catches his eye and looks to Shinsou, who has been watching Eri's presentation with a rare and unguarded smile. It fades when he realizes Aizawa is looking at him, the corner of his mouth pulling in a flash of nervousness that still remains in his slightly raised eyebrows when he lifts to sign. ' *Happy Birthday Zawa Hero.* '

And that was a gift that Aizawa did not expect.

From the corner of his eye, he can see that Hizashi didn't expect it either, which is surprising. He had thought that Hizashi had been the mastermind of this entire operation, and had been more than a bit uncomfortable with suggesting to his wards that they owed anything to him today. Especially Shinsou.

But if Hizashi was surprised, that meant that this was an honest effort on Shinsou's part to connect with him. This name was what Shinsou honestly felt towards him. Shinsou thought that he was a hero, in a way that the word didn't convey as well as the sign did when used in a name sign.

Aizawa was honestly a bit overwhelmed by the implications of it. That he was a hero to Shinsou, in whichever way he meant that. And none of those interpretations had anything to do with him being a stand-in for Chisaki.

"Thank you, Shinsou," Aizawa answered, because he had to answer with something even if he couldn't find the words to say what he felt at that moment. "I truly appreciate that."

Hizashi only let the silence hang for a moment before he jumped in, as he always did to fill what Aizawa couldn't. "Don't tell me that I have to wait until my birthday to get a name sign! It's almost a year away, and I can't wait that long!"

' *Current Loudspeaker.* '

"No! I - ugh," Hizashi sighed, slumping over in an exaggerated fit and missing the flicker of a smirk on Shinsou's face. He rose to level a jealous glare at Aizawa, which he met with a very smug grin. "Blow out your candles and make a wish, so you can finally stop being younger than me."

"That's not how it works, cradle robber," Aizawa teases, and asks Eri to help him blow out his candles, taking advantage of her proximity to let her practice before her own birthday.

He's rarely made a wish on his birthday. Even as a child, he knew that it wasn't rational to expect them to come true, and on the birthdays that he did, he's never made one for himself. This birthday is no different.

He wishes that Shinsou still believes in heroes, in whatever way he sees them. That he could meet whatever expectation that his name sign has placed on him.

Even if the investigation wouldn't make that easy for him.

*

Birthdays began and ended at the stroke of midnight, and this one was no different.

Hizashi checked his phone while he was in the shower, and he doesn't need to read it to know what the message likely said. It was in the tenseness of his husband's shoulders, the furrow of his brow, and the devastated look in his eye.

'Chisaki's lawyer accepted the deal. We have until Friday to come up with something better. - Naomasa.'

Vent Day & Missing You

Chapter Summary

Aizawa tries to take action before The Commission's plans come to fruition, but separating Shinsou and Eri for the school day results in consequences far beyond what he could have predicted.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Concerns for self-harm, Gory imagery

Previously on Wards of UA: The night prior, Aizawa was given a sign name (Zawa Hero) from Shinsou, and found out from Naomasa that Chisaki's lawyer accepted a deal. Chisaki had given the police a sketch of the Boss of The Miasma and information that he was an undocumented foreigner. While in police custody, Shinsou didn't give them any information about The Miasma and refused to eat, which resulted in him being force fed. Eri's horn has grown to the point that she needs "Horn Tricks" to dislodge any built up mucus in her horn, otherwise she'll get a horn ache. Aizawa received a book from Ms. Joke, who has had several wardships in the past, that she explained would help him learn to help Shinsou, and that book is about caring for feral cats. Shinsou had hoped in the previous chapter that if he manipulates Yamada and Aizawa into keeping him despite the investigation, that he could become the "family dog." Todoroki has a cat named Soba that Shinsou was scratched by when it escaped into the vents at the 1-A dorm, and Shinsou rescued it. Class 1-A tried to help Shinsou create a name sign for Aizawa, and Todoroki suggested that he use the sign for 'cat' as part of it, since Aizawa likes cats. Todoroki proposed a theory that Shinsou's quirk allows him to turn into a cat, and thus he is part feral cat. After Shinsou arrived to UA, Aizawa told him a little about the security system, and Shinsou wondered to himself if robots answered questions. Part of Shinsou's training at The Miasma was learning to navigate ventilation systems silently, while Bug attempted to scare him. That first night Shinsou was at UA, after Yamada learns that Shinsou stole discounted books from the bookstore, he likens him to Jean Valjean from Les Misérables. The morning that Shinsou asked for coffee, he was intentionally signing when Yamada's back was turned, but Yamada felt bad for not recognizing that Shinsou was trying to communicate with him. When Monoma stole Shinsou's quirk after 1-B's English class, he told Yamada that it was painful to have while it was copied. Bakugo was assigned a project by Aizawa to write a 100 page essay about trauma related disorders. Shinsou revealed in a previous chat that he thinks Bakugo is somewhat like Rikiya, because they both swear. Bakugo is the only member of Class 1-A to reveal the existence of the group chat to Aizawa, and Aizawa asked him to tell him if Shinsou said anything on the chat that could be relevant to the investigation.

Hizashi still didn't agree with him.

"Shou, I know you want to make progress, and I want that too," Hizashi insists, beginning a braid just to unravel it again, even though he's already arranged for his classes to be covered and wouldn't have enough time to fix his hair even if he didn't. "But I think we should put some distance between what happened last night and the investigation. It's - how do you think he's going to take that?"

"He might feel obligated to answer," Aizawa admits, even if he hates that he's resorting to this. "And we need him to."

The time that Hizashi wanted to give Shinsou was the time that Aizawa needed to verify any information he gained from him. He wanted anything, anything credible and actionable, but he hoped that Shinsou would give him the information that Chisaki claimed that he would, to shut that down any chance that the mobster had of reducing his sentence.

Aizawa knew that wasn't Chisaki's true aim, and Naomasa knew it as well. Even The Commission couldn't be so blind, but they acted like they were to expect this 'formal apology' to be anything more than a ploy to force Shinsou into the same room as that monster. Chisaki's real goal was to amuse himself by digging into Shinsou's wounds before they had any time to heal. To take power over Shinsou again as a brief reprieve from his powerless confinement.

Hizashi knew that too, had called it out immediately, but when faced with their plan of action to avoid it, he wavered. "And will keeping him out of school until he talks make him feel more 'obligated?' "

Isolation was one of the kinder tactics at play here, but it wasn't entirely for the investigation. Aizawa turned to his husband, taking in the irritation, the frustration, and the way it was folded neatly into a glare meant for someone else, but was aimed at him. "Hizashi. I don't know what Shinsou will see when I show him this picture. I don't know what this man has done to him, and I don't know how Shinsou will react. But whatever comes of it, I don't want my students to be involved."

Hizashi glares at the sketch in his hand, the real target of his animosity, but not the sole one. It forces Aizawa to admit what he wanted to leave unspoken.

"And I don't want him to be left alone afterwards."

Hizashi nods slowly, understanding that at least. He needed to be the one to stay here with Shinsou. He needed to be the caretaker to his ward, to protect him even from himself, while Aizawa dealt with the atypical aspects of this case.

Heroes weren't meant to be part of the investigation like this. They were only meant to protect, to offer sanctuary, and leave investigating to the police. But Naomasa knew before he began looking for a wardship designation that Shinsou couldn't be afforded that separation, not when he had shut down time and time again at the hands of the police. After what they did to him, necessary or not.

Aizawa feels a bit more sympathetic towards Sansa when he walks to Shinsou's room, to do something harmful, but necessary.

Hizashi tries to make it easier for him, distracting Eri with getting dressed before she's awake

enough to notice that he's not Present Mic today, or that it's unusual for Aizawa to be awake yet. Shinsou doesn't.

' *Good morning Zawa Hero,* ' Shinsou signs, his expression blank, his eyes still a bit unfocused from waking up.

Aizawa doesn't think he will see that name sign again. "Good morning. Come with me to the office."

He doesn't look behind him as they walk down the hall, but he notices that Shinsou's footsteps start to become lighter and harder to detect. He wonders if the abrupt change in routine has called up his training instinctively, or if he hadn't noticed that Shinsou was a bit less guarded in the morning. If the edges of his training chipped away when he wasn't there to see it.

Shinsou watches him close the door behind them, and only sits when Aizawa prompts him to. Aizawa keeps the sketch folded in his hands, half hopeful that the reveal could startle Shinsou into telling him what he needs to know, and half to put off the inevitable. "I know this will be difficult for you, but I need you to tell me who this man is."

As much as he wanted to believe that Chisaki had nothing of substance to offer, Shinsou's stock-still and naked terror was the most damning confirmation he could have asked for. His eyes are wide, locked on that picture, fingers curling into fists that only grow tighter, knuckles white. He keeps track of Shinsou's breathing, hopes it doesn't stop and slow, hopes that his eyes remained focused, present.

"He's someone you know," Aizawa says. He has to walk a thin line here, unable to say anything to lead Shinsou and compromise the evidence, yet he knows that Shinsou won't answer without prompting. "Shake your head or nod."

Shinsou's eyes flicker up to him, a silent parting of his lips twisting his expression into a flash of betrayal. Aizawa expected nothing less, and also expected that shaky, dishonest denial.

"The organization that Naomasa is investigating," Aizawa says, placing the sketch on the corner of the desk, still visible to Shinsou. He watches his violet eyes follow it, hopes that he'll give him something he can use about that man, to take that option away from Chisaki. "Is still active. Still hurting innocent people. I need you to give me information to stop them."

Shinsou doesn't shake his head, only moves it to the side once, just barely. This is a tactic that Aizawa will regret taking, even if it proves to be effective. Even if he needs it to be to save Shinsou from Chisaki.

"Tell me the name of the person who runs it."

Shinsou was trained to follow orders. He does anything resembling one, from anyone, even Eri. There's a clear fight behind his eyes, because Aizawa knows that he was trained not to give that information away. It might have been brutal, it might have been drilled into Shinsou deeper than any other order that he was given, but Aizawa is trying to make himself into a greater threat than what the teenager in front of him fears.

He knows it's not working, which only makes it harder.

' *I don't know* .' Shinsou's hands are shaking, stuttering through the sign. He looks at Aizawa again, betrayal turned to desperation, but Aizawa can't let up. Can't listen to the voice that tells him to give up, and let Shinsou keep some form of peace and sanctuary until it's torn away by

Chisaki's hands again.

"Tell me where the organization's base is." Shinsou's hands lift to repeat the sign, but Aizawa can't allow that. "I know that you know that, Shinsou."

His tone is too sharp, and he knows that, but he needs to play on anything available to him, even if it's as instinctive as wanting to avoid disappointing him. He knows that it's likely deeper than that for Shinsou, but he refuses to acknowledge it. He needs Shinsou to give him something, anything better than what Chisaki has to offer.

But he went too far. Shinsou's hands lower, not into fists but to curl around his own wrists, fingers at the ends of one of his scars. He knows that this line of questioning is over now, Naomasa told him that this is a warning sign.

Shinsou will dissociate, badly, if he presses any further.

"Hizashi will be staying here with you today," Aizawa says, standing and leaving the room before he tells Shinsou that it will be the same every day after that, until he gives them information or Friday comes.

He doesn't need to tell Hizashi how it went. His husband just frowns and keeps an eye on the door to the office. The office doesn't have any instruments that Shinsou could use, but if he leaves to go to his room, Hizashi will have to follow him.

The lie they end up telling Eri is that Shinsou has a project to work on with Hizashi, and he can't go to school until it's completed. She's clearly not pleased with that, kicking her feet under the table while she glances at the office, and when it's time to leave, he should have been better prepared to stop her from bolting towards it.

"Twenny!" Eri calls, running to place her hands on Shinsou's knees. If there was a moment before Shinsou smiled at Eri and curled a hand around her shoulder, where he still wore the terror that Aizawa had left him in, neither he nor Eri saw it. "You've got to be a really good helper today, so you can go to school with me tomorrow, okay?"

"I'll do my best," Shinsou says, the clench of his jaw afterwards a crack in the deception he's created for Eri's sake. "Horn trick."

Eri sighs in resignation as Shinsou pulls a tissue from a box on Hizashi's desk for her. The only time that Shinsou acknowledges Aizawa is to glance at him before he begins the process, his expression blank, but less guarded. He taps a spot between two ridges of her horn before he flicks it, and Aizawa nods his understanding.

He's not surprised that Shinsou would ignore what happened earlier to make sure Eri would be taken care of in his absence.

In this, they were in perfect agreement. Eri wasn't aware of the investigation, and she shouldn't be. Shinsou was a skilled enough actor to keep up the illusion, Aizawa was as well, and he hoped that Hizashi wouldn't slip too often into the Present Mic persona to become one.

Because Aizawa knew that the moment that Eri knew what was going on, he wouldn't be able to continue the investigation.

He could only afford to be a villain in Shinsou's eyes.

*

Yamada might have messed up, but he still wants to blame Shouta.

After Shouta and Eri left, Yamada tried to get Shinsou to eat, to try to pretend that this could be a normal day. Shinsou was quiet, too quiet, just staring at his plate while he left Yamada too much room to ramble. Yamada couldn't deal with silence, he always tried to fill it, especially when the atmosphere was that heavy.

But he knew that rambling wouldn't help Shinsou, not when he looked so heartbroken. Not when Yamada knew that the timing couldn't be crueler, for Shouta to pressure him the morning after Shinsou had given him a name sign, a name that he *knew* the kid had worked so hard on. Shinsou had put his heart into it, when Yamada had only meant for him to create a sign to make fun of Shouta's hero name.

He thought it might help to explain it, to tell him that Shouta didn't want to do that. That he was still trying to be a hero for Shinsou, that he was trying to save him from Chisaki again.

“ The people in charge of the investigation made a deal with Chisaki, and it's... We're not going to let it happen. ”

But Yamada kept rambling.

“ Chisaki said he would tell them about the organization if he saw you, and that's why Shou is trying to stop them. If we tell them something - anything! Then Chisaki can't do that, they won't let him, and that's why- “

‘ I want to. ’

Shinsou signed that he *wanted* to meet with Chisaki. Yamada had still been trying to find the words to say to that, something other than, ‘No, you don't and I won't let you,’ when Shinsou left to go to the bathroom. Yamada followed to the hall, just to make sure that he wasn't going to his room, to tell him that he would have to give up the knives or find another room to do some well-deserved sulking in, but he was distracted by a text message from Toshinori. And he didn't see Shinsou sneak into his room.

And into the *vents*.

He noticed the bathroom door was open, and only knew that Shinsou was in the vents because he caught him pulling the cover into the opening to flip it upside down so that it didn't fall off. And no matter how long he spent talking to his ward, trying to convince him that this was unnecessary and a little dangerous, considering that the heat was turned on, it didn't matter.

His ward was in the *vents* , and it was all Shouta's fault.

And Shouta, again, was completely unhelpful.

Shou: Will ask Nezu to block access. The book from Joke isn't helpful, Shinsou isn't food motivated.

Yamada had stared at his phone for a while after reading that text message, struggling against the urge to throw it at something. Shinsou wasn't a cat stuck behind a dresser, he was a scared kid who had his heart brutally torn out when Shouta interrogated him about the Nomu Organization. And if

his fragile trust in heroes had survived that, Yamada had surely crushed it by telling him about what The Commission was planning to do with Chisaki.

That's why he's not surprised that coffee doesn't work either, even if he desperately wanted it to.

Yamada *fucked* up, he knows that now. He knows that he should have just tolerated the silence, should have kept his mouth shut *for once* instead of forcing Shinsou to retreat even further. He has no idea how to fix it, what he could possibly do to convince Shinsou to come down, to be able to look at his ward and make sure that he's alright.

But Yamada knows someone that might know the answer, and he hopes that he can catch her before she goes to work.

And he hopes that when he comes back to Shinsou's room, the coffee mug that he leaves on his desk might be a little less full.

*

27 holds Mocha tighter against his face, and doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

He was so *stupid*. He wasn't good at this game, he wasn't good at any of his games, and he shouldn't have tried. He should have known better. He should have *known*.

A family dog. It was unnecessary. They didn't want one. They didn't want him. They wanted information. That's all anyone wants, information or a job. It's all he's good for.

He was so *stupid*. He thought he could be like Eri, that they could look at him like that. That he could make them see him that way, or something similar. He thought that he could stay here, he thought he could win this game.

He was a Dog. He was a Number. He wasn't Eri. He wasn't even *human*.

He used to be. He used to be a stupid little boy who cried into a cat plushie just like this, just like he is now. He doesn't remember how Mocha used to smell, but it wasn't lavender like this Mocha. Whenever he tries to remember the real Mocha all he thinks of is burning plastic and cotton, the ash turned acrid in a way that lingered in his room for days. They left the ashes and he kept them, more than once he wanted to eat them just to have a piece of Mocha that they couldn't take from him.

He'll lose Mocha again when they find The Miasma. Even if he doesn't tell them anything, it's only a matter of time. They know what Boss looks like, even if they don't know his name, and 27 doesn't know it either. They don't know where The Miasma is based, and neither does he. If that's all they wanted to know, then he knows that they're getting close. If those are the only pieces they're missing, they know too much already, and his time is short here.

50 didn't know that she was going to die. If she did, she might have told him. If she told him, he doesn't know if that would have made it easier. He probably would have broken down and cried. He would have made it harder for her to bear it, to waste what little time she had watching him cry when he couldn't even tell her how he felt about her.

He doesn't know if he should tell Eri.

He pushes his face against Mocha hard enough to remind him not to breathe, not to make a sound. He wants to scream, he wants to kick and thrash, but he keeps his muscles tightened against it. He knows better than to do that.

He doesn't want Eri to carry that weight. He doesn't want her to remember him, to think of him like he thinks of 50. He doesn't want to haunt her dreams like that, to be the ache in her chest every time she remembers.

He should have told her that he was a Dog. That he was trash, he was useless. Everyone else did, everyone told her. He should have been a Dog to her, but he wasn't, he couldn't have been even if he tried.

He was Twenny, and she needed Twenny. But he doesn't want her to miss Twenny.

He hopes that she forgets about him. She's still young enough to be able to. She'll grow up surrounded by heroes, by people who smile at her and dote on her far better than he can, and she'll grow up smiling. She'll forget about the time that she didn't, and she'll forget about him.

She'll forget about Chisaki too, and 27 wants that.

He wants to forget about him too.

If he sees him, he'll know that it's different. He's not his Dog, that tag was taken off of him. The pieces of the 8 Precepts still inside him can be ripped out, and that can be the last thing that Chisaki can take from him.

He'll scream into that impassive face that told him to bark. He'll grab Chisaki's mask and show him how he could have taken him down in every single match that he faked to lose. He'll tear him up the same way Chisaki tore into him, and the same way he tore into Eri with The Chair.

27 doesn't care what happens to him after that. The Miasma can have their blood, but 27 wants to have his first.

But he needs to make sure that Eri's taken care of. He knows that the heroes won't hurt her, but they don't know how to take care of her. She still needs him for that, and he needs to make sure that she doesn't.

He needs to do a lot of things, but first he needs a distraction. Something to clear his head, to stop his nerves from running wild under his skin, from the ache in his chest. A distraction will calm him down, settle him back into his own skin, and the heroes always give him one.

27 wipes his tears away, frowns when he realizes that he can't blow his nose, that he'll have to breathe with his mouth until his nostrils clear. He pulls out his phone and ignores all the messages until he reaches the bottom.

Ashi: @Shinny are you sick????

Genesis: Eri said that he's working on a project with Present Mic-sensei.

Sparky Boiii: Sounds fake, but ok.

Crimson Boiii: Yeah he was ok yesterday so he shouldn't be sick today

#1 Eri Enthusiast: We should send someone to check on him after school! Who makes the best soup?

Shitsou's Reaper: ME. I'LL CLEAR THE FUCK OUT OF YOUR SINUSES YOU WEAK TWIGGY BITCH.

Ya Good Boiii: My intestines still haven't recovered, and it's NOVEMBER.

InvisiCutie: The air in the dorm was literally too spicy to breathe

Slappy Tail Boiii: I have a family recipe that works for any illness, but I'm not sure if we have all the ingredients at the dorm.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: Ojiro can cook, Bakugo CANNOT be allowed in the kitchen. Izuku says he can go grocery shopping. Who wants to come with me to drop it off?

Ashi: MEEEEEEE!!!

Soba Boiii: My right hand is a good fever reducer.

Soba Boiii: And I have pictures of Soba that are full of #healing #energy.

Shitsou's Reaper: THAT FURBALL WILL MAKE SHITSOU PUKE EVEN MORE, ICYHOT BASTARD.

Soba Boiii: Take. That. Back.

Pastry Boiii: Pas encore....

Mysterieux Boiii: DO NOT. TELL ERI. I'M SICK. 1. I'm not. 2. I will kill each of you slowly and you will feel nothing but pain every second of it.

Sparky Boiii: bad vibes

Mysterieux Boiii: Eri is afraid of me getting sick. If you scare Eri like that, you deserve what's coming to you. And it will be coming to you. By me.

Sparky Boiii: *bad vibes intensify*

Sweet Boiii: Soooooo you're working on a project with Present Mic-sensei?

Mysterieux Boiii: Sure.

Shitsou's Reaper: LISTEN YOU VAGUE ASS PIECE OF SHIT I DON'T CARE HOW MANY TIMES I HAVE TO TELL YOU, BUT ANSWER. THE FUCKING. QUESTION.

Mysterieux Boiii: I did. :-)

Ya Good Boiii: shinsou please don't you're not at school but we're all going to suffer

Palpitation Projector: Is it for his radio show? Tell him to stop playing Morrissey before I kick him in the face.

Mysterieux Boiii: It's not. Kick out his legs first, his face is a high target to reach.

Palpitation Projector: Noted.

Genesis: Eri is working on her math workbook right now. I'll be able to help her if she has any questions.

Mysterieux Boiii: If she starts looking around and playing with her pencil, she has a question. She doesn't always ask.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: awwwwwwww!!!! #bestbigbro

Shitsou's Reaper: IT'S CREEPY AS FUCK DON'T ENCOURAGE THAT SHIT BOB CUT

Quiet Boiii: She's kicking her feet and hasn't written anything for a while.

Mysterieux Boiii: She's bored. Or irritated by something. Smile at her if it's one kick.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: What does one kick mean?

Mysterieux Boiii: It's a test. Just do it.

Pure Boiii: What name sign did you make for Aizawa-sensei? Did he like it?

Mysterieux Boiii: Skip.

Ashi: Shinny ;:_;

Ashi: I'M GONNA HURT AIZAWA IF HE HURT YOU EVEN IF I DIE

Mysterieux Boiii: Don't.

Shitsou's Reaper: YOU CALLED HIM A FUCKING CAT, DIDN'T YOU? DON'T LISTEN TO HALF N HALF BASTARD, HE DOESN'T KNOW SHIT

Soba Boiii: No. He would have liked it.

InvisiCutie: Did you do something wrong? Are you grounded right now?

Mysterieux Boiii: I don't know.

Genesis: Eri asked how your project is going. Also @Ashido please stop. Shinsou asked you not to act out on his behalf.

Mysterieux Boiii: Tell her it's going well, but it's a lot of work.

Ashi: SENSEI DID SHINSOU WRONG I WANT VENGEANCE

Ya Good Boiii: Ashido you WILL DIE.

Mighty Boiii: Sensei doesn't have his coffee and I don't think he's sleeping, he's just ignoring us. Please stop threatening him.

Soba Boiii: Shinsou, were you acting aggressively? Even if you were, you should only be isolated for a maximum of 30 minutes.

Mysterieux Boiii: @Ashi stop. @Polar Temperatures I wasn't.

Ashi: shinnyyyyyyyyyyy I miss youuuuuuuu so baaaaaaaad

Mysterieux Boiii: Don't. Please just don

Sparky Boiii: Sniped?

Mighty Boiii: Shinsou, are you okay?

Genesis: Eri is very excited to tell you about her day when she returns home.

Genesis: She said she will also take notes for you for Aizawa-sensei's Hero Ethics class.

Genesis: Would you like me to take a picture of Eri and send it to you?

Shitsou's Reaper: INVISIBITCH SNEAK OUT OF CLASS AND MAKE SURE SHITSOU'S STILL BREATHING

Provost Piston: PLEASE DO NOT. Present Mic-sensei confirmed that Shinsou is fine!

Shitsou's Reaper: IT'S A FUCKING LIE THEY'RE DOING SOMETHING TO THE CORPSE FACED LITTLE SHIT. HE HASN'T SAID SHIT IN 15 MINUTES

Mysterieux Boiii: I was counting. Floaty, you owe me 2 questions. Tell me an Eri story. From when I wasn't there.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: Did she tell you about the cultural festival?

Mysterieux Boiii: Immediately. She really liked it. She was really happy.

#1 Eri Enthusiast: @Izuku! You have more Eri stories!

Pure Boiii: The first weekend she was with Aizawa-sensei at the dorm, she seemed really nervous, but she came out when I was cleaning my rabbits' hutch. Midoriya told her she could pet them, and she seemed to really like them! They really liked her too! Snoopy doesn't usually like to be held, but he let Eri hold him, because she called his ear markings cute.

Soba Boiii: I froze my hand while we were watching The Lion King 2. She tried to cover it with a blanket to help. I didn't want to use my quirk to melt it after that, so I let it melt on its own. She's very kind.

Genesis: On her first day of school, she seemed very nervous. Her desk was originally by Aizawa-sensei's, so my stomach must have been very loud for her to hear it growling. I hadn't eaten well the day before, and I had been training my quirk too much that night. She gave me a few of her snacks, even though she seemed too nervous to speak to me. It was very kind of her, if not a little embarrassing for me.

Crow Boiii: Eri and I have shared several apple bunny snacks, but my favorite time with her was during a weekend that Koda's rabbits were in the common room. We both enjoyed treating the rabbits to a delicious delicacy of delight.

Sweet Boiii: The first dorm breakfast that Eri went to, I made apple turnovers and cinnamon rolls. She ate so many that she kind of got a stomachache, but she said that she didn't know which one

she liked more, so she kept eating to help her decide.

Pastry Boiii: Eri said that she enjoyed listening to ma ‘pretty words,’ and I tried to teach her a nursery rhyme from my youth in francais. Elle avait l'habitude de taper des applaudissements lorsqu'elle avait mal prononcé, je n'aurais peut-être pas dû la laisser.

Mysterieux Boiii: Mispronounce?

Pastry Boiii: Oui. She claps? Is this a new habit?

Mysterieux Boiii: Don't let her do that.

Mysterieux Boiii: No matter what, no matter what she says, do not let her do that. Stop her. Tell her it's right.

Genesis: We'll make sure to do that from now on, Shinsou. I'm sorry, I thought it was a learning technique.

Mysterieux Boiii: Chisaki made her do it. Don't let her.

Genesis: I'm sorry.

Mysterieux Boiii: It's fine. She looks up to you a lot. She looks up to all of you.

Mysterieux Boiii: Please take care of her.

Mighty Boiii: 1. When Eri was still in the hospital recovering, she checked out a lot of books to read instead of watching TV. There was one that she kind of tried to hide when it was time to return them to the hospital's library, because she said that it was your favorite book to read to her, and she wanted to make sure that she had it when you came back. Aizawa-sensei made sure to buy it for her, and I'm pretty sure she still has it in her room. I wasn't allowed to read it to her, and I don't think Aizawa-sensei was either. 2. Eri asked Togata-sempai if you could be his sidekick, and she drew a picture of you in a hero costume beside him in his. He still has it on his wall, but I'm sure he would give it to you if you asked for it, or if you wanted it. I could ask him for you! 3. Two days before you came to school, she gave everyone a picture of you with reasons why you're a good person and why we should be nice to you on the back. She worked really hard, and not all of them were the same. It must have taken her a long time to make 19 pictures, but she wanted to make sure that you would be okay here. I know it's not really my place to say anything, but Eri really cares about you, even if she was a little angry yesterday. I just think she gets a little overwhelmed sometimes, and it's kind of good that she acts like that now. She was really quiet before. She was really scared, but she isn't anymore, and that's because she has you. You're her hero, and you keep her safe. And I'm really glad you're here for her too.

Shitsou's Reaper: FUCK MIC, FUCK ALL OF THIS, I'M BEATING DOWN SHITSOU'S DOOR TO STOP HIM FROM DOING SOME STUPID SHIT

Provost Piston: Shinsou, please respond.

Mysterieux Boiii: Don't.

Mysterieux Boiii: I'm fine. I'm not doing anything.

Ashi: Shinny, just please tell us what's going on. We're really worried about you.

Crimson Boiii: Dude, just keep talking to us. Please.

Mysterieux Boiii: It's the investigation.

Mysterieux Boiii: I'm fine.

Mysterieux Boiii: They want information. I can't give it to them.

Mysterieux Boiii: I'm not going to tell you either.

Mysterieux Boiii: I don't know how much you'll know, but if I'm not around, take care of Eri.

Mysterieux Boiii: Don't talk about me after that.

Ya Good Boiii: You're talking like you're going to die. Shinsou, seriously, you need to tell us what's going on.

Provost Piston: There's a grace period. You wouldn't be moved immediately. I'm not sure if that's a comfort to you. I'm just. Very sorry.

Soba Boiii: @Iida you're wrong. Shinsou can stay in the vents in my room.

Genesis: We're not supposed to know anything about the investigation.

Sparky Boiii: TRANSFER TO UA THEY CAN'T MAKE YOU LEAVE

Mighty Boiii: We're not going to do that, Shinsou! Eri isn't just going to forget about you!

Ashi: We're kidnapping you.

Soba Boiii: I'm an accomplice.

Palpitation Projector: Consider Mic-sensei's custody fucking terminated.

Mysterieux Boiii: Don't try. It's fine. It will be fine.

Shitsou's Reaper: FUCK. ALL OF THAT. FUCKING FUCK THAT STOCKHOLM BULLSHIT AND TELL SHITSEI AND USE THAT SHIT. FUCKING DUMB FUCK THEY'RE NOT TAKING YOUR DUMB ASS

Mysterieux Boiii: I'm not going to respond, but I'm not doing anything. Don't worry about me.

27 rubbed off the dried mucus, finally able to breathe through his nose. Bakugo had a point.

A stupid one.

It wouldn't work. Even if his owner was pleased that he folded so easily, even if he *could* tell him anything without falling out of his head, he hadn't made another use for himself. He hadn't been able to make one.

He wanted to stay. With Mocha, with Eri. In this confusing place, a place that didn't have rules or expectations, hardly had any punishments. He wanted to stay here, even if he didn't deserve it.

But wanting never amounted to anything. His games never worked, never amounted to anything. He still kept trying, still too stupid to stop.

But if Chisaki would only talk if he was there, that was a foothold. He could play against it. He could try. Even if it didn't work, he would try.

27 was still too stupid to give up that easily.

*

Yamada was *trying*.

His mother hasn't steered him wrong before. Even if she's never had a kid that hid inside a ventilation shaft, Himiko and Jotaro did have a few little 'clubhouses' that he never knew about. She told him it was important to respect the very clear 'keep out' sign that Shinsou had put up, and he quickly realizes exactly why he picked the vents instead of his room.

They've never made a system for Shinsou to allow them into his room. They've just assumed that because he couldn't tell them to come in, that they should just stroll right in, and keep the kid from having any sense of privacy.

It's no wonder Shinsou went right for the vents after that, but he really hopes that this can be just a one-off thing, and that he'll just put a chair under his doorknob next time.

Yamada started off this 'ignore him to invite him in' plan by listening to the playlist that his radio station interns put together, to make sure it flowed and had the right kind of atmosphere he wanted. They added a few songs from the Open Mic Night as a nice tie-in for him to announce what song was Shinsou's favorite, though he hasn't gotten a straight answer yet. He wavers before he takes Denierre Danse off, because even if Shinsou did like it, French might be just a little touchy for a while.

After playing a few moodier songs, he decided to change it up to a playlist he hadn't listened to in years - 'Hizashi's Tear Tracks.' He *really* thought that was clever when he was a teenager.

The Cure, The Gazette, Depeche Mode, and a hundred other artists combined to make the perfect soundtrack for any broken hearted teenager. It's a little ironic that he would play this for Shinsou to help him through what Shouta did, when Yamada had made it to deal with his unrequited high school crush on Shouta.

He didn't know that it wasn't entirely unrequited until they were in their early twenties, and with hindsight being 20/20, he's a little glad for that. He had been *embarrassingly* lovestruck, and still a bit too self-absorbed to have really made any relationship between them work. He was too young to take Shouta's reserved nature as anything other than disinterest, or the verbal barbs they still traded as something other than irritation. He would have been a wreck in under a week, while in his twenties, he was able to put up with it for about a month before he broke down and asked Shouta if he even liked him. Shouta might have called him an idiot in response, but he started learning how many ways that Shouta could call him an idiot and still mean it as a term of endearment.

Shirakumo could tell back then. He could smile in the face of Shouta's pouting and egg him on until he smiled. And even if Yamada didn't know how he did it, he was *insanely* jealous of Shirakumo for doing that. For being the guy that Shouta clearly had a crush on, for being so damn

cheerful and sincere all the time. For being the guy that Yamada pretended to be, until he was alone in his bedroom and stuck with himself for a few hours, sulking about all the ways he's not like Shirakumo at all.

He wonders how much of that sincerity was real for Shirakumo, especially when he spends more time with Togata. When Togata was just a student to him, he was almost painful to look at. The class clown, surrounded by people who loved him, hero hopefuls who looked up to him. That cheerful smile that he thought was sincere, he now knows is a mask. If it always was, Yamada never paid enough attention to know it, but he knows it now and often wonders if it was the same for Shirakumo. If Shirakumo just never had the opportunity to let it break, let himself be vulnerable for a while.

Yamada hasn't always been the best shoulder to cry on, and he wouldn't have been for Shirakumo. He just can't stand the silence, can't stand the tears because he starts to cry them too. In a way, it might be better that Shinsou drew away instead of letting him in, because he cares about the kid too much to be able to stand the sight of him crying.

He still wants to comfort him, in any way that Shinsou will let him. Even if it's just being his personal DJ for a while.

*

Yamada must think 27 is stupid. He knew why he was playing that music, humming along at times. Warming up his quirk.

27 *was* stupid, he acted before he thought it out. The vents were secure, and he was reasonably sure that Yamada couldn't fit his shoulders through the opening, but he quickly realized that they could be a death trap. If Yamada used his quirk, the sound would ricochet and intensify to cause a great deal of damage without much effort.

27 didn't have a lot to work with, but he fashioned some ear plugs out of the tissues he had in his pocket to protect some of his hearing, though he couldn't do anything to protect the rest of his body. There were rumors that Present Mic could break bones with a single shout, or make an opponent incontinent by hitting a certain note. He doesn't want to find out if they're right with his own body.

It's been nice to not have a quirk used on him for this long.

He found a dead end that might be facing the outside wall, and after staring at the seams of the paneling for too long, he found it a little too tempting to pull out his knife. He knew it was likely reinforced behind the paneling, that there would be brick and cement behind it besides, but there might be a crevice between that where he could hide the things he wanted to lose the least.

Mocha might be safer here than out in the open in his room.

He had managed to pull a corner of the paneling away, just enough to slip the tip of his knife under it, when he hears the scuttling. He turns and realizes that the ear plugs must have been a bit too effective, because the robot has already stopped, close enough to him to raise one of its legs and tap his hip.

Part of its cylindrical body opens up to raise a black rectangle over the dome of its camera, which

blinks before words are displayed. 'There is an electrified probe behind that.' 'Powerful enough to kill about 20 men.' 'Please don't test it. :3'

Before the robot can scuttle away again, he grabs it by the thick plastic dome and sets it in front of him, cornering it. After putting the knife down, still easy to reach, he takes out the phone, and starts typing a message in the group chat for Izuku, Piston, and Floaty, before holding it up to the robot. 'How many of you are there?'

':3' The robot displays in return, before its screen blinks again. '346 vent units active.' '267 in reserve.' '124 full size combat units.' '2834 exam bots in reserve.' 'In case of emergency.'

27 nodded to himself, looking back at the phone. The vent units must be for surveillance, and the combat units must be larger and more deadly if only 124 of them were needed. It wouldn't really matter what the exam bots could do, since there were nearly 3000 of them. He finds himself smiling as the robot tilts its display to the side with that same ':3' face. Apparently, robots *did* answer questions.

And ask them as well. 'Why do you enjoy vents?'

27 frowns, typing out his response. 'Safe. Somewhat. It's not, and I know that. I should probably be afraid of them, but I'm not traumatized. People just think that I am.'

The robot whirs as it settles its body down, legs folding forward. 'Trauma is interesting.' 'Some horrors can be ignored.' 'Some comforts can be frightening.' The robot's screen goes black for a while, and 27 raises a hand to tap it, just in case it goes to sleep like the phone does, but then the screen blinks back to life. 'Would you like to know.' 'This robot's opinion?'

27 nods. He's already asked the Internet, so he might as well know what the robot thinks about what Eri is dealing with.

'Familiar horrors are comfortable.' 'New ones are not.' 'But they are in time.' 'Because it's the only.' 'Way we can go on.'

27 runs a hand through his hair, trying to brush away the trickle of sweat. This robot might be right. Eri had probably been terrified after she was rescued, especially without him there to protect her. Even if she hadn't needed it, she knew that he was safe for her to be around. Even if that wasn't true, even if he had abused her with his quirk, he was -

He was a familiar horror.

It was good that she had the heroes. Even if she was scared of them at first, they weren't horrors. They were the way for her to go on.

He still wanted to be there, even if he didn't deserve it. He probably shouldn't try, it would probably be better for Eri if he gave up. He should let his owner win. Let his owner and Chisaki win.

She'll forget about him sooner, easier, he'll be less to remember, the more pieces they cut him into to dispose of him. Just like all Numbers ended up. Cut into pieces, his fingers chopped at each knuckle, then the wrist, then the arm-

27 jerks his arm back when he feels cold metal on his hand, elbow hitting the paneling with a thud. He stares at it, horrified that he had given his location away so easily, so *stupidly*, rookie mistake and he was trained out of that, before he glares at the robot.

The robot rises up, withdrawing that thin metal arm that touched him into its body. ‘Your temperature is elevated.’ ‘Heat stroke is inevitable.’ ‘5 hours or so.’ ‘I would suggest trying.’ ‘A new horror beforehand.’ ‘:3’

He tries to catch it when it leaps onto his shoulder, but his hand is too slick and it scurries away faster than he could chase.

Apparently, robots are also *assholes*.

*

Yamada heard the thud, and had to stop himself from going to Shinsou’s room to squeeze himself into the vents to make sure that his ward hadn’t just passed out.

He asked Principal Nezu to turn down the heat for the staff dorm almost an hour ago, and all he’s gotten in response is that ever-terrifying ‘:3’ face. As much as he doesn’t want to get in hot water with his boss, he definitely needs to make sure Shinsou doesn’t get hurt while he’s sequestering himself in the ventilation system.

He knows he’s supposed to ignore it, that he’s supposed to be calm and inviting and trying to talk to Shinsou before he’s ready will make him less ready to talk. But his ward might be *simmering* like a little purple sausage in there.

“Shinsou?” Yamada calls, then pulls himself to stand on his computer chair to try to see into the vent, finding it still too high up and completely dark besides. “Hey, I know you don’t want to talk right now, but I just want to make sure you’re alright. Maybe you can clap for me, just so I know you’re okay?”

Yamada shouldn’t have taken his eyes off of him. His ward was in the *vents*, and it’s winter so the heat is turned up to full blast, and as warm as it is in the dorm, it had to be *blistering* in that vent. And Shinsou was wearing long sleeves, he might not take his shirt off, and he probably hasn’t drank any water today, or anything really.

His ward is probably passed out in the ventilation system.

He’s just *such* a good caretaker for that to happen. It’s just *fantastic* that Shinsou trusts him, that Shinsou has put his faith into him like that. Yamada is just so *goddamn* equipped to help Shinsou, the best hero for the job, really.

Yamada hears his phone chirp and hopes that Nezu isn’t asking why the Rat Robocops are throwing an error while they examine Shinsou’s unconscious body. But instead, he finds a chat notification.

From his chat with Shinsou.

Jean Valjean: I can’t talk anyway.

Yamada sits down in a huff, running a hand over his face as he tries not to feel so giddy that Shinsou *finally* used this chat. Because he definitely should have changed his username after the issue with French came up, and it was honestly a bit tasteless when he made it.

But, Shinsou *was* talking to him. Out of spite, maybe, but they were talking. And that was a good sign that the vent situation might clear up soon, as long as he didn't screw it up.

Current Radio: Sorry! That didn't come out the way I wanted it to. You doing okay though?

Jean Valjean: I'm fine.

Current Radio: I'd turn down the heat if I could, but Nezu controls the thermostat. Are you sure you're okay? Do you want me to bring you some water?

Jean Valjean: I'm not coming out.

Yamada throws his head against the back of the chair. He needs to respect the 'clubhouse,' he needs to be grateful that Shinsou is talking to him. *But Shinsou needs to get out of there before he loses it.*

Current Radio: That's okay! I just want to make sure you're alright.

Current Radio: Meet any cool robots up there?

Jean Valjean: Not a cool one.

Current Radio: You're okay, right? It didn't hurt you or anything? Those things are kind of dangerous, Nezu kinda went off the rails designing them. I think just one of them could take down 3 of me!

Jean Valjean: Just throw them. They're fast but easily confused.

Current Radio: That might just come in handy one of these days, little listener!

Yamada waited. He ground his teeth, typing out 'Still okay?' just to delete it right after. Shinsou thought the vents were safe, he needed space to decompress, but the vents *weren't* safe and he just really wanted to see his ward with his own eyes. He just needed to make sure that he was okay.

Current Radio: Whatcha thinking about for lunch? I should probably use the last of the bean sprouts before they start turning, but I don't know what to make

Jean Valjean: I'm not coming out.

Current Radio: I know. I can put it in there with ya! You won't have to come out until you want to. I just want to make sure you get to eat something.

Current Radio: Did any of my tunes catch your fancy?

Jean Valjean: I didn't dislike them.

Yamada frowned. Shinsou was only responding to questions, and with short messages in return. He was probably just pestering the poor kid, who was only putting up with it because he had to. Because he was afraid that Yamada might get angry if he didn't.

Current Radio: That's good! We can just listen to the music for a while, and if you like something, just let me know! I've got some nifty little programs that can pull a bunch of songs together based off of one, and maybe we can find a few more songs you like from that!

Yamada pulled up his own playlists and switched to one dedicated to songs with a heavy bass - 'Can't Hear You.' Whenever he needed a break from his hearing aids but didn't really want to deal with silence, he would drive out of the city and find an empty parking lot, crank up the volume and just let the music *vibrate* him.

He would have liked to take advantage of the day off to do just that, but he still needed to keep an ear out for his ward. Maybe if Shinsou would come out, he could go deaf for a while so that they could just talk through sign. It might help him remember how it feels to sign to someone's turned back.

After a few songs, he gets a surprising message.

Jean Valjean: Can you play that part again

Yamada does, finding himself a little intrigued to know what the acoustics of the ventilation system made it sound like. Shinsou might be getting quite a show in there.

Current Radio: What's it sound like in there?

Jean Valjean: Can you stop

Ouch. Okay, point taken. Hands off of the clubhouse, stop bothering the poor kid.

Jean Valjean: I didn't mean to send that I'm sorry I don't want to hear this

Yamada hits 'skip' immediately, and turns back to his phone. That seemed a little worse than the

usual mis-sent message nerves, and he hoped that song wasn't familiar for Shinsou. Dissociation was probably the only risk worse than heat stroke while he was in there.

Current Radio: It's okay!

Current Radio: I send texts too early all the time! One time I tried to tell Shou to pick up some take out because I was about to go into an emergency call and I didn't know how long I'd be incommunicado, but all I sent was 'Pick up.'

Current Radio: So Shou thought I was injured or close to death or something, and he was panicking the entire time! He was searching the city and calling every hospital, trying to find me while I was playing Whack-a-Mole with a gang of tunneling quirks.

Current Radio: Shou was so mad when I finally called him back lol

Jean Valjean: You didn't laugh.

Text rambling got Shinsou all the way back to sass. Yamada couldn't help but smile.

Current Radio: Ya caught me!

Current Radio: So, what's it sound like in there? It's probably got a lot of reverb, so this music must sound pretty neat.

Jean Valjean: It's weird.

Jean Valjean: It's stupid. It sounded

Current Radio: I bet it's not stupid! There was one time that I kind of got a little drunk, and for SOME reason, I wanted to know what chickens hear before they hatch. I'm pretty sure Nemuri was behind it, somehow. But I wound up with eggshells held over my ears while she played the sound of someone's heartbeat, and I don't even remember what it sounded like, but I was crying. And Nemuri was laughing. And Shou recorded the whole thing for blackmail.

He hears a snort from the vent above his head, barely loud enough to hear over the music. He wonders if Shouta still had that video, maybe Shinsou would laugh if he saw it.

Jean Valjean: It's weird. It sounded like my quirk felt.

Oh.

For all Yamada's rambling and wordsmith capabilities, he doesn't really know what to say to that. Shinsou hates his quirk, he hates it enough to reject it completely, probably to the point that it's

physically affecting it. Monoma wouldn't have a reason to lie to him.

He knows that Shinsou needs to see a quirk specialist, but that's not going to happen until the investigation is closed. There's a lot of specialists that Shinsou needs to see, and he can't get the help that he needs right now.

He only has Yamada.

Current Radio: It's not weird to me, you know. I think it's kind of cool.

Current Radio: I was just thinking about how I play this kind of music when I take my hearing aids out. I can't hear it, but it feels like I can??? It's kind of hard to explain, but I think you can get it.

Shinsou doesn't say anything for a while, and Yamada wonders if he should ask if he's okay again, just to make sure he responds, but he does.

Jean Valjean: I didn't know you were deaf.

Current Radio: I've got some pretty nifty hearing aids so villains don't find out! lol

Current Radio: But it kind of comes with the quirk, and I was born with mine, so I've been deaf as long as I can remember!

Bringing his own quirk up might not have been the best idea.

Current Radio: What do you want for lunch, zaru soba or hiyashi chuka?

Jean Valjean: Hiyashi chuka

Perfect, out of two cold dishes, Shinsou picked the one with the most vegetables. Not that he ever complained about vegetables, or about anything really, but it was nice that he picked that one.

It was also pretty quick to make, especially after boiling the noodles first then chopping the vegetables and mixing a sauce while he waited for them to cool. Yamada took his time arranging everything in swirls of color, with the pale green beansprouts on top, though it would probably get a little messed up when he set it into the ventilation shaft.

He didn't even think about the door that he left open until he walks into Shinsou's room and sees his ward for the first time since this morning.

Shinsou is hanging upside down from the ceiling, sweating and flushed, and he looks like he was trying to reach for the coffee before he realized that Yamada was standing there. He watches his

ward pull himself back up towards the open vent, and the rush of panic knocks him out of his initial confusion.

“Wait, wait! I should’ve knocked, you don’t have to-”

Yamada can’t help the sigh of relief when he sees Shinsou pull himself out of the shaft instead, standing on his chair before he quickly steps down. ‘ *It’s fine. I’m sorry.* ’

Yamada just smiles, relieved that this is finally *over*. His ward looks a little worse for the wear, but at least he can see that, at least they’re really talking. “It’s okay, kiddo! Everyone needs some space sometimes, I totally get that. If you want to eat in your room, that’s okay too, and I won’t bother you or anything.”

Shinsou runs a hand over the back of his head before he signs again, still looking a little more guilty than he should be. ‘ *Not a bother.* ’

And *finally* , the clubhouse opened up. Shinsou didn’t just want to get out of the vents, but it sounded like he was finally ready to talk. Maybe about what happened, maybe about anything else to distract from that. Whatever Shinsou wanted from him, Yamada would gladly give it. “Let’s see if you’re still singing that tune by the end of the day! Even Shou can’t handle me for too long before I bother him to death, but I was thinking that maybe we could just use sign today, since it’s just us. I’m probably a lot easier to deal with when I’m on mute.”

Goddammit .

If Yamada didn’t have his hands full, he would slap himself. Him and his big mouth got him into this mess to begin with, and even after nearly five hours of wondering if his ward was having heatstroke or not, *that* just falls right out of his mouth.

Shinsou raises his eyebrows, and Yamada *absolutely* deserves whatever non-verbal lashing he’s going to get, but instead he sees a flash of a smirk before it goes away. ‘ *Rude.* ’

“Yep, super rude, I’m going to shut up now,” Yamada swears, setting the cold ramen and water bottles on the desk for Shinsou to decide whether he wants to eat in his room or risk being around Yamada’s big mouth again. “And I’m going deaf in three, two, one.”

The steady ringing of his hearing aids echoed a bit before everything else fell silent, and he couldn’t help but rub the sore cartilage a bit. Powerloader worked wonders with making hero gear comfortable and efficient, but near constant wear still had its drawbacks.

He popped his hearing aids back into their little case and put it in his pocket, before he looked up to see Shinsou still staring at him, eyes widened with a bit of concern.

‘ *You don’t have to,* ’ Shinsou signed. ‘ *I didn’t mean that.* ’

‘ *It’s fine! I haven’t taken my ears out for a while. It’s nice!* ’ Yamada signs back. ‘ *Nice to spend day talking with my favorite listener.* ’

‘ *But not talking,* ’ Shinsou signs back, and Yamada is glad that he has his hands free, because even when his mouth is shut, he can still say the wrong thing. He still slaps a hand over it out of habit, but when he does, he realizes that he might have taken his hearing aids out a little too early.

He watches Shinsou laugh, just a smile and huff before he catches himself, and Yamada can’t help but smile behind his hand before he pulls it away. ‘ *Stop bullying me!* ’

Shinsou absolutely does *not* , even if he signs that he's sorry. Every little slip that Yamada makes gets called out immediately, and he has to take more than his fair share of ' *Now Music* ' s and ' *Current Radio* ' s on the chin.

He definitely regrets giving Shinsou coffee, especially after watching the kid drink it with his hiyashi chuka, which *had* to be disgusting. And the boost in energy wasn't hindering his ability to come up with bad hero names, *at all*.

But Yamada was sure this was just the start of a great day off.

*

Bakugo is just fucking tired. He's ready for this shit day to be over, because then he might be able to sleep for a few fucking hours. He needs a fucking *nap*, like a fucking toddler, and it's fucking bullshit. *Fuck* midterms, everyone's all over his ass and he has a lot of shit on his plate to begin with.

Fuck that stupid fucking project Shitsei gave him. It doesn't know *shit* , none of those books or websites know *shit*. He's not fucking-

He's not going to sound like fucking Shitsou's dumb ass . But he's not. Fucking. Traumatized.

He got kidnapped, it was fucked up. They didn't *actually* do shit to him. He might have gotten a little fucked up after All Might retired, but who fucking wasn't? It was *All Might* . Everyone was pissing their pants at that point, because All Might is fucking *All Might* , and he's not like that anymore, and it's all Bakugo's fucking fault.

Fuck whoever keeps blowing up his phone. It's probably Kaminari's dumb ass, going apeshit over a new meme or some shit.

But it's not. It's fucking *Shitsou* going apeshit.

If Eri ever swears I will kill you and no one will find the body: How do you not log off?

If Eri ever swears I will kill you and no one will find the body: You owe me an interview.

If Eri ever swears I will kill you and no one will find the body changed their name to Shit chan

Shit chan: You said something about grounding.

Shit chan: I can't look it up.

Shit chan: I'm in a vent.

Shit chan: Mental quirks don't work on me.

Shit chan: What do you want to know

Shit chan: I don't know what you want to know in exchange.

Ojiro should have broken your neck changed their name to Your fucking therapist, apparently

Your fucking therapist, apparently: CHILL YOUR FUCKING TITS. I've been in class, dipshit.

Your fucking therapist, apparently: Why the fuck don't they have a therapist for you or some shit? I'm not fucking paid to do this

Your fucking therapist, apparently: Fucking avoidance and detraggering exercise bullshit apparently fucking works

Your fucking therapist, apparently: AND WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU IN A VENT?

Shit chan: Explain detraggering exercises in exchange.

Shitty Hair tried to lean over his shoulder to look at his phone, still fucking chewing on a giant fucking meatball sub. "Mrf nrfn t-"

"*CHEW*," Bakugo growled, putting a hand over Shitty Hair's mouth like he's a fucking toddler who doesn't know how to fucking eat and talk, because he fucking *is*. He's fucking *surrounded* by idiots who don't know how to do fucking anything.

Shitty Hair swallows, and his lips do some weird fucking shit that feels *way* too much like a fucking gay fucking kiss bullshit fuckery, and Bakugo is not fucking dealing with that right now. "You're talking to Shinsou?"

"He's pulling this mafia-ass bullshit from a fucking vent," Bakugo says, typing out instructions on how to not be a weak little bitch for Shitsou. Even if this is *not* his fucking job, someone needs to do this shit, and just like every fucking thing else, that means it's Bakugo's job.

Sero can't wrap his stupid fucking brain around Pre-Calc? Why go to a real fucking tutor when Bakugo's there! Kaminari and Ashido didn't fucking study worth shit the whole term, but why fucking worry now? Bakugo's there to duct tape them to their fucking desks and pound that shit into their skulls. Headphone bitch keeps fucking "studying" art history with Yaoyorozu, and now she has no fucking idea what their essay is supposed to look like, but hey, *Bakugo's there*.

His fucking *teachers* can't be assed to handle Shitsou, and now it's Bakugo's problem. He doesn't know what the fuck they're doing to Shitsou when no one's looking, but if Shitsou keeps coming to him with this kind of shit, he can know they're not doing shit for his fucked up brain problems.

Your fucking therapist, apparently: You do the fucking shit that triggers you when you're all comfy and safe and shit, then stop when it starts to fuck you up. And you fucking do that WITH A REAL FUCKING THERAPIST.

Shit chan: I don't have time to get one.

Shit chan: I needed to get away from Yamada.

Your fucking therapist, apparently: Tell me what the fuck is going on and I'll give you some fucking PTSD hacks this weekend. Deal, fucking yakuza ass bitch?

Shit chan: 1. I need the hacks now. 2. I am a yakuza, you're not insulting me.

Your fucking therapist, apparently: Bullshit, and I'm done fucking around with you. Tell me what the fuck is going on or I'm eating lunch and ignoring your ass.

Shit chan: What is hiashi chuka

Your fucking therapist, apparently: Cold ramen with a fuckton of veggies, the next thing you send better be a fucking explanation or I'm fucking done.

"Dude," Shitty Hair says, way too fucking close to his ear with all the fucking lip sounds and chewing going on. "Does Shinsou not really know what-"

"Fucker lost his shit over a soda, so no, he probably doesn't fucking know what half the shit he eats is," Bakugo answers, tossing his phone onto the table. If Shitsou doesn't fucking respond, he doesn't give a shit. He's not going to give a shit about a guy who thinks he's anything like a fucking *villain*. Fucker probably talks to him because he's fucked in the head and thinks they're fucking *friends* or some shit, but Bakugo doesn't give a shit about him.

"Dude, we should order some pizza this weekend! Like, with every topping, so we can find out-"

His phone vibrates and Bakugo snatches it up, and if it's not a straightforward fucking answer, he's skipping next period just so he can throw his phone at Shitsou's face and be *done* with this shit.

Shit chan: They're taking me to see Chisaki for the investigation, and I can't log out when I see him.

Bakugo shuts off his phone before Shitty Hair can see it, kicks his chair out, and starts walking to the staff room. Shitty Hair still wants to know what Shitsou said, but fuck that.

Fuck that, fuck that, *fuck all of this*. This is *fucked up* and if Shitsei doesn't explain this shit or tell him that Shitsou is just being too fucking stupid to fucking compute his real fucking reality, *Bakugo will fucking murder him*.

Shitsou just better be fucking *wrong* about that shit, and if Shitsei has any fucking involvement in that shit, he's fucking *dead*. He fucking knows this shit, he fucking *knows* what that would do to Shitsou, it doesn't take a fucking genius to know that Shitsou is already crazier than a bag of cats, and no one could handle that kind of shit to begin with. Chisaki is *fucking crazy* and Deku should have knocked his head clean fucking off and done the whole fucking world a favor for it.

Bakugo kicks the door open, and has to stop himself from murdering the fuck out of Shitsei right then and there, because fucking Eri is *crying* and she runs up to him, and holds on to his leg. The brat doesn't fucking like him, he fucking gets it, so if she's that fucking upset, Shitsei fucking *deserves* what's coming to him.

"Ugo, I don't wanna do the horn trick!" Eri says in that whiney, pathetic little voice that's so fucking irritating to hear. It's like nails on a fucking chalkboard, and if murdering the fuck out of someone will get it to stop, Bakugo can and *will* do that shit.

But she *did not* just fucking call him ‘Ugo.’ “Did you just fu-frigging call me a ugly freaking boot?”

She just whines and sniffles, and it’s *fucking disgusting* . She shouldn’t be at school if she’s fucking sick, and fucking Shitsei should know that. She needs to sleep and eat soup and shit, and even if he doesn’t have the fucking time, he’s going to have to make some to cook some bland ass soup she could handle. “Kiri calls you Baku, so I can’t call you that.”

Bakugo rolls his eyes, because this stupid little naming system is fucking stupid, and he doesn’t give a shit about it, at all, because it’s fucking stupid. “Call me ‘Baku.’ If Crappy Hair throws a fit about it, I’ll beat his ass.”

Eri just sniffs again, probably getting snot all over his fucking uniform, but if he kicked her, she’d go flying, so he just has to let this shit happen. Shitsei looks like he was trying to get her to blow her nose or some shit, still holding that fucking tissue in his hand, but he’s so fucking incompetent that he doesn’t know how to get that shit on her fucking nose instead of letting this shit happen to his fucking pants.

Unless he does know, and he’s just being an asshole. “Oi, your fucking mole has some intel, and I’m not talking about it in front of her.”

Shitsei looks at Eri, then tosses the tissue on the desk. “Eri, stay here while I talk to Ugo.” *Fucking asshole.*

Bakugo can’t fucking move until he does that stupid little pat thing on Eri’s head, even though he’s the only fucking one who doesn’t treat her like she’s a fucking dog, but thanks to everyone else, she doesn’t fucking let go until he does. He follows Shitsei across the room, thinking there’s some secret trapdoor or some shit, but Shitsei just opens a fucking window and hops out, like that’s *fucking normal*.

Fuck it, they’re on the first floor at least, and Shitsei has some fucking explaining to do.

“What did Shinsou say on the chat?” Shitsei asks, and Bakugo slams the window shut because Eri does *not* need to hear this shit, if she doesn’t know it already. And if she does, Shitsei’s *fucking dead*.

“Why the *fuck* are you taking him to Chisaki?!” Bakugo hisses, trying not to yell because of fucking Eri, and trying not to fire off his fucking quirk because he *fucking needs* to right now. “He’s bugging the shit out of me from a fucking *vent* -”

“Who else knows about that?” Shitsei asks, trying to be all commanding and shit, but absolutely, unequivocally, *fuck that noise*.

“Why. The fuck. Is this happening?” Bakugo asks, and he feels like he’s going to explode. He pops off a few crackles just to stave it off, just so he can *breathe* , but he’s seeing fucking red. All those whiney ass elementary school counselors would probably shit their pants if they could see how pissed he is now, all that bullshit self-managed anger *bullshit* they tried to teach him never *fucking worked* , and it sure as shit wouldn’t do anything now.

Because Shitsei just blinks at him and doesn’t *fucking care* . He doesn’t give a shit about how fucked up this is, and that’s the most fucked up part about it. He’s a fucking *hero* , he spews this shit about what heroes are supposed to do every fucking day, how they’re supposed to act, he *can’t* just fucking let this happen.

“Give me one *fucking* good reason why I shouldn’t-”

“It’s out of my hands,” Shitsei says, all quiet and shit. “I need you to convince Shinsou to work with the investigation so it doesn’t come to that.”

Bakugo just shakes his head, can’t even fucking *look* at Shitsei right now. “Fuck you.”

“We both want to stop this-”

“Then stop it!” Bakugo yells, he doesn’t fucking care if Eri hears, if everyone hears, this is just. Too *fucked up* . He fucking laughs and doesn’t know why, he fucking feels like he’s in a goddamn tailspin, because this is *fucking Aizawa-sensei*. He could just *fucking stop it*. “Fuck, why the fuck can’t you just fucking- Why the fuck is it me?! Why the fuck do you think I can do anything?! You’re the goddamn hero! You- for fucking *once* , just handle this shit for yourself! Fuck!”

Shitsei steps forward and Bakugo steps back, *fuck* that stupid ass Good Boy Pat, he doesn’t fucking need it, he needs to fucking *breathe*.

He does, he fucking counts his fucking breaths, he fucking times his fucking quirk, counting and numbers and bullshit that he’s always fucking gotten easier than fucking *breathing* , and he gets over that shit.

Fuck it. Fuck all these heroes that don’t do shit in the end, and even if he sounds like a villain for thinking that shit, he’s not.

He’s going to be the greatest fucking hero of all time, because he’ll never sit back and watch that shit happen. Shitsou probably won’t listen to a fucking word he says, but even if he *literally* has to beat the shit out of him, he’ll be better off bleeding than dealing with seeing Chisaki again. Even if he has to pretend he’s friends with the fucking corpse faced dick, he’s not letting this shit happen.

Bakugo opens the window and jumps back through, hoping that Eri didn’t hear his fucking meltdown, but when he looks around to see if she’s hiding under a desk or some shit, he doesn’t see her.

Shitsei’s still trying to get his bony ass back through the window when Bakugo turns around to ask him.

“Where *the fuck* is Eri ? ”

*

The day is nice, cloudy and hazy in a way that reminds Aoyama of home. It’s far too nice to spend lunch inside, to miss the slight chill and gray skies, and Aoyama knows that he won’t be missed inside anyway.

Midoriya does invite him to sit with him occasionally, and often Sato will reserve him a seat, but Aoyama knows that neither will miss him too terribly if he instead takes his lunch outside. Even if it is a lonely place this time of year, perhaps it suits him.

Perhaps beautiful days are much like beautiful people, and they must feel lonely at times as well.

But before he selects a seat, he sees that there might be another reason for him to be drawn to the gray sky chill today. He sees that a lonely princess sits high upon her tower, waiting for a shining knight to bring her comfort with his cape.

He has forgotten his, but his blazer will have to do, as something must be done to protect little Eri from this cold and cloudy day. “Mon petit princesse, these tears do not suit you.”

They did not, neither did her trembling lips or worried expression. Whatever foul beast had driven their sweet princess to seek sanctuary alone in a tree outside must truly be a horrible one. “M’ sorry, Yama.”

“Non! I’ll not take an apology when I am owed none!” Aoyama protests, hand on his heart and the other thrust to the sky, challenging the powers above to bear witness to this tragedy. Their sweet princess driven to tears, driven to sniffles and apologies, and the cruelty of it is too much. “Mon petit, you must tell me who has driven you to such loneliness, such sorrow, and the shining hero will rain justice upon them!”

Eri tugs his cape tighter around herself, frowning with such sadness that broke his heart to see. “No one was mean to me. I’m just sad. I just,” Eri’s lips trembled again, tears flowing anew, and Aoyama wished to call Midoriya for aid, knowing that he could stop this sorrow far better than he could. Could bear the sight of it far better. “I really don’t like my-y quir-rk.”

A sob began, but it was a familiar one. A twinge in Aoyama’s chest now sings in bitterness and in hope. In this, he could understand, though he hated to see such sorrow besides. He pulls himself to sit beside his new companion in this familiar pain, tucking his arm around her shoulders to give her a bit more warmth. “That is a thing I’ve often struggled with myself, mon petit. My sparkles were not often kind to me in my youth.”

Eri looked at him, perhaps surprised to know that the bright and shining knight had wounds beneath his armor. It was not a thing that many knew. “But it’s cute. It’s nice. My quirk is bad.”

“Non,” Aoyama whispered gently. “Your quirk is not bad. It is kind, as Midoriya says, but we both know that kind and ‘cute’ quirks may often be hard to bear. Mine brings me pain at times, and embarrassment. I suppose we are not so different in this, though I hate to see you bear it.”

Eri shook her head, pressing her hand to the curve of her horn. Like he thought, these odd little sniffles were to do with it, and his heart ached at the thought. Their sweet princess, and her hidden pain, and what little that could be done about it. “I want to do nice things, and fix Mirio, but it hurts. It hurts and it makes me mean, and it makes me ugly. I don’t wa-ant my-y quirk, Yama-a.”

He brushed at her soft cheeks as the tears fell anew, wishing he had more than pretty words and an ill-fitting cape to offer her. “Mon petit, I will never shame you, but your words are quite wrong. You are our beautiful princess, and your quirk will never change this. If there were a spell that could be cast to save you from your troubles, I would say it, but I only have a song.”

It is a mournful song, a sad one, but the princess he knows likes songs. Especially ones with pretty words, and pretty words do suit her well. Especially these.

“Un cadeau que j’ai apporte des ennuis

Et ils peuvent me faire tomber

Mais je vais briller si brillant et fier

Et donner le meilleur

Le reste je garde et nourris

Parce que c'est la mienne

Et je m'aimerai pour moi

Aimerai mes larmes et fronce les sourcils.”

The tears have stopped, and Aoyama does not know if the sounds are enough to soothe her. If the words may do her well, as they did for him in his youth.

“Ma papa wrote this song for me, for even when I did not like my quirk, I loved songs. It reminded me to love myself, every part, because there is much good that we can do through that. But also because, we *must* love ourselves, mon petit,” Aoyama says, smiling gently to the little soul who still shines brightly in the darkness. “It is very sad and lonely if we don’t.”

“Yama,” Eri says, wrapping her arms around his stomach. Her little warmth quiets the chill on his arms, and the nervous hope that his words, though not fluent as they never were, were enough. “I don’t want you to be sad and lonely.”

“I am not, mon petit,” Aoyama says, because the truth is not for her ears. It is not for anyone’s ears, not but the ears of his friends that he left at home, the ones who knew his mother tongue, and heard the troubles that he whispered in his room at night.

He wanted to be a bright and shining hero, and UA was the place for that. But a knight’s armor does not always fill a heart that longs for home.

“I am the shining hero, whose sparkling cannot be stopped!” Aoyama declares, his signature pose moves his arms away, but he hopes it inspires the little princess to see that her troubles can be carried on to a bright and shining future. That he had carried his this far.

He earns a little smile, a rare and fleeting thing, and he treasures it all the more from his little princess. “Yama, I like your other smile.”

He gives it to her again, as even if few can see it, his princess deserves it all the more for knowing. “Mon petit, I shall give you this smile always. And whenever your brave heart fails you, I will give you the song to help.”

“Yeah, make him sing it again, Eri,” Jirou says, and Aoyama nearly falls from his perch when he realizes that she has been standing behind him for quite some time. Her soft smile betrays no mockery, her fingers toying with the ends of her ear quirk. “You can actually carry a pretty nice tune. It would have been nice to know that before the festival.”

His princess looks at him with hope in her eyes, but his courage fails him, a rosy blush that does not suit him heating his face. “Non! My songs are meant for only a few, and meant for my mother tongue.”

He hopes that he did not again slip into it as he spoke, as Jirou looks at him with a bit of shock, before it cools into her jovial half-smile. “Still, I think you would have worked into our set pretty well. It would kind of be badass to have a Japanese-French duet.”

Kind words, but there is nothing for it now. The festival has passed, and the stage would have been frightening besides. He still marvels at how Jirou could have bared her heart so bravely, though in singing for Eri, he realizes it was an easier matter. They were meant to be brave heroes, and to sing for a little girl who needed cheer was a heroic task indeed.

“Aizawa-sensei was looking for you, so I think we should probably meet up with him,” Jirou says, and their little princess frowns in worry over what she had done. Aoyama did not even think to ask if she had become lost, too intent to soothe her worries. “But maybe Aoyama can sing for us while we walk?”

Jirou is surprisingly intent upon this, but when their princess asks for it with her shy and trembling words, he cannot refuse. He lifts her easily to settle her on the ground, and his heart is made full and warm as she holds onto his hand, the words of his songs falling more easily, more brilliantly, more bright.

He finds himself wicked and amused by Jirou’s attempt to accompany him in song, her words stilted and clumsy in a way that he has struggled with often. But he finds himself less amused long before they return the princess to her rightful place at their teacher’s side. He finds that he missed hearing those words spoken so close, even if Jirou does not manage them.

That aching feeling reaches a pitch when Jirou mentions that they should practice before next year, as though he has already agreed to the stage, and in this, he finds little protest.

He finds that clumsy words can still be meaningful, and they can brighten a lonely day.

*

Mirio can be kind of a selfish guy sometimes.

He’s always known he wanted to be a hero, because he likes being the kind of guy that people depend on. As much as he hates seeing people down, he likes being the guy that turns that frown upside down. It’s a great feeling, and one that he can kind of get addicted to sometimes.

Especially with Eri.

Eri is a really sweet kid, and Mirio wants to give her the world, because she honestly deserves it. She’s been through a lot, and if every smile and plushie and game they play together can rewrite her past just a little bit more, he’s more than happy to do it. And Eri has always seemed just a little more comfortable doing those things with him than anyone else, just because he’s never been ashamed to act like a kid or do something embarrassing. It’s even easier with Eri, because she doesn’t have anyone her own age to play with.

But Eri looks so *adorable* when she tries to act like a high school student, just like she is right now. She’s copying his notes with a purple crayon, eyebrows pinching together with every tricky word she spells out. He’s not really paying that much attention to the lecture, which might come back to bite him on the midterm, but it’s kind of impossible to when Eri is just *so cute*.

And he’s kind of missed her since Shinsou came to UA.

He and Eri used to be practically attached at the hip, with Aizawa-sensei’s busy schedule and Mirio being more available than Nejire and Tamaki. They had internships, and he didn’t. They had to get

ready to graduate, to really go plus ultra on their studies, and Mirio kind of didn't.

He hasn't given up on getting his quirk back, not after Shinsou told him that Eri could use her quirk without pain, even if it took longer. And he already knew that he would be waiting a long time for her to get control over it anyway.

He was happy to wait. To be Eri's own personal hero, while he couldn't really be a real one. While his friends started their hero careers, he could watch and cheer them on.

It was easy to ignore that kind of depressing stuff when he was with Eri, but since Aizawa-sensei seemed to be doing less hero work, he wasn't around her as much. And he really missed that, to the point that he was a little too happy that Shinsou wasn't at school today.

Even though he knew Eri was upset about that.

It was hard to tell with Eri. At first, she was just so shy all the time that it was hard to tell if she was having a good time or a bad one, unless it was really good or really bad. He's noticed that she's a lot braver with showing her emotions when Shinsou's around, and usually a lot happier, but he definitely remembers how to tell when Eri is not really having a good time but too shy to talk about it.

It's hard to even say what it is about her that tips him off, maybe just his hero instincts, but he might be the only one in the room who isn't surprised when that frown gets even more upside down.

"You okay?" Mirio whispers, hoping that maybe he's caught her just in time, but he sees the wobbly lip and knows that he isn't.

Eri shakes her head, curling her arms up on her desk before she lays her head down, and like a cloudburst, the crying really starts. Mirio tries to pat her back, noticing that every other hero in the room has noticed now. Even though Aizawa is trying to carry on with the lecture, he's still looking over just to make sure that Eri's not getting too upset.

"What's wrong?" Mirio asks, stretching over his desk to practically lay his head on hers with her, because if she does work up the courage to talk about what's upsetting her, it's usually pretty quiet at first.

This time, it's not really quiet at all. "*Mo-o-om*," Eri whimpers, before another sob picks up, and she kicks one of her feet against her desk. "I wa-ant my *mo-om*."

Mirio, and probably Aizawa-sensei, are the only people in this room who know who Eri's really talking about, but everyone knows exactly how Eri feels right now. Everyone was the preschool crier at least once, just a little kid who was excited about fun games and making friends at school until the reality of being away from mom or dad hit when they least expected it, and hit harder than a little kid could really handle.

Aizawa-sensei's lecture is pretty much over now, because even if the upperclassmen pride themselves on being better behaved than the first years, no one could hear that familiar cry and do nothing to stop it.

"Eri!" Neji calls before she jumps out of her desk, running over to hug her as best as she could while Eri still laid on the desk. Sohma started asking if anyone had a cup so he could summon water into it, President Touja offered to use his quirk to predict what Aizawa-sensei was going to lecture on so that Aizawa-sensei could step out, and half of the class was telling Eri that it was

okay, trying to encourage her even if they didn't know her well enough to know what she really needed.

And Eri definitely didn't need Shizuo's offer. "I know an acupuncture tec--"

"Shizuo," Mirio interrupts, finding it hard to remind himself that a lot of hero students didn't know the full story on Eri's past. Even if he knows Shizuo *probably* would have thought better of saying that if they did, or at least feel horrible after the words came out, Mirio can't help but feel defensive. "If you hurt Eri right now, even for acupuncture, I really wouldn't be able to control myself."

Tamaki puts a hand on Mirio's shoulder, shaking his head a little to scold him, and it's a little deserved. But then, the biggest Preschool Crier of them all crouches down in front of Eri's desk, and pulls one of her hands away with the palm facing up, so he can show her a new magic trick. "Eri, can I show you something that'll help?"

Eri looks up, because she's always been just a little fascinated by Tamaki, even if they were both too shy to really connect before. The more time Mirio spends around Shinsou, he can definitely see why.

"If you write 'Mom' on your hand, like this," Tamaki says, writing on his own palm with a finger before he presses his hands together. "Then put your hands together, you can make a 'Mom Call.' Every mom can feel when their child makes a 'Mom Call,' and if you concentrate really hard, you can feel your mom answering it."

"Tamaki, that's really lame," Neji pouts, probably a little upset that Eri wasn't clinging to her like a surrogate mother. But Tamaki takes it to heart, like he does with almost every jab that Neji makes at him, and disconnects his Mom Call to lay his head on Eri's desk, hiding his face.

But Tamaki looks up when Mirio taps his shoulder, and looks a little surprised to see Eri pressing her hands together for her own Mom Call, still sniffing with her eyebrows pinched tight in concentration.

They definitely needed to help her out. "Signal boost!" Mirio calls, before he claps his hands together, and the rest of 3-A quickly follows suit. Tomoe starts humming like a monk, and the sound picks up and carries as more and more hero students start humming along with it, Shizuo's distinctive rasp being the loudest.

Even Neji starts humming, even though it comes out more like she's powering up for an ultimate combo move.

Eri's eyes open wide, staring at her hands as she pulls them away and ends the Mom Call. Tamaki smiles at her, definitely still a little embarrassed by how big his small gesture had gotten with everyone's help, before he asks, "Did your mom pick up?"

Eri nodded, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. But then she noticed that she had quite a bit more attention than she usually did, with every single student staring at her, and she shrank in on herself. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Eri!" Mirio reassured. "It's a hero's duty to help boost Mom Calls to make sure they go through! Even during class! Right, Aizawa-sensei?"

He's pretty sure if this wasn't for Eri's benefit, Aizawa-sensei would have tripled everyone's page count for the midterm essay, and not tell them until the day before it was due. But this *is* Eri, who

probably needs a little reassurance that she isn't in trouble for interrupting class. "It's a very sacred duty," Aizawa deadpans, nodding at Eri, and turning back to his lecture notes after she nods back.

Mirio expects Eri to get back to her notes, while he tries to get back to making his own, ignoring that little tug of disappointment when he realizes that the Pokemon plans he had been looking forward to today should probably be put off so Eri could make up for lost time with Shinsou. But before he can get too morose about it, he feels her tug on the sleeve of his uniform, looking up at him nervously. "Can I make Mirio calls too?"

Mirio might look like a tough guy, but no one could stand that kind of 'heart squeeze' moment, finding out that Eri might have been missing him as much as he had been missing her. "Only if I get to make Eri calls too!"

He holds out his hand to shake on the deal, both of them looking as serious as they possibly can before he crosses his eyes and makes her giggle.

It might be a little selfish of him, but he's definitely going to make an Eri call after school, and hope that Shinsou picks up too.

*

"You're doing very good, Eri," Momo says, smiling at her after she finishes up her science quiz about the different parts of leaves. Ocha smiles at her too and gives her a head pat before she lets Eri pick another sticker to put on her work, so Eri can look back and know she got all of the questions right.

Eri is trying to do a really good job at school, so she won't think about how much she misses Twenny. The heroes help her a lot, because they're really nice to her today. Momo talked to her a lot during homeroom, and Other Yama taught her a pretty song, and Mirio helped her take good notes for Twenny. She doesn't get to see a lot of heroes today, because she gets to stay with Zawa all day, but that kind of makes her miss Twenny even more.

Zawa did her horn trick, but he didn't really do it right. She still feels kind of stuffy, but she doesn't want to tell Zawa. She really hates that she had to let him do the horn trick at all, but he was really worried after she ran away from him, and she knew that it was really bad that she did that.

Eri looks at Momo, and kicks her legs out under the desk. She's not supposed to do that, but Momo doesn't get mad at her, because Momo is a really nice person. Momo just smiles at her, because she's a really good hero, so Eri knows it's okay to ask her a question that might be kind of weird. "Momo, are people veins supposed to look like leaf veins?"

Momo's lips look weird, like she's making them get smaller, before she smiles at Eri even more. "That's a very good question. We should go through our scientific method to figure it out."

Eri knows she smiles right when she hears that, because her cheeks feel a little sore and twitchy. She really likes when Momo plays the Science Method game, because it's what scientists do all the time, and Eri is getting really good at it. "My research book said plant veins carry water around, and Zawa said people need to drink water. But if people need to drink water, they gotta have some way to carry it around too, so maybe that's what people veins are supposed to do."

Ocha makes a weird noise, and tries to stop it by putting her hand around her mouth and stomping

her feet. “Eri, you’re such a cute little scientist!” Ocha says when she calms down, hugging Eri really tight even though it’s kinda hard for her to reach around Eri’s desk.

Momo looks like she’s going to laugh at Ocha, but she just gives Eri a You Got It Right smile. “That’s a very good observation. We have our research, our real-world observation, and our hypothesis is that they are similar, so now we need to test our hypothesis.”

Eri nods, and flips through her science book. “I can test it by looking at plant veins and people veins, and see if they look different.” Eri misses the picture the first time, but Ocha helps her by pointing out the leaf picture after she flipped past it.

Eri frowns, because a lot of the pictures in her science book were black and white, and that didn’t really help her with her experiment.

“I don’t know what color they are, but leaf veins are really straight and neat. People veins are bunchy and crooked.” Twenny’s veins were really bunchy, and they moved a lot before He took them away, just like he took Twenny’s skin. He made sure Eri looked at it, even though Twenny was telling her not to.

Ocha and Momo don’t say anything for a little bit, and Eri knows she said something weird again. She doesn’t like doing that, it makes her sad when the heroes think she’s weird. Maybe she shouldn’t know what people veins look like. Maybe that’s why Twenny didn’t want her to see his.

“Let’s see if I can find some pictures in color,” Momo says, pulling out her phone to search for stuff. Momo usually likes to show her stuff in person instead, but maybe since Eri said something weird, she doesn’t want to have to see her after school to show her plant veins.

“I think my veins are kind of straight!” Ocha says, putting her hand on the desk in front of Eri, and poking at the blue lines on her hand where her veins are. “Maybe I’m secretly a flower person! What kind of flower do you think I’d be, Eri?”

Eri wonders if the Viney Lady in the other English class makes flowers in her hair in the spring, and that makes her giggle thinking of Ocha with viney hair. She would look really weird. “I think you’d have a really big, really pretty flower, Ocha! A really big pink one!”

Ocha makes that scream kinda noise again and hugs her really tight. “Eri, you’re so sweet! I love that about you!”

Momo shows Eri her phone, and it has a lot of pictures of leaves on it. Some of the veins are white, and sometimes they’re green or purple, but they’re always the same color. They’re not blue and red and tiny white ones, like people veins are. “People veins are different colors, so they’re not the same,” Eri says, forgetting that she shouldn’t say weird things like that because the heroes don’t like it. “But they do the same thing, so that’s my conclusion!”

Momo smiles at her, even though Eri knows she messed up and didn’t finish the game right. “That is correct. Veins exist in plants, people, and animals to carry around nutrients and water, but because people and plants are so different, their veins have different shapes and colors. I have an idea for a project to demonstrate how they work, using food dye and flowers.”

Eri *loves* doing projects with Momo. They’re always super fun, and she learns a lot from them. “Can we do it after school, at my dorm? Twenny won’t be as scared of you if we’re doing stuff together! Sometimes he even gets really talk-y, but that might be because he was sick.”

Twenny was sick now, but it was different. Yama and Zawa tried to hide it from her, but even the

heroes knew about it, because they were talking about it this morning.

He wasn't acting sick like he did when he got really sick at the compound. He didn't really seem sick at all, even if he was acting more scared than he always is, and he had the Mondays on Monday. But Eri knew that something was wrong even before the heroes started talking about Twenny being sick, because Twenny was acting even weirder than when he was just scared.

Maybe if Momo came to the dorm with them, she could stop Zawa from taking Twenny away, just like Ocha stopped Twenny from doing the horn trick. Zawa might want to keep Eri from getting sick, just like He did, but Eri really doesn't want to make Twenny sad again. She doesn't want to see him cry now that they got rescued by the heroes.

She wants to make Twenny happy, like she gets to be now. She doesn't want him to be sad or scared or hurt anymore. She really wants to make him so happy that he gets full of overwhelming happiness, like Mirio said he wants for Eri.

Eri's head feels kind of tingly around her horn, and she tries to see if her hair is tickling her, but it's not. Her horn just grew again, and now it was even bigger than too big, and it was getting those ridgy things that were kind of sharp.

Twenny told her that if she gets hurt, her horn grows, but she still wasn't hurt at all. Maybe Twenny was wrong about that, but that wouldn't make sense, because Twenny was never wrong, except about other people.

Zawa puts his hand on Eri's head, and he must have been doing his really sneaky quiet walk because she didn't even know he was there. "Are you alright, Eri?"

Eri nods, putting her hands in her lap. She wants her horn to stop growing, because it's scaring Zawa, and it looks like it's scaring Momo too. Her horn scares a lot of heroes, because it's so bad.

"We were learning about veins," Momo says, and she has her serious Vice President face on when she looks up at Zawa, instead of her Eri Did A Great Job smile face. "Whether plant veins and human ones looked similar. And if Shinsou would like to do a project with us."

Zawa nods at her, like Momo was talking with her hands like Yama does sometimes, and pats Eri's head. He leaves his hand there for a while before he walks back to his desk, and he seems kinda sad, but Zawa kinda seemed sad all day today.

Maybe Zawa didn't like that Twenny and Yama stayed home today, because he missed them. Eri really hopes that Zawa missed Twenny, because maybe he wouldn't take Twenny away then. Eri doesn't know where Zawa would even take him to, because the dorms all have people already living there, and Zawa promised that he wouldn't take Twenny to the bad place, because he's a hero.

When school is finally over, Eri has a whole lot of stickers on her workbook, and she's really happy to go back to the dorm so Twenny can do her horn trick. She won't even be bad or whiney about it, because if she's really good, then maybe Zawa will let Twenny stay so he can do the horn trick all the time.

But Zawa is walking really slow, even when Eri tries to walk faster than him. Eri can't really walk a whole lot faster, because she has to hold Zawa's hand so it doesn't turn into icicles, and Zawa should probably wear some cute cat mittens like Eri has so they don't.

Eri has to try really hard to be good when Zawa stops outside their adult dorm, but she's really

close to getting to see Twenny again, and she really doesn't want to stop, even if it's to talk to Zawa.

"Eri," Zawa says in a kind of weird voice, and he bends down really far so he's kinda short like she is. Twenny does that a lot when he talks about serious stuff, but Zawa almost never talks about serious stuff with her anymore. "When you were talking about people veins, were you talking about Shinsou?"

Eri was right about knowing what people veins look like. Zawa sounds kind of mad that she does. She nods, because she doesn't want to say something else that's weird and bad, and make Zawa more upset about it.

"It's okay," Zawa says, and he still doesn't sound like he's supposed to, but he hugs her and that makes her feel a little less scared that he's mad, because mad people don't hug. "I'm sorry that you had to see that."

Eri hugs Zawa back really tight, even though it's kind of hard to because he's a lot bigger than her. But he's really sad that she saw Twenny's hand get taken away, and that's all her quirk's fault.

Her quirk wasn't working, no matter what He did, and He was really getting mad about it. He told Hari to get Twenny, and Eri tried really hard to make her quirk work, because she was really scared that he was going to hurt Twenny, or even make her make him go away, just like He said she did to people before her mom got tired of it.

Twenny looked like he really wanted to help Eri stop crying when he got there, but he wasn't allowed to when people were watching, and He told him to hold out his hand. Then He took off his glove and held Twenny's arm, and started taking Twenny's hand away.

Twenny tried to stop him, and he was crying and screaming a lot. Twenny was telling Eri not to look, and He was telling her to look at what she was doing to Twenny. It made the bad feeling inside Eri get so big that her quirk hurt the most it ever had.

Eri doesn't remember what happened after that, but Twenny was a weird kind of away for a long time. Sometimes, when he's away, he still moves around and does stuff, but he doesn't do a lot, and he doesn't talk. It was really lonely, but then Twenny came back, and hugged her really tight.

Zawa hugs her really tight again, before he looks at her, and he looks really serious again. "Was it Shinsou's hand?"

Eri nods, and she's glad that Zawa already kind of knew that, so she doesn't have to tell him what happened. She doesn't want Zawa to know that Twenny got so hurt because of her, but she really wants to ask him a different question. "Zawa, after I fix Mirio, can you take my quirk away?"

Zawa looks at her really sad, and she already knows that he can't, even if she really wants him to. Other Yama looked at her really sad too, because no one can take bad quirks away. "I know that it's difficult right now, but your quirk will likely erupt soon. After that, we should have more time before it begins again."

Eri didn't want it to ever begin again, and she really hopes that Twenny will help her fix Mirio's quirk this time, so it'll be longer before it starts bothering her again. Even if Twenny doesn't want to, and even if it might make him a little sad, maybe if she knew how sad she was, he would do it for her.

But Eri doesn't want Twenny to know she's sad right now, because he might be sad that he didn't

get to go to school, or scared about being sick, so she tries to smile really big when they walk in the door.

Twenny and Yama are folding laundry, even though that's kind of Eri's job, but Eri isn't mad. When she sees Twenny, she remembers how much she missed him all day, and she runs up to hug him really tight so he knows. "Twenny! Are you done with your project? Can you go to school tomorrow?"

Twenny smiles at her kind of sad, and she already knows that he can't, and she's a little mad about that, but he pulls her really close so he can look at her face. "I can't, but I'm working hard on it. Horn trick."

Eri sighs, even though she didn't want to be mad about that, because even if Twenny was sick, she had a lot of stories to tell him about school, and she wanted to tell him about them instead of getting all snotty. But she tells him it's okay, and she feels better after that, and she feels like a lot more snot came out because Zawa didn't make her horn do a thunky sound.

Even after Eri runs out of stories to tell him, and even when Yama asks if she wants to help him fold the socks, she doesn't let go of Twenny even a little bit.

Even if Twenny got her the most, worst, grossest sick in the whole wide world, she doesn't want to be away from him ever, ever, ever, ever, *ever* again.

*

Hizashi tried to pull him out of the office several times, but Aizawa had work to do.

And several good reasons to do it.

He had gotten halfway through the Slovenian database when one of his informants finally got back to him, and he couldn't help the rising apprehension when he saw which one it was. Shiori was a valuable asset to have, and she hadn't failed him yet, but she always exacted a heavier price than most for her services.

He found himself a bit relieved when all she had sent him was the word 'Analog,' meaning that she wasn't able to offer those services anyway without more information.

None of his informants could do anything with what little they had. They knew that the Nomu Organization used numbers as brands, that their members were scarred in unique ways, and they had a picture of the man who was in charge of it but didn't even know his name.

And Shinsou wouldn't give him that.

He can only hope that Naomasa will be able to force Chisaki to slip, for him to admit something meaningful even if he has to make a promise for Chisaki to see Shinsou again. A promise that Aizawa will *ensure* is empty.

There's a risk that this will happen again. That Chisaki will continue to play The Commission, and they will continue to fall for it. Aizawa knew that he had plenty of intel to drag it out, he may even know more than Shinsou did. He knew how to contact them for business transactions, how deeply tied they were to the League of Villains, and likely knew a few of their weaknesses that he would

have used to keep an edge over them.

In a perfect world, they would be able to get that information from Chisaki, using means that the mobster deserved to suffer. Aizawa wouldn't mind at all if Mind Slice left Chisaki in a vegetative state or worse, but the use of intrusive mental quirks for interrogation was heavily restricted. Chisaki was an adult who was determined to have the full capacity to make his own decisions, and would be required to give consent, which rendered interrogation quirks *almost* useless.

Except for cases like Shinsou, a minor legally under the care of The Commission. A minor whose consent could be given by the very same government agency that would request it.

Aizawa needed to close this investigation before it came to that. He needed to make progress, and he *needed* Shinsou to work with him on that.

But now he couldn't even be in the same room with Shinsou. Even with Eri clinging onto the teenager, even if he never dropped into that same terror that he had this morning, Aizawa noticed it. Noticed that Shinsou was watching him with apprehension, that he held his breath when Aizawa looked in his direction. It wasn't clear, but it was there all the same.

Shinsou was terrified that Aizawa would continue to pressure him for information, which only made it easier for Aizawa to doubt that he even could. With how fruitless it was proving to be, with how moody and depressed Eri had been, with how it was affecting Shinsou, Aizawa regretted that he had attempted it at all.

Shinsou deserved some peace before it was ripped away again, and if sequestering himself in the office to work every other possible angle gave that to the kid, Aizawa would do it.

But he would probably make much greater progress if a certain loudmouth would stop pestering him. "So, now that the kids are gone for a couple hou-"

"*What?*" Aizawa demanded, swiveling around to face his husband, who had better just be trying to get a rise out of him. It's working incredibly well, and that's why he's not surprised to see Hizashi raise his hands to try to calm him down, wincing as he does.

"They're playing the Pokemon game with the Big Three, it's fine," Hizashi insisted, catching what Aizawa was about to say next. "Togata knows the drill, if Eri's quirk starts acting up, he'll call you. He said he'll keep them close to the dorm, just in case."

That still wasn't exactly what Aizawa wanted to hear, but neither was what Hizashi said next.

"So, we might be raising a little mafia princess?"

Chapter End Notes

Class 1-A Chat Usernames:

Ashi - Ashido Mina

Genesis - Yaoyorozu Momo

Sparky Boiii - Kaminari Denki

Crimson Boiii - Kirishima Eijirou

#1 Eri Enthusiast - Uraraka Ochako

Shitsou's Reaper - Bakugo Katsuki
Ya Good Boiii - Sero Hanta
InvisiCutie - Hakagure Tooru
Slappy Tail Boiii - Ojira Masharao
Soba Boiii - Todoroki Shoto
Pastry Boiii - Aoyama Yuga
Mysterieux Boiii - Shinsou Hitoshi (27)
Sweet Boiii - Sato Rikido
Palpitation Projector - Jirou Kyouka
Quiet Boiii - Shoji Mezo
Pure Boiii - Koda Koji
Mighty Boiii - Midoriya Izuku
Provost Piston - Iida Tenya
Crow Boiii - Tokoyami Fumikage

Pokey Man

Chapter Summary

27 gains a prize and a realization while playing Pokemon Go with the Big Three, and afterwards Mirio comes to a startling realization himself. Unfortunately, the bough breaks at last.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None!

“I really hope we can find a Kangkashan,” Mirio says, a joke that Tamaki understands, covering his mouth to hide a laugh when he hears it.

27 only has an idea what joke it is, and he can’t bring himself to feel insulted by it. Even if he’s earning quite a few odd looks, Eri doesn’t seem to notice, far too comfortable inside his hoodie. It’s easier for her to play the game with him like this anyway, his arms supporting her weight as he holds the phone, her head the only part of her that has to face the cold wind. He’s had to jerk his head out of the way a few times to avoid her horn smacking him in the face, but he can’t say that he would put her down even if she did hit him.

He just really hopes he hasn’t ruined her chances of being adopted by Yamada and his owner.

He didn’t mean to tell Yamada, but he had gotten too comfortable with the hero. He was caught off guard, and he shouldn’t have been, and he’s lucky that Yamada didn’t take advantage of that in a far worse way. He shouldn’t have answered, even if Yamada seemed nervous about asking. He shouldn’t have felt like telling him would reassure him, and he shouldn’t have felt like he needed to reassure him. He should have recognized this game.

Yamada kept glancing between him and the washing machine, a few times his hand would raise to sign, before he just scratched the back of his head. Finally, he sighed, a bit louder than usual, before he finally asked. ‘Are you really okay with seeing Chisaki?’

27 had wavered, knowing that Yamada wanted to know more than just a ‘Yes.’ He wanted 27’s reason, proof that he would be okay, and 27 had plenty of reasons. To kill the part of him that was Dog, to take vengeance for Eri, to stop Chisaki from giving them information about The Miasma. And only one of those reasons was safe to disclose. ‘Yes. I want to. For Eri.’

He used a name-sign for Eri that he was still unsure about, and Yamada looked like he was going to laugh when he recognized the sign for her name. ‘She is a little bossy.’

‘No. Boss,’ 27 corrected. He used the sign for female boss, not the descriptive sign for bossy. He

wouldn't mis-sign on something that easy. 'Not bossy.'

Yamada just repeated 'Boss' with a raised eyebrow, still confused, and a sudden irritation made 27 slip.

'Boss of 8 by birth. Real heir. Trash bird pretender.'

And Yamada didn't know that. His eyes went wide, mouth dropping open, before his signs came quicker than usual. 'Eri is Boss. Boss of. Eri family name.'

'I don't know,' 27 lied, realizing too late what he had done.

They didn't know how or why Eri had come to be under Chisaki's control before 27 told them. They had no idea that Eri had yakuza ties in her blood, and 27 should have realized how lucky she was that they hadn't found out.

His owner and Yamada were heroes, and given how uncomfortable his owner was around 27, they might be uncomfortable adopting Eri if they saw that she was tied to the criminal underworld like that.

27 knew that she would never take advantage of her birthright. The yakuza way would be extinct before she could, and even if it wasn't, the 8 Precepts of Death wasn't the faction that would spark a revival. He just imagined it would be funny if she did. He could already see the legions of kobuns kneeling before her with apples and cat stickers and anything else she could desire, men and women of violence groveling towards her fascination with cute things.

And it was an easier way to try to explain what Eri was to him. She technically was his Boss, he hadn't officially severed his ties to the 8 Precepts, to un-take the Sakazuki oath that he swore. She was his Boss, and he was sworn to protect her for that.

That word fit as well as the name sign. It was right, but it didn't feel right. It felt like it encompassed too little of this overwhelming emotion, the steadiness that she gave him, the purpose. The warmth.

He didn't have a name for it, and wondered if one even existed.

"Aw, just a Pidgey," Mirio says, and the phone in 27's hand vibrates as the tiny bird appears on his screen. He taps on it and enters the screen to capture it, lifting the phone higher so Eri can take her turn to throw the magic ball at it. "Oh right, you guys are still kinda low level, so you still need to catch Pidgey's and Zubats."

"We gotta catch them all, Mirio!" Eri cheers, catching the bird with the second to last ball in their stock. They would have to find another point to restock soon, or return to the lucky one that Mirio showed them.

"Yeah Mirio! We have to catch them all! All of them! Don'tcha know how to play? You play this game all the time, and you don't even know how to play, do you?" Nejire rambled, seeming to be a bit bored aside from taunting Mirio and Tamaki, since she didn't seem to be using her phone to play the game.

"I know! But you can only have so many Pidgeots before you stop needing them," Mirio argued, staring at the phone while Eri named the new bird 'Pipi,' forgetting that they already had 25 birds named the same thing. "Did I show you guys how to evolve your pokemon? You just tap this button to turn them into candy-"

27 shook his head, horrified by the idea. He knew that this was a game, these little monsters weren't real, but every single one of them were given a name by Eri. To un-make them after that, for something as useless as candy, was unthinkable.

Mirio scratched the side of his head, pressing his lips together. "I guess that is kind of mean, isn't it?"

"It's okay, Mirio," Eri said, curling her arm back inside the hoodie. "Twenny wants to keep all the monsters, so we can just play like that instead!"

Another monster popped up on the screen as they took another step, and 27 found himself a bit too interested in it again. It was purple, with a wide toothy grin. It was just *purple*, that didn't mean anything, he shouldn't be reckless, especially when they only had two capturing balls. It was *stupid*.

But he wanted it.

"Ah! A Grengar!" Mirio said, once again pointing out the official name of a monster as soon as it popped up, possibly for their benefit. "They're pretty cool. They're a ghost type who can possess other pokemon. Kinda spooky, right?"

Possession. That wasn't terribly different from what his quirk could do.

It was stupid. *It was stupid*. He didn't want it, he shouldn't want it, this was just a game that he played for Eri's sake. He didn't really care about it. This was just a monster that would live in the phone afterwards, a thing that he would count and he had plenty of things to count. He had so many other things to worry about. He shouldn't care about this monster at all.

He tapped on it.

The first ball went just a little too far to the side, and the monster taunted him for it. But that only made him want it even more. He wouldn't lose like this, he wouldn't accept a loss from this creature.

The last ball. The last capturing ball that they had. He shouldn't waste it, he shouldn't use it at all. He should let Eri pick the monster that they used the last one on, let her use it.

It missed.

It bounced off the monster and again 27 was taunted.

27 narrowed his eyes, sure that if there was a way for him to really battle this monster, he would *win*. He would be the one to possess it.

"Yeah, he might be a little too high-level for you guys," Mirio commented, noticing the monster still taunting him. "We can go back to the Pokestop at the 3-D dorm-"

27 shook his head, refusing to give in so easily. Mirio had to know a way to beat this monster, there had to be a way for him to win. When Mirio looked at him, head tilting in confusion, 27 pointed from the monster to himself to explain his reasoning.

Mirio's lips again twisted in an odd way before he covered his mouth, then turned to look behind him. "Tamaki! We need to take down this Grengar!"

Tamaki approached, then shook his head when he saw the screen. "It's useless. Even with

pokeballs, it's an 80 level, and you're probably 20 at most-"

"Tamaki," Mirio interrupted, staring at his fellow hero with fierce determination. "We have to. There has to be a way."

Tamaki turned his head to the side, before he pulled his own phone up, opening and closing the game in quick succession. "If this is a unique spawn, it should come up on my phone, then we can trade or battle for it after linking our accounts as friends."

Tamaki was right. He almost closed the game, but when Mirio gasped in alarm, he stopped and tapped on the monster. It was a quick battle, using only one capturing ball that looked different from the ones that he and Eri had, and didn't suffer a single taunt.

Tamaki looked up to 27, and 27 realized that he had nothing to trade for it. This was another taunt, another humiliating loss, and he shouldn't let it hurt. It was just a *purple monster*, it didn't really mean anything to him. "Oh, to send me a friend request, you just tap this."

27 watched as Eri followed the instructions, finding himself a little hopeful that she could influence Tamaki to just hand over the monster. He shouldn't care. He shouldn't *care*. It was stupid, and it was stupid how much he *wanted it*.

And Tamaki just gave it to him.

Eri cooed as the monster popped out of the inbox in a puff of purple smoke, pulling up the screen that asked for its name. "Twenny says 'Thank you, Tama! I like being friends with you!'"

27 tightened his arm around Eri's legs reflexively, wishing that she hadn't started this habit of speaking for him, especially when she was taking so many liberties. They weren't friends, Tamaki had probably only given the monster to him because Mirio asked him to. He was probably still holding a grudge against 27 for threatening Mirio when he was still under the impression that Mirio would use Eri's quirk selfishly.

But, he was beginning to trust that Mirio wouldn't. Whether it was the hope that Eri's quirk would be more effective if it was born out of happiness, or if he truly cared about Eri that much, he could accept that Mirio might not be a threat to Eri.

Tamaki was still staring at his phone, hunched and unresponsive to Eri's words. He probably wouldn't even care about 27's, but he made the effort to speak them anyway, closing his eyes and pretending that they were meant for Eri, to thank her for speaking for him. "T-thanks."

He saw Tamaki's head rise out of the corner of his eye, but refused to look up from watching Eri name the monster 'Grenny.'

Nejire wailed in frustration, shoving Tamaki aside to pout at 27. "Shinsou! Talk to me instead! Talk to Big Sis Neji-chan! I'm cooler, I'm way cooler, I'm SUPER WAY COOLER than Tamaki!"

"Neji," Mirio reprimanded, putting a hand on her head in an effort to push her backwards, but she just dug her heels in and whined, still pouting. "You don't even have any pokemon to give Shinsou, not even a Pidgey!"

"Pokemon are lame!" Nejire whined, turning away with a huff and crossed arms. "Shinsou likes me better, you know! I know he likes me."

He could blame it on that sniff that he heard, since she was standing behind him and out of sight. It

was training, it was habit. It was nothing.

She moved her head back and forth under his hand where it was barely touching the top of her head. “See! See! Shinsou *likes me* !”

“Because you’re not really being the ‘sexy’ kind of cute,” Tamaki muttered, though his provocation was made hollow as he positioned himself behind Mirio, creating a barrier to hide behind. “You’re throwing a fit like a kid-”

“*Ta. Ma. Ki,*” Nejire growled, ignoring the light pats that 27 was trying to use to get her to calm down. “TAKE IT BACK!”

Nejire charged after Tamaki, who bolted as soon as Mirio stepped to the side. As they took off across the campus, quirks coming into play when Tamaki sprouted wings and Nejire tried to shoot him down from the sky, Mirio laughed. “Yep, that’s the Big Two for ya. Let’s get some pokeballs while they work things out.”

27 looked down at the phone, finding himself hating how he couldn’t have both the game and the voice app open rather than the relief he first had, before he handed it off to Eri so that he could sign. ‘*Big 3.*’

Mirio cocked his head to the side, just like 27 imagined that he would. “Three? The Class 3-D dorms?”

“Big Three!” Eri corrects, luckily having learned that sign from Yamada. “You said Big Two, but you’re all the Big Three!”

Mirio smiles, again hiding that wince. “I guess I did! Thanks for correcting me, Shinsou.”

He waits until Mirio’s back is turned to say what he feels more honestly, to see if it feels right. And it does, even if it terrifies him, even if a pit opens in his stomach when he realizes how well it fits Mirio.

‘*Hero.*’

*

Mirio might be a big guy, maybe even a tough one, but he’s not the kind of guy to be ashamed of finding something cute, or being open about it. He’s made quite a name for himself at the plushie shop, especially after he found a cat plushie that was so soft it *melted* in his hands, with giant eyes and a *tiny* little tongue sticking out of its mouth. He couldn’t hold himself back, nearly brought to tears with how *cute* it was.

That’s why he’s kind of having a problem with Shinsou right now.

Because Shinsou is kind of adorable.

Tamaki has teased him plenty of times for treating the underclassmen like little kids, but it’s hard not to when they’re just so *tiny* . And *scrawny* . And so enthusiastic, like little kids running around a playground with wide eyes full of hope, full of promise. Sometimes he looks at them and wants to ask what they want to be when they grow up, expecting at least one of them to say they want to be a fire truck.

They’re tiny and cute, and maybe he should be a little more used to that after spending so much time with Eri, who is the tiniest and cutest person in the entire world, but he’s *not*. At first, he

thought it was just because Eri is hanging out in Shinsou's hoodie like the most adorable kangaroo baby ever, but it's *not*.

Shinsou is just kind of adorable all on his own.

He doesn't want to turn his pokemon into candies to evolve them, because it's mean. He keeps every single one he catches, just to keep them. His eyes got so big when he saw the Grengar, and it kind of made him look like a cat ready to pounce. And he wanted it *because it looked like him* .

It's adorable. It's super adorable.

And it's kind of sad.

Aizawa-sensei didn't tell him anything about the case that caused Shinsou to become a ward, but Mirio knows it's not related to the 8 Precepts of Death. So, like anyone would, Mirio tried to do his own research to find out, and it didn't take long for him to find some answers.

Just by googling Shinsou's name, he found the missing child fliers, and the newspaper articles. Shinsou went missing when he was 4 years old. A criminal likely kidnapped him, taking him away from a normal childhood at such a young age, and put things into motion for Shinsou to wind up at the 8 Precepts of Death.

It doesn't really matter if Mirio knows what happened between the kidnapping and the 8 Precepts, because he knows one thing for certain - Shinsou never got to have a normal childhood. He never got to play games like this, he never got to dream of becoming a hero, or a fire truck. He never got to be an adorable kid.

And Mirio is more than happy to help him make up for lost time.

"Choco milk!" Mirio cheers, quietly hoping that this vending machine was still a little buggy, and would drop two milk cartons if the button for it was pressed twice. The tell-tale thud tells him he's right, and he collects his prizes before turning to Eri. "Do you want to press the button, or am I Eri's super terrific official button pusher?"

Eri tucks her chin deeper into Shinsou's hoodie, thinking before she reaches out her hand to make her own selection. Shinsou walks her closer, and has to bend his knees for her to pick a lychee soda, which she takes from him with a little smile, careful not to spill any on Shinsou's shirt.

"Which one do you want, Shinsou?" Mirio asks, noticing that Shinsou seemed a little surprised at the offer. He also noticed the hesitation, the small frown when he looked at his choices, which might seem like too many to really consider. A little decision too important to make. "There's chocolate milk, melon milk, banana milk, normal milk, and sodas-"

Shinsou touched the button for chocolate milk, but didn't press hard enough to actually select it, still seeming a little hesitant when he glanced at Mirio. Mirio just smiled, perfectly comfortable with being a button pusher or decision maker, as long as he had a little input.

Eri looked up at the sky, which was beginning to glow with orange and red hues with the sunset, then turned to look at Shinsou. "Twenny, I like being outside. We get to be outside a lot here."

Shinsou's eyes widened again before he reached for his phone, only unlocking the screen before he put it back in his pocket. "We've been outside for a while," he muttered, seeming a little concerned about that.

Mirio had lost track of time on the Pokemon hunt, but they probably should get back to the dorm.

Even if Eri seemed to be doing alright, her horn probably wouldn't just get bigger the next time she felt an 'overwhelming emotion,' and Aizawa-sensei would need to be there as soon as it happened. "We can head back to the dorm if you guys want! It is getting a little late."

Shinsou signed something, and Mirio recognized the 'one,' before he started reaching for his phone again. Before Mirio could know what Shinsou wanted to say, Midoriya started calling for him, jogging past Nejire and Tamaki with just a wave.

"Sempai, Shinsou-"

"Izuku!" Eri called, kicking to be released from her little pouch, which Shinsou helped her with after taking the soda out of her hand. As soon as she was down, she ran up to Midoriya, who was already crouched down for her. "Izuku, we caught a LOT of monsters! I named some of them after you on Twenny's phone! Do you wanna see?"

"Yeah, I really would, Eri!" Midoriya said, pulling away from the hug to pat Eri's head. "But, I was hoping to talk to Shinsou first, if that's okay." Midoriya looked at Shinsou, signing something that caused Shinsou to frown.

"Eri," Shinsou called, holding Eri's drink out to her while she stared curiously, likely picking up on Shinsou's concern. "Midoriya wants to tell me a secret."

Eri glanced at Mirio, then back at Midoriya before she turned back to Shinsou. "A boy secret?" Shinsou nodded, and Eri sighed before she pouted at Shinsou. "Okay, but I really want you to be friends with Ashi or Momo so you don't have boy secrets!"

"I'm working on it," Shinsou promised with a small smile, before Eri turned away and it fell from his face.

Midoriya waited for Eri to run into Nejire's waiting arms, glancing between Shinsou and Mirio, which made him wonder if he should be included in the 'boy secret' after all, even if he was a little too interested to offer to leave. "Shinsou, are you really going to see Chisaki?"

Mirio couldn't believe what he was hearing, laughing under his breath. "Is this some crazy rumor that's going around? Jeez, you first years are..."

Shinsou nodded.

Mirio felt the ground tilt from under him.

No. The word was screaming inside of him. He wouldn't believe it, he wouldn't believe that. They all fought so hard to save Eri and Shinsou from Chisaki, they gave so much to rescue them from that monster's shadow. They were *safe*, there was no way. He lost his *quirk* to save them. He watched Chisaki absorb Shinsou into his body and did *nothing*, but he couldn't do nothing again.

"For the investi-igation. Eri do-oesn't know."

Mirio knotted his hands into fists, watching the horror spread on Midoriya's face, more horrified to see Shinsou's still blank as he typed.

"It's fi-ine."

"It's not," Mirio said, shaking his head. "Shinsou, that's not 'fine' at all!"

Shinsou had been suffering under that dark cloud all day, while Mirio never knew about it. Never

suspected it. Shinsou had probably been putting on a brave face for Eri's sake, but even Mirio had been fooled by it. Shinsou was probably fooling everyone, even Mic-sensei and Aizawa-sensei.

"Isn't there something that Aizawa-sensei can do?" Midoriya asks, pleading for Shinsou to tell him that this didn't have to happen. "Kacchan was wrong, wasn't he? Aizawa-sensei wouldn't let that happen!"

"I won't," Mirio vows, even if he knows it's fruitless. There's nothing he can do, there's nothing that he can do now, but he *can't* let this happen. He can't let Shinsou suffer again for someone else's sake. "I won't let that happen!"

"*I wa-ant to. It's fi-ine.*" Shinsou is holding his phone too tightly, still not meeting their eyes. Mirio knows he's lying, knows that the brave face is beginning to crack. "*I wa-ant to see Chi-isaki.*"

"Mirio!" Tamaki yelled, and Mirio looked.

Eri.

*

27 can hear Mirio talking on the phone, he watches the heroes crowd around Eri, keeping their distance. They don't realize how much that still hurts her, the green wisps of her quirk swirling higher, almost reaching out for them subconsciously.

He wants to reach out to her, to pick her up from her scrapped knee, to take away that small pain that's too familiar for her. It might be right on top of one of her scars, it might be a wound too familiar that called up her quirk. But he can't, he can only be relieved that she isn't restrained. She isn't in The Chair, she won't be harvested, she just needs her quirk to be quieted.

"Twenny," Eri calls, pleading with him with her wide, red eyes. He knows what she wants from him.

He doesn't want to. He won't. He *won't*.

Mirio keeps talking, his owner should have been here. He should get here faster than this, he shouldn't let Eri keep suffering.

The wisps get higher, and the heroes back away, only causing them to grow higher. She's reaching for something, for someone, something to take this pain away from her.

He could. He could, but he won't, he won't add another scar. He won't give her a deeper wound, burrow deeper into her mind. It's abuse. It's abuse, he's abused her, he won't do it again.

He *won't*.

"*Twenny!*" Eri screams, the wisps turning into a blaze, and he knows it's hurting her. She's in pain.

And he won't let her suffer.

He remembers how to make the push, how to reach out and pull the string without seeing it. He pulls it, and it's *wrong*.

She's pushing back, the string is frayed, he can barely hold it and he can't possibly command her with it. He holds onto the control as tightly as he can, and he feels like the string has been plucked, vibrating inside his mind, trying to break free.

It *hurts*. His head is throbbing, and he has to force his eyes open to make sure that she's under, that even if he can't quiet her quirk, he can stop her from forcing it higher. He sees her eyes turned white and looks away, feels sick enough to vomit.

He did it, even if he knew better. The control feels wrong because he knows it's wrong, because he doesn't want to do this. Because she might have begun to heal before he forced his way into her mind again. Before he tore open another scar.

He holds the control, ignoring the pain. Ignoring the trickle of blood running down his nose, only barely registers that it shouldn't be happening. He hasn't used his quirk intentionally in over a month, and that slip didn't feel this wrong, his quirk feels *wrong*. It feels weak, it feels shaky, it shouldn't feel like this.

He feels like something pops inside his head, like the string might have broken but it feels more like it disappeared completely. It falls into a void.

27 falls with it.

*

Hizashi shouldn't have let this happen.

"Eri, it's okay," Togata reassures again, gently trying to move Shinsou's unconscious body onto his bed from where he had been carrying the teenager on his back. "Shinsou is going to be okay, he just needs to rest for a while."

Aizawa feels her shaking in his arms, and knows it isn't solely from the backlash of erasing her quirk. Her forehead was warm against his palm when he checked it, but she wasn't in that same feverish coma that she had been after the raid on the 8 Precepts. She was awake, alert, and terrified as she watched Shinsou fall forward before he was caught by Togata.

Shinsou was having the reaction that Eri should have, after Aizawa had erased his quirk. It was a split-second decision, noticing the blood on Shinsou's lip, the strain apparent in the way that he was shaking, his skin too pale, eyes too tight. Shinsou was trying to contain Eri's quirk when Aizawa wasn't there, just like Aizawa said he was allowed to. He might have even acted recklessly *because* Aizawa allowed him to, and he took that as an order.

Recovery Girl wasn't a quirk specialist. There wasn't anything that any of them could do now but let Shinsou rest, and hope that he recovered quickly.

Eri tugs on his shirt to be let down, and though her legs are still shaky, she pulls herself onto Shinsou's bed, hands hovering over his arm but unwilling to touch. He recognizes it immediately, placing a hand on her head to reassure her. "It's fine. If you want to rest with Shinsou."

Eri nods her head, laying down and curling herself tightly into his open side, his arm a pillow that he didn't consciously make for her, but she takes all the same. Her hands fist in Shinsou's hoodie,

and Aizawa knows that there's little he can do to quiet the sobs that will no doubt come.

He can tell by Togata's grim stare that he's needed elsewhere besides.

Togata closes the door after he follows Aizawa out of the room, and waits until they're in the living room before he speaks. "Shinsou is meeting Chisaki."

Aizawa sighs, doubting that Shinsou had been the one to tell Togata that. Bakugo had said that no one else knew, but he must have decided not to keep that information to himself. He could only hope that Bakugo had only told Togata for whatever reason, and that this information could stop leaking any further. "It's related to the investigation, and *no one* is supposed to know about that."

"Look," Hizashi cuts in, likely seeing something concerning on Togata's face, while Aizawa kept his back turned just so he wouldn't. "There's not a lot we can do when it's coming from The Commission of Wardship Affairs. I really wish there was, but there's not."

"Homicide," Togata says, biting out a bitter and airy laugh. "It's not really heroic, but Shinsou couldn't meet with Chisaki if Chisaki was dead."

Aizawa turns around to face his student, to take in the fact that Togata absolutely *means it*, and sighs. "Shinsou has the ability to stop this, and he hasn't. He's agreed to it."

"He's terrified," Togata says, his own arms shaking, though not out of terror, his eyes too wide, too strained. "He's supposed to be safe."

"I know," Hizashi says, putting a hand on Togata's shoulder, trying to reassure him even if this situation is beyond him. Beyond any of them. "Shinsou is the only one who can stop it, and he won't. He wants to do it for Eri." Togata's posture stiffens, likely feeling the same small insult that Aizawa had felt. They had already faced Chisaki for Eri's sake, Shinsou had no reason to do it again, but Aizawa knew that it was deeper than that. "It's just supposed to be a formal apology from Chisaki. 15 minutes, and then Shinsou gets to leave. And if we can't stop it from happening, we need to focus on being there for Shinsou after that."

Togata gritted his teeth, the tension slowly beginning to fall when he turned to the side.

"Comforting victims of trauma." It was becoming Lemillion's specialty, and though it began in such a bitter way, Aizawa had no doubt that it would serve him well after he regained his quirk. "I'll try to focus on that, then."

Hizashi guided Togata out, trying to get him to agree to using the chat to find out what food Shinsou liked to eat, as he hadn't gotten a straight answer and was insistent on making it Friday night.

Aizawa remained frozen.

There wasn't a single thing he could do to stop this, and too many of his students were feeling the same bitter hopelessness that he felt. He wished that Hizashi had taken away Shinsou's phone, but he knows that's entirely selfish of him.

Too many of his students were beginning to doubt him, because this was one horror that he couldn't stop. He couldn't erase it, couldn't fight it. Couldn't protect anyone from the slow machinations that The Commission had put into place.

Hizashi knew the look in his eye before he had to say anything, leaning his arm against his, carefully turning his expression away to hide the irritation. "I already cancelled my patrol, so if you want to look into Eri's parents, it's fine."

Aizawa nodded, winding an arm around his husband's back as a small concession, an apology that he didn't want to speak aloud. He wanted distance, he wanted progress, and he couldn't find progress with Shinsou's case. He wanted something to prove that he wasn't as useless as he felt, and his own patrols weren't an option for him.

"But! You need to use a sick day and stay home with Shinsou tomorrow," Hizashi stipulated with a raised finger, and Aizawa fought the urge to draw away from it.

"Hizashi-"

"Nope! You have all that time built up, and Principal Nezu doubled it to prove a point! *You* need to stay home with the kiddos that you keep bringing home!" Hizashi looked at him and sighed, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "Look, I know the Guilty Gus look pretty well by now, but avoiding Shinsou isn't going to help anything. You need to patch things up before Friday, and before Eri notices, because you know she will. She's a smart little cookie, and she's got enough to deal with."

Aizawa nodded, and though he knew that isolating Shinsou to the dorm tomorrow might offer an opportunity to get information about the Nomu Organization, he knew he wouldn't take it. If Shinsou wanted to face Chisaki on behalf of his 'Boss,' then he already had two reasons too many not to talk.

In the meantime, Aizawa could at least make progress in the investigation into Eri's birth parents.

Anger Management

Chapter Summary

The after-effects of Eri's quirk eruption are difficult for Yamada and 27 to deal with, but when Yamada is able to calm Eri down, 27 doesn't find relief.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Depressive episode

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri's quirk erupted and was controlled by Shinsou until Aizawa erased both of their quirks, and both were affected physically by that erasure. Shinsou had described that Eri was emotionally volatile after her quirk erupted when he explained how it worked to Aizawa. Shinsou is supposed to meet with Chisaki, as Chisaki promised to give information about The Miasma if he is given the chance to 'formally apologize' to Shinsou, and Shinsou has agreed to it to make sure that Chisaki won't. Mirio suggested killing Chisaki to stop that meeting from taking place. Shinsou mentioned to Yamada that Eri was the heir to the 8 Precepts of Death by birth, which was new information to Yamada and Aizawa, and Aizawa left to investigate whether they could find Eri's birth parents and family name. Eri has a habit of calling Shinsou 'Mom,' because in her perception, he acts like a 'TV Mom' to her.

Yamada had been making his little patrol for a couple hours now. Between finishing up all the little chores that tended to fall to the wayside, he found himself checking in on the wards every 10 minutes or so to see if there were any changes.

Both were fitfully asleep, though Shinsou's fever seemed to be breaking little by little. The number that he read off of the thermometer the first time he checked nearly gave him a heart attack, but Shinsou had a history of surviving, and even functioning perfectly well with a temperature that was nearly lethal.

He was heading to check if the little kotatsu-head was finally going to have a normal temperature reading, when he found true relief to hear two voices behind the closed door. That was, until he got close enough to the door to understand what they were saying.

“-hate you! You were supposed to fix Mirio!”

“I know.”

Yamada heard Eri growling under her breath, before her words became sharper. “I hate that you can't talk right! You're stupid and I hate you!”

“You’re right.”

Yamada didn’t even think about knocking, ripping open the door in the vain hope that his hearing aids were picking up a television drama rather than a nasty argument between his two wards. But seeing Eri *kick* Shinsou’s chest, sprawled out over his bed still messy with the evidence of a quieter fit, was all the proof that he needed to know this was really happening.

‘ *Emotionally volatile* ’ didn’t really come close to describing Eri’s cold glare.

“It’s your fault Twenny doesn’t-” Shinsou cut Eri off with a hand over her mouth, which she screamed against, kicking her legs in a flurry. Shinsou looked like he was in rough shape, sweat still on his brow and wetting his hair from the fever, and he just looked exhausted besides. Not that Yamada could blame him, hearing those angry words from Eri were hard enough, but Shinsou absolutely couldn’t deal with it now.

“Okay, we’re a little mad right now,” Yamada said, trying not to take Eri’s pouty glare to heart when Shinsou pulled his hand away. It had to be hard for a little girl like Eri to process a powerful quirk like hers, and what Chisaki had done to her certainly didn’t make it any easier. “Why don’t we find a way to let that ‘mad’ out in a better way? Like, throwing some pillows around, or ripping up some paper-”

“No!” Eri screamed, turning her face into the bed, kicking her feet again but this time catching Shinsou’s chin on one kick before he caught her ankle and held it down.

‘ *Doesn’t want to see.* ’ Shinsou signed, looking all the more exhausted when he looked in Yamada’s direction, though his eyes never left the floor. ‘ *It’s fine.* ’

Eri balled her hands into fists before she rolled over on her back, reeling her legs back to kick Shinsou’s side. “Go back to him! I don’t care if you want to stay with him! You can just *go away* !”

Yamada could practically see Shinsou’s heart breaking at those words, his lips pressed together too firmly, his eyebrows pinched together in an effort to keep himself together. Yamada couldn’t just sit back and let this happen.

“Eri, don’t say things like that! I know you don’t mean it, kiddo,” Yamada said, crouching by the bed to notice that Eri was shaking a little, her arms wrapped too tightly around the pillow. He knew that she didn’t mean it, and it was probably pretty terrifying to be inside her head right now, with so much anger built up inside her and no good way to deal with it. Other than making Shinsou into a punching bag. “So, you don’t want to make a mess, even if you’re really upset, yeah?”

“I don’t want to, *Yamada* ,” Eri hissed, and boy, she could hit where it hurt.

But, Yamada could take a few blows from an angry 5 year old a bit better than Shinsou could. “So, we’re going to scream. Alright?”

Eri looked up at him, probably peeved that she was being told what to do when she was already in the foulest mood ever, but that only helped him out when he started to yell, and she quickly joined the duet.

He made sure to keep his quirk out of the mix, but still loud enough to cover up most of Eri’s anger, and when she stopped to catch her breath, it looked like he did a pretty good job. His little bean definitely wasn’t set back to rights, but she looked a little surprised to find that the anger meter had been drained a little bit. “Better?”

Eri nodded, tucking her chin deeper into the pillow, though she still kicked away Shinsou's hand when he tried to put it down too close to her leg. "S' stupid."

"But it works! So, let's keep-" A knock on the door quickly reminded Yamada that the staff dorm might not be the proper place for these vocal exercises. "Let's go somewhere that we can really let loose, alright? I know just the place for all the yelling I do when I'm mad!"

When he answered the door with a grumpy Eri in his arms, Midnight looked like she might want to do some yelling of her own. "There had better be a spider in there."

"Nope! Just some super serious Quirk Grumps going on! Can you do me the biggest favor in the entire world, oh x-rated hero that I love so much?" Yamada pleaded, noticing that Midnight's glare had barely cooled, and it would probably look a lot more intimidating if she wasn't wearing rubber duck patterned pajamas. "Can you watch Shinsou for a bit while we head to Gym Gamma?"

If it was for anyone else, Midnight probably wouldn't have budged, the evidence of a few rough patrols clear in the rings of exhaustion around her eyes. But she sighed, smiling softly at Eri even if Eri refused to look at her. "Don't take after this loudmouth too much, alright?"

"Don't tell me what to do," Eri muttered against Yamada's shoulder, and Midnight's eyebrows raised, probably shocked to hear a sass like that from someone who hadn't even entered puberty yet.

"Okay! Let's get some yelling done while we're on the way! Three, two one!"

This might not be his favorite duet to perform, but he could stay up all night belting it out anyway, for Eri's sake.

*

Useless.

27 struggled to keep his eyes open, the words from the television long since becoming noise to his ears. Sushi wasn't helping, something about the way the cat purred in his sleep, a steady and warm weight on his thighs felt like a drug. Like 27 was being drugged into sleep with him.

He couldn't fall asleep here. He had that much training, if nothing else. Even if he didn't have his quirk, didn't have Eri, didn't have much of a chance against Chisaki.

He couldn't let himself fall asleep here. Even if it was warm, even if Sushi was soft, even if the noise from the television was a steady hum, too much like a lullaby to him right now.

Witching Hour was asleep, her head resting on her arm where she was curled up on the recliner. He might be able to escape, if he could move his body. If Sushi wasn't resting on top of him, weighing him down.

Useless. Eri knew he was useless. She didn't care if he left, and he should be happy about that. He shouldn't feel so hollow and useless.

He shouldn't feel like crying.

He closes his eyes, and leans back against the couch, turning his head away from Witching Hour if she happened to look at him. If she saw him so weak and useless. He keeps his breaths steady, hopes that the tears dry on their own when he can't bring attention to himself by wiping them away. His arms feel too heavy to do that anyway.

Eri always said what she honestly felt during these fits, and this one was no different. She didn't care, she hated how useless he was, how broken. She said those things plainly, when something always held her back from saying them when she wasn't overwhelmed.

She hated him, and he was happy about that. She wouldn't miss him. She wouldn't hurt.

He shouldn't let it hurt either.

Useless. So useless that he might as well fall asleep.

*

Yamada stared down at the empty Gym Gamma, barely lit with only the security lights on, and let out another shout to cover up the noise from Eri's. He knew it wasn't really necessary at this point, the noise-canceling headphones from his hero costume did a perfectly fine job, as long as she held them over her ears.

But it felt so good to let it out.

He imagined that Overhaul was on the other end of it, that he could have somehow rattled Shinsou free when the fusion took place during the raid. That he had been requested to go to the raid at all, that he could have beaten down at least one of the criminals that had hurt his wards so terribly, had left the scars that they still had to carry.

' *Homicide*. ' If Yamada had been a part of the raid, if he knew what he did now, he probably would have stepped over that line without a second thought. He knows the limits of his quirk, he knows *exactly* how it could be used to kill. He would do it without a second-thought if it meant protecting his wards, if it meant that healing came a little quicker for them.

He feels Eri wrapping her arms around his waist, and he moved with one free hand to pop his hearing aids back in, her quiet little sniffles coming into focus as the whine of the devices faded out. "M' sorry, Yama, I didn't mean it! I didn't!"

"I know, little bean!" Yamada reassured, trying to wrap her up in a hug with his arm still trapped to his side. "You just had a pretty rough day, and that can make you say things you don't mean. That happens with me and Shou all the time, but it's harder when you're a little kid, and you don't have room for all that meanness or mad. We can always come out here and put on a show when that happens."

Eri kicked her foot, legs still swinging off the walkway through the bars of the railing, before she pulled them out and curled herself up in Yamada's lap, hiding her face against his chest. Yamada just smiled, wrapping his arms around her.

He's definitely been missing out on the Eri cuddles, even if he can still be a little jealous that Shouta and Shinsou get ones when Eri isn't so upset.

"Yama, I don't wanna have my quirk," Eri whined, hands making fists in his jacket. "I don't wanna be mean!"

"I know," Yamada said, tucking his chin before he stops himself, fighting the impulse to cross another line, to kiss the top of her head to express the way that he feels about her, but he shouldn't. To act like a father, when he wasn't. "Quirks can give you a lot of trouble, can't they? They can make you mean, or they can make you hurt. Or they can hurt people you care about."

Eri nodded, burrowing herself a little deeper into his jacket, and he hoped that he was reading her

wrong.

Eri's quirk could kill too. And much like his, it developed long before it could be controlled or restrained. If Shouta was right, if their little Eri was Hanabusa Eri, then she already had.

The previous head of the 8 Precepts of Death had one daughter, Hanabusa Kaede. No one had looked too deeply into who the deceased man was before his passing, or who his family members were. But Hanabusa Kaede was in prison for child neglect, for failing to produce her child after social services investigated why she wasn't enrolled in school.

Shouta texted him after convincing Sansa to let him meet with her. They couldn't show Hanabusa Kaede a picture of Eri to verify it completely, and she refused to give them a sample of her DNA to prove the relation. All that she would say when asked why she didn't have her child or know where she was, was that she didn't have a child. That she gave birth to a monster who killed her boyfriend, and destroyed her life.

Hanabusa Eri's birth certificate matched the notes from Chisaki's 'research' notes, a 5 year old girl born on December 21st. Hanabusa Kaede's white hair, the features that were similar were clear from her mugshot. Even if Hanabusa Kaede didn't want to prove it, Yamada doubted that the relationship wouldn't be legally established at some point. He's sure nothing would come of it, that Eri would *never* be returned to her mother, but he still finds himself worrying.

He hopes that Eri doesn't remember that, remember Rewinding a person past the point of their existence. He hopes that she never finds out, and never blames herself for having a quirk manifest too early to control it. That she never finds herself torn apart the same way that he was, when he found out that the reason he didn't have his biological parents in his life was because he had deafened them after he was born.

"You know, I really hated my quirk too," Yamada says, running a hand through Eri's hair. "Because my quirk hurt people. I actually hated it so much that I stopped talking for a while, kind of like Shinsou. Because I wasn't sure if I could be a good person if I had a quirk that could hurt people."

Eri looks up at him, her big red eyes still wet with tears, and he runs his thumb over her little horn, trying to give her a reassuring smile.

"But quirks that can hurt can also help people. It's all about how you use them. I could have turned out to be a really nasty villain, but I didn't, because I wanted to use my quirk to help people. It wasn't easy to like my quirk, though," Yamada says, thinking back on all the times he wanted to crush his hearing aids, as though that would take back the damage that had already been done. How often he wondered how different the world would sound without them, if he didn't have his quirk. What his childhood would have been like if his parents didn't surrender him to social services. "Sometimes, I wished that I didn't have a quirk at all."

Eri's hand touches his neck, and he feels a proud little smile pulling him out of his morose mood. His inquisitive little scientist learned all about vocal cords from Yaoyorozu after watching The Little Mermaid, when she was curious whether someone's voice could actually be stolen. He tried to tell her about how vocal cords played into his own quirk after he overheard her telling Shouta about it, but she had just tucked her head against Shouta's chest, in a mood where she was a bit too shy to talk to the loudmouth she had to live with.

Even if Shinsou had his own Little Mermaid problems, Eri hadn't been nearly as shy since he came to live with them.

“Yama, your quirk doesn’t make you ugly,” Eri mumbled, and he almost wished that she had been a little more upset by her own words. That this wasn’t something that she honestly thought about herself, that it was still a part of the emotional tailspin that her quirk gave her.

“Eri, you’re not ugly!” Yamada argues, trying to get his little bean to look at him, but when she does, her expression is far too serious. “You’re the cutest little bean in the whole world! Everyone says that, and hundreds of heroes can’t be wrong!”

“I’m cute now,” Eri explains, and he’s only a little relieved to see a flicker of her usual self-confidence, watching her press a hand to her horn. “But when it’s big, it’s so ugly, Yama! And it’s full of snot, and gross! I really don’t like it!”

“I know you’re not a fan of the horn tricks, and I don’t blame you, kiddo. It’s not fun being sniffly and sick,” Yamada says, pitying the miserable little bean who’s had to put up with that for the past few days. “But even if you had a beard like Shou, and warts all over your face, and you had a big green mole right in the middle of your forehead with curly hairs sticking out all over the place, you know what? You’d still be the cutest little bean in the whole world.”

Eri doesn’t look like she believes him at all, putting her hand to her forehead in fear that a mole might already be sprouting there.

“Because you don’t just look like the cutest bean in the world, you *are* the cutest bean in the world. Because you’re smart, and you’re kind, and the best helper in the whole world. Do you know what me and Shou would do if we didn’t have you to help us pick our plates? We’d eat off the table like *animals*, Eri! Shou would want to use the kitty cat face plate, but then *I’d* want to use it too, so he’d just break it because he’s mean to me when you’re not around, and then we’d have *no plates!*”

Eri pouts, trying not to giggle, despite all his hard work to get her to. “Zawa’s not mean!”

“Oh yes he is! He’s just not mean when you’re around! He’s so mean to me, Eri. He tells me he’s not hungry, then as soon as I make something, he eats all of my food. He makes me do all the laundry, even if his hero costume gets the dirtiest after his patrols. And when it gets cold, I tell him to make sure to wear socks and mittens, because his hands and feet get cold, but do you know what he does? He doesn’t wear them, just so he can stick his cold toes and hands all over me and make me feel cold!” Yamada pouts, knowing that as soon as the first snowfall came, he’d have a snowball shoved down the back of his shirt. “He bullies me so much.”

“Yama, are you gonna leave him?” Eri asks, red eyes wide with concern. “Zawa acts so bad! He’s really mean to you!”

“No! No way, little bean!” Yamada insists, worried that he might have vented just a little too much, before he realizes that Eri wasn’t just worried about him and Shouta splitting ways over a few cold toes and chores. She might be worried about someone else who had been acting a little ‘mean’ and ‘bad.’ “I love Shouta a lot, a whole lot more than I hate cold toes or not eating my own food. Even if he’s mean, or if he acts bad, I still love him. Because he’s my mean little grump, and most of the time, he’s not mean or bad at all.”

Eri pulls herself closer to his chest, picking at his jacket before she works up the courage to ask, “Does Twenny still like me?”

“I know he does,” Yamada promises, running a hand over Eri’s hair before he holds her close. “Shinsou cares about you a lot, little bean. And I know that he knows you didn’t mean what you said. You two have been together for a long time, and gone through a lot together. I know Shinsou wouldn’t leave just because of a few grumpy words, even if they were pretty grumpy.”

“I didn’t mean it!” Eri insists. “I don’t want him to go back to him, Yama! Don’t let him!”

“Go back to....” Yamada’s heart drops when he realizes who Eri was talking about. The only person she would refuse to name.

She wasn’t supposed to know, because nothing could be more frightening for poor little Eri than knowing that Chisaki was still around, still able to torment them. But for her to not only find out, but to think Shinsou was going to *live* with Chisaki again. He couldn’t imagine how that felt for poor little Eri, but if his own sickening dread was any indication, it would have been a very ‘overwhelming emotion.’

“Eri,” Yamada says, still unsure how he could make the truth any more pleasant to bear, but he couldn’t lie to her now. If she found out after the fact that she was lied to, it would only be more devastating. “Shinsou will *never* live with Chisaki again. Chisaki is in prison, and he’ll be there for the rest of his life. He’s never getting out, *ever*. ”

He wishes he could end it there, with a promise that he knew he could keep. But Eri picked up on things with Shinsou, and if they had been together all day today, she probably would have realized that something was off. And she might pick up on it afterwards. Even if Shinsou wasn’t a wreck, even if they told her it was just a really important school test like they planned to.

“You know how wards get to live with heroes to keep them safe, right?” Yamada asks, and Eri nods. “Shou is your hero, because he can keep you safe if your quirk gives you trouble. And Shinsou is my ward, because I can keep him safe from bad people. And the police are trying to find those bad people, but they need to know more information about them. They want to get that information from Chisaki, and they need Shinsou to meet with Chisaki for a little bit for that to happen. And Shinsou said he wanted to do that.”

Eri shook her head. “He doesn’t want to, Yama! He’s scary and bad, and Twenny gets really scared of him!”

“I know,” Yamada says, holding Eri a little closer. “I think Shinsou might get a little scared when it gets closer, and he might be a little mixed up afterwards, but I think he wants to do this. So he knows that Chisaki can’t hurt him anymore. And to know he can’t hurt you anymore either.”

Eri frowns, and Yamada knows that as soon as she sees Shinsou, she’ll want to convince him not to meet with Chisaki, even if she doesn’t know it’s an option.

“I know you want to protect him from feeling scared or mixed up, Eri,” Yamada says, giving her a half smile. “But Shinsou wants to do this, and we can’t stop him. We just have to be there to support him along the way. And one of my favorite ways of doing that is making food, but Shinsou hasn’t told me what he likes to eat! I asked him a million gazillion times, and he still hasn’t told me!”

“He hasn’t told me either,” Eri says with a little frown. “But I can ask him! I wanna know too! And...” Eri trails off, then clasps her hands in front of her chest, staring at them. “I wanna ask him with my hands. And tell him sorry. ‘Cause it’s not stupid that he talks with his hands! His hands always look really pretty, and I know it’s not your fault that he does it!”

“I know, sweetheart,” Yamada reassures, feeling his heart melt at such a grand gesture from his little bean, one that she came up with all on her own. “I think Shinsou would really appreciate that. So, this one means ‘Sorry,’ and this one is ‘I’m really, super duper sorry.’”

Eri starts copying the more formal sorry without hesitation, and he helps guide her hands through

the correct motions.

And he hopes that the apology will be enough to heal those angry words that he knows hurt Shinsou so much.

*

“It’s okay,” 27 says, struggling to offer that much. He’s tired, and hollow, and every small motion draws too much out of him. Too bleach soaked. “I’m happy that you feel better now.”

Yamada helped her. He won’t let that hurt.

Eri catches it anyway, tucking her chin to her chest while she stares at her hands. He hates it, hates that he’s too tired, too useless to comfort her the right way. He busies himself with opening the door while Yamada and Midnight talk, so that he can get her settled inside. So he can wait for instructions, for anything else he needs to muddle through, ignoring how little strength he has left.

He feels a little relief to be back in their dorm, back to familiar surroundings. He knows it’s empty, that this is the place he can sleep. He’s allowed to be that vulnerable here.

“Twenny,” Eri calls, tugging on the sleeve of his shirt. He’s still sweaty, dirty, she shouldn’t dirty herself with him. “I don’t want you to be sad.”

“I’m not,” 27 says, still not able to look her in the eye. He can look at her hair, her shoulders, her horn. Not her eyes. She’ll see too much in his. She’ll be upset by what she sees.

“You are,” Eri whines, shaking his arm by his hand trapped between hers. “ *Twenny*. ”

She’s upset, and he needs to comfort her. He needs to find a mask to slip into, but he can’t. He’s numb, and too hollow, and too tired. He can’t even feel the urgency that he should to comfort her, and that scares him. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey,” Yamada says, closing the door behind him, and 27 can’t react fast enough, can’t pull himself straight or calm Eri down in the few seconds he has before Yamada notices. “Hey, is everything okay?”

“Twenny’s still sad!” Eri says, dropping his hand to walk in front of him, signing again. “I’m really sorry, Twenny!”

“I’m sorry, it’s fine,” 27 persists, hoping that Eri would just drop it. That he could just be ignored now, ignored by Eri too. He just wants to disappear for a while, just enough to gather himself. To be there, for what little she needs him for.

“It’s alright, little bean!” Yamada says, distracting Eri. Separating them. He should be angrier about that, but he isn’t. “How about we work on dinner while Shinsou takes a shower? It’ll help him wake up and feel a bit better.”

27 moved to comply sluggishly, despite the relief he felt to be alone for a while. To disappear from Eri for a little bit, knowing she wouldn’t miss him. Doesn’t need him anymore.

Eri doesn’t need him anymore.

He doesn’t know what to do. He’s been waiting for this moment to come, knew that it would eventually. It’s better that she had a transition, that he wasn’t just taken away or killed. She had him when she needed him, and now she doesn’t need him.

He knows he has games, but they're meaningless. He can't turn anything over in his head, can barely look at the black band on his arm while he showers. Can barely pull himself from the warm spray after he finishes.

Eri doesn't need him. It makes him meaningless.

He pulls whatever clothes are on top of the drawers, barely looks at them. Barely feels the short sleeves, or the hair that's still too wet. He stops in front of the door instead of moving immediately to comply with the implied order to meet them for dinner. Breathes in the numbness to stop his face from becoming wet. He's cried too much already, he wishes he could just stay numb to it.

He feels nothing and too much when he sees Yamada and Eri talking, Yamada translating what she says as she tries to copy him in stilted, fumbled movements. He's intruding here, he's not meant to be here. It's a beautiful moment between a family that he isn't part of. Never will be. Unwanted.

But they both look at him and he feels the numbness lift too quickly, too sharp. He *wants* to stay here. He wants to be wanted. He just knows it's hopeless.

"Hey there little listener," Yamada says, his smile strained. 27 should be more aware of that, more worried that he's made the cracks and broken pieces too easy to see, but he can't be. It's hard enough to just stand there, just occupying this space.

Eri stands in front of him, her hands clasped in front of her chest and worry plain on her face. She still needs comfort from him, maybe this is the last thing she needs from him. Just to wash her hands of him, apologize for her own sake for what she said, then she could move on. Forget about him.

"Twenny," Eri said, but her hands said something else. "I'm really sorry I said you're dumb for not talking. You're really really smart, and I like watching you talk with your hands. Your hands always look really pretty, and I want my hands to look pretty like yours!" Eri's signing trailed off as she went on, until her hands were fisted in front of her chest again. "I really don't want to make you sad, or make you leave. I never wanna be away from you, ever ever ever! Because you're my mom, Twenny, and we went through a lot together, and I want us to be together forever. Especially because we can be together for good stuff from now on!"

He forces a smile, and it feels like his face is cracking like plaster as it spreads. He closes his eyes and turns to the side, but he still has to raise a hand, has to betray the break that he feels in his chest.

He *wanted*. He wanted that so badly, bad enough for it to hurt. He wanted to be there, to never leave her, to be together for the good times she deserved now that the bad ones were done.

He wanted to be '*Mom Shi*.' It was the only name he would ever treasure, far more than Dog or Shinsou Hitoshi. Even more than 27.

It was more than expectation and meaning, it was a promise. A promise he wanted desperately to keep for her, for himself. He wanted to be there.

He wanted to win.

"I'm sorry," 27 said, clearing his throat afterwards to hide how close he was to crying, kneeling in front of Eri to hug her close. "I'm sorry I made you worried. Y-your signing is getting really-y good."

Eri pulls back, her small hands brushing away his tears, and he feels the break too keenly. He felt it

every time she's dried his tears, he's felt the humiliation. The disappointment in himself. And more than all of that, he feels overwhelmed to know that she cares.

She shouldn't, not now. Not after what he did, after he forced his way into her head again and held her under his control. But she did. She wanted him, even if she didn't need him.

And that was enough.

An Honest Conversation

Chapter Summary

27 is kept away from Eri and away from school yet again, but that only gives him an opportunity to find the answers he's been looking for. Aizawa expects that nothing will come from staying with Shinsou today, certainly nothing relevant to the investigation, and he doesn't doubt that Shinsou will find his company far less enjoyable than Yamada's. But he's proven wrong.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Brief mention of torture, Brief mention of 50, Dissociation,

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa kept Shinsou at home with Yamada yesterday after trying to question him about The Miasma, and soon after Aizawa and Eri left for school, Shinsou got into the ventilation system of the dorm and stayed there half the day. Shinsou believes that he abused Eri with his quirk after being forced to use it on her so often at the 8 Precepts. Aizawa showed Shinsou a sketch of the Boss of The Miasma, which was provided by Chisaki, in hopes that Shinsou would identify him or tell him where The Miasma was located. While Shinsou was messaging 1-A while he was in the vents, Iida assumed that Shinsou's investigation was reaching its end and told him that there would be a grace period before he would be moved from UA to a new home, assuming that was what was distressing Shinsou. Prior to that, several students noticed that Shinsou wasn't acting like himself and asked him to keep replying. Prior to that, Ashido was 'threatening' Aizawa after assuming that Aizawa didn't react well to Shinsou's name-sign for him and that Shinsou was upset because of that. In the chat, Shinsou compared Bakugo to Rikiya, which Bakugo reacted poorly to, and Shinsou tried to say it wasn't insulting because he considered Rikiya a friend. Shinsou used the 1-A chat to get information about Aizawa to make his name sign for his birthday. Most of Class 1-A is trying to hide the existence of the group chat from Aizawa, but Bakugo is the only one who has let him know about it. Aizawa asked Bakugo to convince Shinsou to cooperate with the investigation yesterday, after Bakugo found out that Shinsou would be meeting with Chisaki. While Aizawa and Bakugo were having that conversation, Eri ran outside because she didn't want to do a 'Horn Trick.' Shinsou's name-sign for Aizawa was 'Zawa Hero.' Before the raid on the 8 Precepts, Aizawa was supposed to investigate a thief who was using their quirk to steal from a bookstore, and that thief was Shinsou, but Aizawa moved the case to someone else to be at UA more often after Kamino Ward. Shinsou has avoided using his right hand, because it shakes and is less coordinated with certain actions after Chisaki used his quirk to destroy and remake it. Before Aizawa showed Shinsou the picture of Boss, he said that The Miasma was still active and still hurting innocent people. Eri told Aizawa that Shinsou's mother 'gave him away.' Shinsou thinks that Aizawa knows almost everything about The Miasma because he only asked for Boss' name and the location of the compound. After Shinsou was rescued, he was taken to a juvenile prison facility after nearly being killed by Bug, and was attacked by 127, which was recorded on security footage and shown to Aizawa before Shinsou became Yamada's ward.

The morning came, and Aizawa felt the dread nearly overwhelm him, enough to make an embarrassing nuisance of himself while he watched his husband get ready for the day.

“It’s too soon for them to be separated for that long,” Aizawa says, fully aware of how hypocritical he’s being. “Eri doesn’t have to go to school-“

“Shou,” Hizashi interrupts sharply, his head falling back and nearly ruining his hair before the gel dried. “You need to patch things up with Shinsou, and *I know* if Eri stayed home, you’d spend all your time with her to avoid talking to Shinsou. And if that means that I have to take on the absolutely *grueling* task of spending all day with my little bean, I guess I’ll just have to ‘*fight on*’, ”

Aizawa was allowed to be jealous, especially with that smug grin egging him on. “She won’t be happy to be away from him for that long.”

“I know,” Hizashi said, his grin softening a bit before he clapped a hand on Aizawa’s shoulder. “But she doesn’t know how to get into the ventilation system when she’s not happy.”

Aizawa quickly pulled out his phone to resolve that situation before it could come to fruition. Though he was a bit more equipped to pull Shinsou out of the vents with the capture scarf if necessary, he didn’t want to resort to something so forceful.

Especially when today would be miserable enough for them already.

*

27 glared at the robot on the other side of the vent cover, its mechanical arms stretched across it and locking the cover in place. He patted his empty pocket, where the phone had been before his owner took it, before he looked around his room, convincing himself that it couldn’t be more different from his room at The Miasma.

He wasn’t trapped here, not exactly. He was free to go to his room, free to leave it. But his owner was on the other side of that door, and he knew what he wanted, despite the lies he offered to lure him into complacency, to lower his guard.

“ *You don’t have to talk about the investigation unless you want to.* ”

His owner must be surprised he could breathe on his own, he must think he was that *stupid* . The investigation was the only reason he was here, the only reason his owner didn’t go to school today. His owner had plans to make him talk, and he should just be grateful that Eri wouldn’t know, that she would be kept away from it.

For now, he was left to wait, and his owner probably hoped that the wait would be unbearable without the phone. But he still had plenty of distractions.

27 pulled out the math test from the desk drawer while he waited for the laptop to turn on. He even considered pulling a book from the shelf to further prove how many distractions he had, how many things he could do. He wasn't trapped in the room, waiting for Bug to take him to train, or bring him a meal. He wasn't counting his paces, or the dripping of the faucet.

...34, 35 . 35 taps of his finger, and the laptop was ready to use. He opened the Internet, and typed quickly, nerves rising as he forced himself to look at those words. Even if he didn't speak them aloud, even if no one but himself knew that he typed them, they were an accusation all the same. A confession of his greatest crime.

'Cure for mental quirk abuse.'

There wasn't one. There was only treatment. Therapy, medication. Some mental quirks could rewrite the damage already done, making their users highly sought after specialists in their fields.

He spends an inordinate amount of time searching their names, trying to find one in Japan. He's kidnapped a few people on jobs, but never on his own. He's always been told exactly where the target would be, what they'd answer to. He was driven to the location, and only needed to be used for his quirk. A quirk that harmed them, would harm the person he needed to kidnap to help heal Eri.

But Eri didn't need to be healed.

One of those specialists wrote a book about Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, and the website about it listed the symptoms. Disorganized thinking, paranoid delusions (often that other people could read their mind), suicidal ideation, self harm (often tied to delusions about bugs being underneath the skin), extreme social withdrawal, trembling in the extremities, whitening of the hair.

Eri didn't have any of those symptoms.

27 stared at each entry on the list, then searched for the symptoms over and over, to make sure the list wasn't incomplete. He turned each line over in his head, trying to find how badly Eri suffered from it.

Eri could get distracted, she could mumble over one thought and into a completely different subject. But that was normal for an under stimulated child.

Eri had little superstitions, and tended to place a great deal of power into little actions or totems, but that was also normal for her age. It could also be a coping mechanism.

Eri wasn't suicidal, she didn't self-harm, she wasn't socially withdrawn *at all* . Her hands and feet didn't shake, and her hair had always been white.

Eri...was fine.

27 holds his head in his hands, just trying to breathe. Trying not to laugh, or cry, he doesn't know what he should feel.

He was so *fucking* lucky. After the thousands of times that he quirked Eri, she was *fine* .

He couldn't explain why he was still able to control her without any verbal response, without asking a question, but whatever caused it wasn't a symptom of quirk abuse. He searched for that answer several different ways, before finding an article about mind reading quirks. Overuse of mental quirks doesn't make it easier with each repetition. Whether it was his quirk evolving, or something else, it didn't matter. He still wouldn't use it.

He still could have hurt his mother.

He nearly types it out several times, before he erases it. He doesn't remember her name, he doesn't know if he even knows enough to find her. If he could handle finding her, seeing a picture of her at an older age. After the years went by, as cruel as they were to him, they might have been crueler to her. She might be dead.

She might have killed herself because of him. Because of his quirk.

He feels the numbness in his skull, and tries to ignore it, but he knows that will only make it worse. He needs a distraction, and he taps his finger against the desk to count the taps before he reminds himself that he has other distractions.

He reaches for the phone before he forgets himself, then turns his eyes to the math test. He hasn't answered the questions that Bakugo taught him to answer, and he might be able to answer more of them just by figuring it out, working with the pieces he knew to work out a solution to one he couldn't fully answer.

He doesn't have the pen that Yamada gave him, or the highlighters, but he doesn't need them. It doesn't matter if his circles are shaky, messy attempts. He has a plan.

He can show a broken piece if they'll be able to pull it out of him, and take another piece of the 8 Precepts away.

*

Aizawa turns the phone over in his hand, watching the screen unlock before he turns it over again, staring at the closed door of the office afterwards.

He knows it's wrong, he doesn't need Hizashi's eventual scolding to remind him of that. He's the one who saw firsthand how little Eri and Shinsou had, that all their worldly possessions didn't fill a single box at the evidence locker. Beyond that, he knows that Shinsou treasures this phone, and it's clear in the way he treats it.

But he can't let his students know about the meeting with Chisaki. He can't face another student boiling with well-deserved rage and betrayal, facing the reality that heroes are useless as often as they're saviors. Facing the fact that despite everything that Aizawa has done, it's been for *nothing*. That even after the raid, Shinsou will still be under Chisaki's thumb tomorrow.

The phone vibrates with another chat notification, and Aizawa unlocks the screen again before he turns it back over.

He could look. He's highly tempted to. Bakugo doesn't know what the investigation is looking for, that any little piece of information about the Nomu Organization could prove to be instrumental. Something as small as Shinsou mentioning a restaurant or town that he's visited could be a lead that breaks the case.

But he wouldn't do this to a student. He's invaded Shinsou's privacy far beyond what he's comfortable with already, though that was hardly his choice. He needed to know what Naomasa found, without any doubt that Naomasa was withholding anything. And with how fruitless the keylogger has proven to be, he doesn't exactly have high hopes for these chats that Shinsou has been using.

But he needs to know. To use any tool that's available to him. He's done far worse already, and looking through a teenager's phone is hardly as traumatizing as showing him the sketch of

someone he's sure has abused him.

And he's curious. He still knows nothing about the teenager that's been living with him, beyond the simplest things that he's offered in that 'Like' game. He likes coffee, cats, and learning. It's not enough to know anything about Shinsou, and he knows for a fact that his students know him better than that.

He can see immediately that Shinsou isn't as active as he seemed to be on these chats. Several have old unread messages, some haven't been fully set up. The most active one seems to be the Class 1-A chat, and that's the one he opens first.

It crashes immediately, stalling to load all of the unread messages before it shuts down, but Aizawa ignores the irrational thought that this might be a sign not to continue. He relaunches the app, and finds his students are interested to know why Shinsou is absent again today, and why he's absent as well.

Several are concerned, especially after he didn't take a single day off to recover from USJ, and they note that immediately. But others correctly assume that he's watching Shinsou today, and incorrectly assume that Shinsou must actually be sick. They had apparently been told about the 'Project' that Shinsou had with Hizashi, but now believe that was a cover story for Eri's sake.

Aizawa scrolls up, reading messages about their study plans, their anxieties building towards the midterms, before he finds the messages that Shinsou sent.

Iida. Aizawa closes his eyes and lets his head fall against the back of the chair. They hadn't told Shinsou that his placement here was temporary for a *reason*, and Iida had given Shinsou yet another reason not to cooperate with the investigation. At this point, the investigation was all but over, knowing that Shinsou would fight tooth and nail to keep from being removed from Eri.

But Aizawa continued reading, catching on the concern that his students clearly had at the time. Pleading for Shinsou to keep responding, as though they were worried that he was a suicide risk.

'They want information. I can't give it to them...if I'm not around, take care of Eri. Don't talk about me after that.'

That absolutely sounded like Shinsou was at risk, and he feels a swell of pride that his students reacted somewhat appropriately, even without training. But he knows that Shinsou wasn't at risk at the time, he was in a vent. And when he reads it again, his eyes catch on Shinsou's words. *'I can't give it to them.'*

He knew that Shinsou was trained not to give that information away. Even if he didn't allow himself to dwell on it, he knew that training likely included torture. That his hands curled around the scars on his arms every time he was pressed too much because a scar was likely a reminder not to speak, one or many of them. Or all of them.

He scrolls up to distract himself from that thought, from the lingering desire to close this application and forget everything he's seen so far, before he sees Chisaki's name.

'Chisaki made her do it.'

He's noticed it. Eri has done that in front of him. She couldn't say 'Nemuri' once and she clapped her hands, too close to her face, and he *noticed* the flinch. He said *nothing*. He did nothing but watch while an echo of Chisaki took control of Eri again.

He has another reason to pour over these chats now.

‘ Floaty, you owe me 2 questions. ’

It seems that the ‘Like’ game wasn’t the only way Shinsou traded for information. He counted questions that he answered, to exchange for more information. He doesn’t know whether to be horrified that Shinsou seemed to play games when he wanted to interact with people, likely lacking enough socialization to know how to do so without some sort of structure, or horrified by his own thoughts. How quickly he started wondering how he could use this ‘Question Game’ into an interrogation tactic, before he realized how damaging that would be.

He’s learning more about Shinsou, but much like the keylogger, he doesn’t like what he finds.

He finds an explanation for Ashido rubbing her hands together and glaring at him during homeroom yesterday, but when he sees ‘Pure Boiii’s question, he can’t fault her for it.

‘ What name sign did you make for Aizawa-sensei? Did he like it?’ ‘Skip.’

He notes every little detail that Shinsou provides about Eri’s habits, and doesn’t miss that ‘Genesis,’ likely Yaoyorozu’s username, knows that Shinsou was unsettled to be away from Eri yesterday. He also doesn’t miss how casually his class brushes off Shinsou’s death threats should they tell Eri that he’s sick.

He still doesn’t know how many of them have accepted Shinsou as a ward, and whether they want to protect and comfort him as a part of a duty that a hero holds or whether they see him as an extension of Eri. But it’s clear that they care about Shinsou deeply, in a way that makes him proud to see.

‘ Rikiya was nice. He was my friend. ’

Rikiya was a *monster* . He had been one of the torturers, all of the 8 Expendables were. They took turns beating Shinsou with their quirks, with their fists, while Shinsou was still struggling to stand after the bleach torture. He knows that wasn’t the only time, he knows that Shinsou had endured more violence than he admitted to in that statement he gave about the 8 Precepts, because the bleach torture wasn’t in it. Neither was the beating. Shinsou only wrote about what happened to Eri, how Eri wasn’t fed enough, how Eri was tortured.

Aizawa had never considered the possibility that Shinsou could see one of the 8 Expendables as a *friend*. That he would be so used to violence to see any small absence of it as a gift, and he’s not even sure if Rikiya gave him that. He doesn’t know why Shinsou considered him a friend, but he knows that he wasn’t. The more he considers the possible explanations, the more it unsettles him.

‘ Even Rappa could be flipped when he overextended himself. ’

He finds himself mirroring the same reaction that his students had. He’s never considered that Shinsou had fought the 8 Expendables.

He knows with the casual way that Shinsou says that, that it wasn’t an escape attempt. And it wasn’t a single occurrence either. Shinsou, a half-starved teenager with years of training apparent in the way that he carried himself, had been pitted against those formidable criminals time and time again. They were older than him, they were well fed and healthy. He knows from experience that some of the worst fights are with strength-enhanced foes, as someone who also lacks a physically enhancing quirk. And his quirk *cancels* those quirks.

Shinsou faced them, and won. Not often, but the fact that he did at all is almost too surreal to believe.

‘Zawa can mean ‘murmur.’ ’ ‘ ‘Useful.’

Shinsou put a lot of effort into his name sign.

Aizawa knew it from the first time he saw it. He saw how fluid the sign was, knew immediately that Shinsou had practiced it several times. He didn't realize how much effort he put into it, that he enlisted the help of his students. Bargained for information. That Shinsou was trying to find information about him to fit his name sign.

That the 'Like' game was another attempt to do that.

Aizawa closes the app, and turns the phone over on his desk. They've been playing games instead of talking, they're both interested to know about each other, and he should have realized that from the start.

It was logical that Shinsou didn't know how to connect with people without a structure to guide the conversation, rules made clear and goals made more attainable. Whatever socialization he had at the Nomu Organization, it was lacking, and Shinsou relied on what little he remembered from his life before that.

Shinsou was a child, and he knew how to play games.

But Aizawa wasn't a child, and he should teach Shinsou how to interact with people honestly. Even if they started with the games and moved outwards, now that he knew that Shinsou wanted to know more about him, he owed it to Shinsou to have an honest conversation with him. To answer Shinsou's questions, even if his own weren't answered. He would make it clear to Shinsou that this wasn't an interrogation tactic. This was beyond the investigation entirely.

He and Shinsou lived together, and they shouldn't be strangers to each other. This awkward separation was both of their faults, but Aizawa could break it down, little by little. Now that he knew that there was more than fear on the other side, there was a flicker of interest. Whether Shinsou still wanted to know more about Aizawa now, after the line of questioning, after that betrayal, he doesn't know. But he could ask.

Before Aizawa stands to do so, he hears the chirp from his phone, and pulls up the keylogger.

And he realizes that they needed to have another conversation entirely.

*

Shouta wasn't kidding about Eri being unhappy to be away from Shinsou.

Yamada watched Eri pick at her lunch, her little frown deepening every time she looked up at the door, hoping that Shinsou would come through it. Hoping that she could point out all the little side dishes she organized, or the rice balls that she decorated. Hoping to watch him eat any part of it that he would, to scold him when he didn't eat enough of it.

It was a little easier to distract her during class, but he was running out of homework and quizzes that needed grading. He'd likely need to steal some from Nemuri or Ectoplasm at this rate, to keep her occupied until his free period where they could spend some quality time going over JSL or English, or both. Whichever his little bean felt like learning today.

He looks over at the little 'confidential meeting' going on between Jirou and Midnight in the corner, catching another cold look from Jirou when she notices. He's still not sure why that little listener has always seemed to hold a grudge against him, even before the exam where he faced off

against her and Koda, but he can take a hint. Especially when it didn't seem to affect her studies, with her English scores being one of the highest ones in his class.

Eri taps her chopsticks against the side of the bento box, as though she's tempted to give up on finishing her lunch with the weight of missing Shinsou weighing so heavily on her, and he gives in. "Hey Eri, do you know what Shinsou likes to eat? I'm still trying to figure out what his favorite food is, but he still won't tell me! I think I need a little inside scoop from my favorite little listener."

Eri perks up at the mention of Shinsou's name, but the pout returns quick enough, her head tilting to the side. "He doesn't like oatmeal, but I don't know if he likes chicken. He didn't tell me what he likes either."

"Why don't you play that question game with him?" Jirou asks, and Yamada is surprised to see her looking in his direction, even if that little glare returns when she sees him looking back. "Don't you think it's a little irresponsible to live with someone when you don't even know that much about them?"

"Maybe! That's why I'm trying to figure it out, listener!" Yamada replies, just a little too jovially to cover up the sting from Jirou's words. He knows that he should know more about Shinsou. Shinsou trusts him more than anyone else other than Eri, and he has a responsibility to know more about Shinsou in turn. He's his *caretaker*, and it's pretty hard to call himself that when he can't even plan a well-deserved comfort meal for him. "What's the deal-io with the question game? I've never heard about it!"

Jirou starts tugging at the end of her aux-lobes, glancing away, and he knows that she's about to lie to him. But he hopes that enough of the truth still slips out. "When he chats with other people, he does this thing where he only answers questions if he has one he wants answered. So it's an even exchange." The cold look returns, and he imagines that she was trying to hide the existence of the group chat that he and Aizawa are already incredibly aware of. "Seriously, you're supposed to be his caretaker and everything, and you *don't* know about that?"

"I didn't know either," Eri mutters, bringing panic over Jirou's features.

"Eri, I didn't mean it like that--"

The door to the staff room flies open, Bakugo's usual entrance cutting off Jirou's attempts to console Eri. Kirishima is right behind him, smiling apologetically while he hovers behind Bakugo, and looks like he wants to pull him back out of the room when Bakugo sets his sights on Yamada. "Oi, I need to talk to Shitsou, so I'm going to your place after school."

Jirou sighs in frustration, running a hand over her face. "Can you seriously just drop it? You're not gonna--"

"I'm gonna fucking stop it, so don't tell me shit!" Bakugo snarls, tucking his hands into his pockets when he looks at Yamada again. "Aizawa-sensei told me to talk to Shitsou, and he's not answering the fucking chat, so I'm gonna do this shit face-to-face. Alright?"

Yamada takes a moment to take in how bloodshot Bakugo's eyes are, the rings of exhaustion around them, and another to take a very deep breath. This was *not* just midterm nerves, and he should have known better. *Shouta* should have known *better*. "So! Before we do that, let's have a chat, alright? Let's step out to...."

Bakugo jerks his chin towards the window, likely catching the hesitation while Yamada fumbles to find a private place to have this conversation, in a staff room that is becoming less and less private.

“Aizawa-sensei jumped out that fucking window last time.”

“He...does that,” Yamada said, still trying to find any other option, but coming up with none.

“Okay! Defenestration it is! Hang tight here, little listener, and I’ll be right back.”

He shot a look at Midnight, who nodded, already read into the little flight risk that Eri could become if left to her own devices, and led Bakugo to the window in question.

He and Shouta needed to have a chat, about a lot of things, and though the window hopping was one of them, it certainly wouldn’t be the first order of business.

The first order of business would be *why on Earth* Shouta would put that pressure on *Bakugo*.

*

Aizawa watches Shinsou pick at his lunch, and tries to turn the situation over in his head.

An honest conversation. He owed that to Shinsou, he owed it to the child sitting in front of him that didn’t know to learn more about the person that he had to live with. He should have offered it sooner, but Hizashi was right. He avoided it, and it wasn’t all due to avoiding distressing Shinsou.

It was made so apparent with the shirt that Shinsou was wearing, the Lemillion shirt that Hizashi had made during his short-lived hobby of crafting hero merch. Aizawa found himself staring at the shirt to avoid the sight of those scars, but in doing so, he realized the reason he had retreated so readily from Shinsou.

Lemillion was a hero that Shinsou recognized, the one that he saw during the raid. Eraserhead wasn’t, ‘Zawa Hero’ was a new and short lived development, and deservedly so.

But Eraserhead could have been the first hero that Shinsou saw, if he had kept that case on his docket.

He knows better than to turn situations like these over and over, to play the ‘what if’ game. He’s lectured on the subject enough times to hear his own words echoing back at him, but he still wonders. If he had followed Shinsou from the bookstore, would Shinsou have spoken to him about his situation? Would he have done it for Eri’s sake? Would they have rescued Eri sooner, the raid taking fewer casualties?

What difference could a month have made for both of the wards, for Togata? For Sir Nighteye?

Would Shinsou have trusted him more after that raid, after that rescue? Would the investigation into the Nomu Organization been easier to close if he had that trust, if he had proven himself that much?

Would Shinsou have fought him as soon as he spotted him, to return to the 8 Precepts and return to Eri?

‘ *The erasure of quirks is an attractive-* ’

Aizawa stops that line of thought as soon as it comes, as soon as he does the math. If he had slipped up, if he had been caught off guard for even a *second*, things would have turned into a far different ruin. One that he doesn’t want to think about, doesn’t want to consider being under that blindfold and under that yakuza bastard’s scrutiny any longer than he was during the raid. If he took that case, he would have worked it alone, but he doubts that Shinsou was ever alone when he was allowed outside. And he doubts that Chisaki’s interest in his quirk would have been a secret.

He wants to know more about Shinsou as he is now, he wants to have an honest conversation with him. And Shinsou is making an effort to be honest in a way he didn't expect to see.

He's using his right hand.

He doesn't actually try to eat any of the food in front of him, and Aizawa doubts that he could if he tried. His hand shakes violently, and it seems to be an effort just to hold his chopsticks in place, though they slip too. Aizawa doesn't know if he should mention it, or if he should just heat up more steamed buns so that Shinsou can eat something that doesn't require as much hand coordination.

He doesn't know if this is a game, but he's willing to play a game with Shinsou at first, as long as it's an honest one. Disguising an honest conversation.

"I want to play the question game with you," Aizawa says, Shinsou's violet eyes locking on his for just a moment before he glances to the side. A promising tell. "You ask me a question, and after I answer it, I'll ask you one. It won't be about the investigation. Just to get to know each other."

He fights the urge to lean his head forward, to tuck his chin into his scarf or have his hair fall to cover his expression, because he's already taken precautions to stop either of those things from happening. His scarf is in the office, his hair is tied back. It never fails to make him feel vulnerable, but they can both be vulnerable now.

Shinsou stares at him, head tilting slightly though his expression remains blank. He places his chopsticks down, the act of pretending to eat now forgotten, though he doesn't seem to know how to start the game. He runs a hand over the back of his neck before he stiffens and pulls it back, his hands resting in front of him before he begins to sign.

' People you're looking for. Not innocent. '

Aizawa feels his mouth twitch into a frown, realizing who Shinsou is referring to. Realizing that he can still avoid naming the organization, before he remembers that this conversation isn't about the investigation at all. He should make an effort to get to know Shinsou.

But there's another conversation that they need to have, and this might be the way to do it.

"You were a part of that organization when you were four years old, correct?" Shinsou doesn't nod, doesn't answer at all, but Aizawa doesn't want to consider that there might have been another criminal that had taken Shinsou after his mother 'gave him away.' That there might be more owners than there were brands, and that Shinsou might have been traded more often than any given item at a second-hand shop. "I can't imagine what crimes a four year old could commit to make them any less innocent."

He wants to ask if Shinsou was an anomaly. If the Nomu Organization didn't have a habit of taking children, if they took adults instead. Vagrants, drug addicts, people that weren't missed and weren't looked for as hard as missing children. If Shinsou's quirk was just too tempting for them, too well suited to what they wanted to use him for. The weapon that they made from a small child.

He won't ask, because this isn't related to the investigation. He wants Shinsou to give him a hint of what he already knows from the keylogger, so that he can reassure him more directly. But Shinsou doesn't respond, his hands flat on the table. "Even if a child like Eri did something heinous with her quirk, she couldn't be blamed for it. Children that young don't have control over their quirks."

That strikes something in Shinsou, like he knew it would. He sees the sharp inhale, the flinch in his

hands before he raises them to answer. ‘ *E-R-I not. Quirk not like mine. My quirk villainous.* ’

It’s not the clearest confession of his worries, but it’s still workable. The leap that he takes can still be believable, and the keylogger’s existence can still be hidden. “ ‘Villainous’ because of its capabilities, or ‘villainous’ because of the risk of Mental Quirk Abuse?”

Shinsou’s eyes widen before he looks down, curling into himself as though he’s waiting for a blow, and Aizawa looks away himself. He might have come across too bluntly.

“Eri was evaluated at the hospital, before she was released,” Aizawa says, wanting to address what he knows is Shinsou’s most pressing concern. “She doesn’t have any symptoms, or any evidence of damage associated with that syndrome. Not all mental quirks can cause it, and some believe that there has to be a harmful intent behind each use to cause damage.”

Shinsou still doesn’t look up, but his hands lift to sign. ‘ *Question game. My mom has it.* ’

Aizawa expected that the first few questions wouldn’t be questions at all, though he did have a small amount of hope that they would be. He brushes it off regardless, considering whether a reassuring lie would be convincing enough when he didn’t know the answer. “She doesn’t.”

He watches Shinsou sigh in relief, his hands raising to his face before he remembers himself, sitting up straight. Looking at Aizawa again before he glances to the side, but he looks back, gaze settling slightly to the left. ‘ *Your turn.* ’

He imagines that Shinsou doesn’t believe that this conversation won’t turn into an interrogation, and he imagines that Shinsou would answer even if it did. That he would consider a reassuring lie to be an even exchange for the information that he has guarded so resolutely. But Aizawa won’t take that opportunity. “Have you ever had a cat?”

He can see that Shinsou seems surprised, watching his eyes widen and head tilt just slightly in the pause he takes. ‘ *No.* ’ His hands curl inward, but he doesn’t ask a question. ‘ *Cat toy. M-O-C-H-A.* ’

Aizawa knows that Shinsou knows enough JSL to be clearer with his words, but he also knows that Shinsou might be signing in a purposefully vague way. He doesn’t know if Shinsou is referring to the stuffed animal in his room, or one that he had at some point in his childhood, but he takes note of the name anyway. “Your fondness for coffee must have started from a young age.”

He sees a twitch next to Shinsou’s mouth, but doesn’t know whether he’s fighting a smile or frown. He guards his expression too well, even now. ‘ *Your favorite coffee.* ’

“Black, dark roast,” Aizawa answers, holding back a deluge of brands and brewing methods that would put Midoriya’s ramblings to shame. “Sometimes Americano, if I don’t need as much caffeine. Have you ever had a Mocha?”

‘ *No,* ’ Shinsou answers, one hand curling in before he signs again. ‘ *Y-A-M-A-D-A wants food. I want M-O-C-H-A tomorrow. If okay.* ’

Aizawa nods, already seeing through Shinsou too clearly. Hizashi gave him an invitation to make his preferences known, and Shinsou accepted it. But he still sees it as an exchange of some sort, rather than a gesture of kindness. Kindness was just that foreign to Shinsou. “There’s a good coffee shop by the station. Hizashi isn’t exactly a trained barista, though he tried to pick it up as a hobby.”

Aizawa looks at Shinsou’s arms again, forcing himself not to look at the scars, and instead at the black band still left on his arm. Shinsou hides things well, but this might be too much for him to

hide, and Aizawa can see it clearly now.

Shinsou is afraid of the meeting tomorrow, and the black band, the empty space where Chisaki's brand was could be a way of reassuring himself. But Aizawa could offer something better. "The meeting will take place at the police station, at 5. Eri will be with Togata, and both Hizashi and I will go with you. We will be outside the room, while you and Naomasa meet with Chisaki and his lawyer. Chisaki is supposed to apologize to you, but if he deviates from that, or if he tries to threaten you, the meeting will end. And it won't happen again."

Shinsou nods shakily, his hands lifting to sign a few times before he places them back down. Aizawa waits, hoping that the relief he wanted to provide was enough. The knowledge of what was to come could be some kind of relief, though he didn't know if it would be any more bearable. '*Time now.*'

Aizawa pulls out his phone, before he realizes that he's pulled out Shinsou's. He lays it down on the table between them. "12:37. You can have your phone back as long as you don't tell my students about the meeting."

Aizawa still doesn't trust him not to, but he forces himself to pretend he does. He wouldn't blame Shinsou if he did, if he reached out to his students the same way he reached out to Bakugo. But he took from a child who had nothing, to protect his students. And in a selfish way, protect himself from knowing how disappointed and disillusioned in him they were.

Shinsou doesn't take the phone, but he looks at it long enough that Aizawa knows he wants to. Instead, he signs.

'*I want to go outside. 4 hours and one minute. Will give useless information in exchange. Can.*' Shinsou stops, glancing away before he looks back. '*Can give phone in exchange.*'

Aizawa was willing to play these games of exchange to learn more about Shinsou, but he's learned little else than how deep these games run. That every little interaction has to be a trade, every request he makes needs to be paid for. Even for something as simple as going outside, something that he does for Eri regardless of how difficult that little request can be at times.

Shinsou shouldn't feel like a prisoner here, but he does. And when he was a prisoner under the 8 Precepts, he imagines that those trips outside also had to be bargained for. This is what Shinsou knows, this is the game that he knows how to play.

Aizawa won't take the phone, and he feels all the more disgusted with himself for taking it in the first place. But he will play the game if that makes Shinsou more comfortable.

"We can go outside after you eat, at least half of that," Aizawa stipulates, knowing that the full meal was likely too much for Shinsou, though he wanted to make sure it was an option. "I can make some steamed buns if that would be easier."

Shinsou shakes his head, taking up the chopsticks with his left hand, but Aizawa no longer sees it as a deception.

They could play an honest game with each other, and they owed it to each other to do so now.

*

27 picks at the scarf around his neck, trying to calm his nerves. He asked for this, and that much was a risk. He hadn't been sure if his owner would allow it, but he seemed to be in a generous mood today.

He has the phone back, but he won't use it. He won't flaunt it, won't inspire his owner to take it again. Instead, he works on the math test, but finds himself at a point that he can't guess the answers anymore.

His owner sits in front of him at the table outside, sometimes staring at his phone, sometimes reading a book about feral cats. Despite how insistent he was that 27 should wear a jacket and scarf, he isn't wearing one. If it's a ploy to make 27 somehow pity his owner, it shouldn't work, but it does.

27 checks the time on his phone, and an hour still hasn't passed, but he begins the exchange anyway. '*Pick a number.*'

His owner looks back at him, from where he had been staring off across the campus. He knows that his owner saw him sign, that he doesn't have to repeat himself, but he feels like he should. That he should have found a way to phrase it in a way that didn't come across so demanding. "1."

27 feels his eyebrows come together, and tucks his chin into the scarf as though that would hide it. His owner must not know what he was offering, if they knew enough about The Miasma to only want Boss' name and the compound's location, they had to know about Numbers. '*Never existed. Could be too proud.*'

The first Number was 2, and they died long before 27 was purchased. Even 10 never met them, but he heard how much they boasted that they were the first. That they were the real number 1 because of that. They were sloppy in their work, and Bug finished them off after too many complaints. It was a lesson to never think too much about your number, never place any stock in it. The number was a name, and that was all it was.

He wonders if he should offer his owner another chance to pick, but that would defeat the purpose of the game. Every hour, he could pick a Number, and 27 would tell them what he knew about that Number. They probably knew their quirks, but 27 could offer better information. How they fought, what their weaknesses were. His owner might still have that information already, but there was a chance that he didn't.

It was useful information, but 27 could surrender it. He had to, to have this chance to be outside longer than he ever had been before.

He had been so close yesterday. Just another hour, and he would have passed that threshold. His jobs always lasted 4 hours, on the dot, and Chisaki had given him an hour and a half at most to be outside. If he could stay outside longer than that, he could convince himself that this was better. That this place really was better than The Miasma and the 8 Precepts.

He could feel more normal if he did, more than having a phone made him feel. He could close his eyes and imagine he was a person, a person who was allowed to do things like this. To be outside whenever he wanted to.

His owner looks confused, before his lips thin out in irritation. Maybe he should offer him another chance, maybe he should just tell him every Number that he knows, and drag it out to the point that he gets to stay outside regardless. He just wants this, he wants to pretend he can do this even if he can't. "Shinsou, we don't have to talk about the investigation."

It's so odd. 27 can't wrap his mind around this play, how insistent his owner is that he doesn't have to talk about the investigation. He's *here* for the investigation, that's the only reason that they're living together, the only reason that 27 isn't in jail right now. But his owner is acting more odd than usual, and 27 just has to accept that this is another one of his oddities, his false tells. The same

way that his owner tried to insist that he wasn't a criminal when he was 4 years old.

He was. He was a criminal from the day that his quirk manifested. His owner just hasn't seen his quirk in action, how disturbing it is. No one should have the power to take over another's mind, to make them look so blank, so soulless. There's a reason that 27 can. He was born to be a criminal.

He was never innocent. *'It's fine. Trade. Every hour.'*

27 looks back at the test, but he still doesn't know what it's asking for. He was able to solve most of the questions that asked what 'x' was, going through the basic arithmetic that he knew to figure out the number hidden behind the 'x.' But now the 'x' was on top of a fraction, and equivalent to another fraction. He doesn't know how to solve that one.

He should be better with numbers, being a Number. Seeing people behind some of the answers that he works out. 'X' becomes 127, becomes 98, becomes 58. Some of the 'x's are just stories that he's heard from 10, some of them are dead. He doesn't know what he would do if one of the 'x's were 50, if he would even be able to answer it. If he could convince himself that circling the answer wasn't tarnishing her memory in some way, to use her number like that.

"Would you like me to look over your test?" His owner asks, and 27 remembers that he's also a teacher. Yamada was supposed to be the one to grade his test, but his owner could too. He slides the test across the table, but keeps the notes that Eri wrote for him for the Hero Ethics class he missed yesterday.

He reads the first few lines before he realizes that his owner is still staring at him, and he looks up to confirm it. His owner is so odd, he almost looks bewildered to see 27 reading those notes. Eri wrote them for a reason, though 27 still doesn't know how she had caught on to his interest so easily.

"You...pay attention to my class?" His owner asks, and again, he seems surprised. 27 didn't write notes like the students did, had little reason to when the concepts seemed simple enough to follow. But the material was interesting, far more interesting than Chisaki's long winded lectures about Hero Syndrome and Quirk Plagues, and he would have listened even if his owner wasn't the one teaching it.

27 nods, and wonders if he should start asking questions again. His owner has taken two turns in a row without a question in return, but he's not sure if they're still supposed to be playing the Question Game. Before he thinks of one, his owner cups a hand over the back of his neck, and looks back at the compound before he stands.

"I'm going inside for a minute, don't..." His owner pauses, hand tightening into a near fist before it relaxes. "I would prefer if you stayed there while I'm gone."

27 nods, unsure why his owner worded his order so awkwardly. If it's a test, it's one it's an easy one to pass. He doesn't have anywhere else to go.

He likes this place. He likes living at UA, because sometimes when he closes his eyes, he can pretend that he's living here as a person. That he can have things like food, trips outside, and instruction on subjects he's interested in for free.

He knows they're not free, but it's easy to pretend.

*

Aizawa wraps the red woolen scarf around his neck, watching the coffee drip into a thermos, and

tries to wrap his head around what this situation has become.

Shinsou paid attention to his Hero Ethics class. *Willingly* .

He didn't even hesitate to pick up his lesson plans from the office, still wondering if he should start from the beginning of the year for class 3-A's lecture notes or whether he should start from the very beginning with class 1-A's. If Shinsou might notice the difference and be insulted that the first topic was a discussion of what the word 'Ethics' really meant.

If they could even have a discussion, if Shinsou's interest in the subject was enough to finally crack the wall built up between them. If his signing could finally be as fluent as it was with Hizashi, rather than those stilted, awkward sentences he shared with Aizawa.

He's never been more jealous of Hizashi in his *life* , to know that Shinsou has been such an eager student for Hizashi, while Aizawa never imagined that Shinsou might have wanted to learn something from him.

Especially ethics. His students had to be trained to pay attention, had to be threatened more often than not. In the end, it paid off with attentive and well-educated third years who could answer both philosophical and tactical questions with no hesitation. Heroes who knew themselves well enough to answer to any situation resolutely, and without question.

Out of all of his classes, his Hero Ethics courses were the ones that he enjoyed teaching the most. Principal Nezu had offered more than once to cut them to lighten his coursework, but he never allowed it, could never be forced to choose between the homeroom that established his class as his, and his ethics courses where he could polish every Class A student into the mindset of the hero they wanted to become.

He doesn't know why Shinsou is interested in his ethics classes, and doubts that he wants to become a hero. In the back of his mind, he knows that Shinsou has the capability to be a great one, but beyond that, he knows that Shinsou isn't in a place to fathom what he wants to be when he grows up. Before Shinsou could know what occupation he wants to have as an adult, he should at least be able to pick his own clothes to wear, or be able to pass elementary school mathematics.

He's honestly a little relieved that Shinsou started looking over the notes that Eri took for him. It might be more productive for Shinsou to work on his math, but Aizawa couldn't remember how to solve that particular algebra equation, and the rest of his test was even less promising.

Aizawa tries to froth the milk with a whisk, but he realizes quickly that it isn't a proper substitute for the correct method. When he reaches for the chocolate syrup, he can practically hear Recovery Girl chiding him, but he reasons that the decaffeinated coffee and nearly completed lunch makes up for it to some degree. It's cold outside anyway.

It's not a Mocha, but it's the best that Aizawa can make, and he owes it to his newest student to start off with a good first impression.

*

Mirio was acting weird today.

Eri was really glad that he came to get her after Yama's free class, because she really kind of hates sitting by his desk in front of his whole class. A lot of heroes she doesn't know keep telling her she's cute, but they say it in a weird way, like they're not even talking to her. Even if she wouldn't be mean and tell Yama she doesn't like it, she's really happy she gets to skip Yama's Class C class,

because he really hates it, and they'd probably be really loud when they talk about how cute she is.

She likes that she gets to walk around the school building with Mirio instead, catching monsters on his phone, but he keeps trying to hide his face, or smush it against a wall when she's not looking. She hopes that Mirio isn't getting sick, because he said that his teacher let him out of class because they're doing quirk stuff, but he might have been lying. He might actually be really sick, and if he's sick, he should be in bed instead of playing monster games with her.

"Mirio, are you okay?" Eri asks, and Mirio looks up from where he had his face smushed against a wall. His face looks really red, like people on TV do when they have a fever, or when they're really embarrassed.

He gives her a really big smile, and scratches the back of his head a lot. "Yeah! I'm super-duper! I get to hang out with my best buddy today instead of having to go to class, and da-Mic-sensei said we can hang out after school too!"

Eri leans on one of her feet to think better, because Mirio started calling Yama 'da-Mic-sensei' today, but his voice gets really squeaky and high when he says the 'Mic' part. "Are you giving Yama a new name? Everyone calls Yama 'Mic-sensei' or 'Yamada-sensei,' but since you're really good friends, you should have your own name for Yama!"

Mirio closes his mouth really tight, and tries to cover his face with his hands. "Uh, no, that's not really..." Mirio sighs really loud, and puts a hand behind his head kind of like Zawa does sometimes. "It's kind of embarrassing, but I had this really silly dream last night that Mic-sensei was my dad. And I guess I can't stop thinking about how silly it was, because I keep accidentally calling him my dad. It's just really silly, isn't it, Eri?"

Eri shakes her head. "I don't think it's silly! You both have yellow hair, and you smile a lot, and Yama worries about you a lot like a dad does! And if Yama was your dad, then you could be my real big brother!"

Eri feels her face getting really hot when she remembers that Yama isn't really her dad, he's just kind of her TV dad. It must be really silly that she forgets that too.

But it's really easy to forget that when they do all the dad stuff together, and she gets to live with Yama and Zawa like TV families do. They get to eat together, and Yama and Zawa read her bedtime stories when she asks them to. Zawa always draws cute cats on her omurice, and Yama always takes her on fun shopping trips. She kind of wishes they could pick out a name for her and adopt her already, but they took a long time to pick out their married name and ended up not picking one at all. She might have to wait until she's really old to get adopted, so she just has to be patient right now.

Mirio looks at her kind of funny, because his eyes look kind of sad, but he still has a smile. It's just kind of like his smaller one, but different. "I guess it really isn't that silly, then. Mic-sensei is a really good dad, especially for you. Right, Eri?"

Eri nods, but she still feels really embarrassed. "I don't know if I can call him that though. Yama might get mad. Or maybe Zawa would get really mad, but.... Maybe I'm not supposed to call them my dad."

Mirio does his hero pose with his fist in the air, and smiles really big at her. "We can find out! Why don't we both go to Mic-sensei, and call him 'Dad'? If he gets really mad or upset, then we'll know if it's okay or not! I can go first if you want me to!"

Eri nods a lot, because she's still kind of scared that Yama might not want her to call him 'Dad,' but she knows that he wants Mirio to, because he talks about Mirio's dad in a kind of mean voice. And if Yama doesn't like Mirio's dad, it must mean that Yama wants to be a better dad for Mirio.

Mirio picked her up, and started carrying her to Yama's class, and it was a really good idea to do that. The doors of the other classes opened up, and a lot of heroes ran out the door really quick, and Eri might have gotten lost with all the heroes around.

Yama looks kind of mad at his phone, but he looks up and smiles when Mirio walks into the classroom. "Hey listeners! Did you have fun cutting class to chase around pocket monsters?"

"Sure did, D..." Mirio stops talking, and he has to smile really big before he starts again. "Dad! Eri, did you have fun?"

Yama doesn't look like he's mad at Mirio, because he kind of looks like he's trying not to move at all. Eri can't kick one of her feet, but she knows that Mirio really wants her to call Yama 'Dad,' because he said it already. "I had a lot of fun, Dad!"

Yama still doesn't look like he's mad, but his face gets really *really* red, like he's really sick, and he looks behind him for a while. But then he turns around, and he has a really big, really nice smile on his face. "I'm really glad you guys had fun! We should, uh, head home I guess! School's over and all, and I know you missed seeing Shinsou today, and um. Yeah! Let's head over there, then!"

Yama picks up his stuff really quick, and he almost forgets her backpack. But when he walks over, he doesn't give her backpack back for her to carry.

Yama gives her and Mirio a really big hug, and even if she gets a little smushed trying to hug Yama back while Mirio does too, Eri still kind of likes it. Especially when Yama messes up her hair and Mirio's too, when he rubs his hands all over their heads. "I'm really glad that I've got such great kids."

Eri's really glad that she has such great dads, and she even gets to call them that.

*

27 shouldn't have taken the notes outside.

His owner is flipping through his book again, his frown has gotten deeper every time that he does it. He's disappointed, *incredibly* disappointed in how stupid 27 is. He probably regrets buying him.

He just can't answer those questions the right way.

Some of them were fine, they were fun to talk about. Tactics, the mental coordination of a fight. Those were the things that he enjoyed learning from his owner. They were things that he was good at talking about, his owner nodding and even smiling when he noted something that he had learned from experience. How to pick a weakness beneath the obvious strength, how quirks and allegiances could change the way a person fought.

But most of those questions weren't about that. They were about right or wrong, and 27 didn't know what his owner wanted to hear from him. What was right now that 27 was owned by a hero.

Chisaki abided by a unique yakuza code, and 27 learned it soon enough. The Miasma's code was to do whatever the client wanted, whatever the client thought was right was right, unless it went against The Miasma. But even when he figured out what would be the opposite of all of those codes, what *should* be the correct answer for a hero, his owner still frowned. At the hesitation or

the answer, he didn't know.

“ *What would you do in that scenario?* ”

It was a test, and it felt as miserable to be unable to answer it as the math test did. 27 didn't know what his owner wanted to hear, and he had been struggling with that ever since this ethics lecture began.

He feels all the more envious of the hero students in Class 3-A for answering so readily, so assuredly. He doesn't know if they just know what his owner wanted to hear more than he did, or if they didn't have to answer in a way that pleased him. Or if they just knew their own answers because they've never had to change themselves to fit a hundred different expectations and names, shifting with every owner and client that they never had.

He checks the time again and breathes a sigh of relief to know that it's almost over, this four hour long proof that UA is different is almost done. It doesn't feel as freeing as he hoped it would be, but he could always look back on that number, four hours and one minute, and know that he was just a little more free here than he had ever been.

And his owner still hasn't picked the last three numbers. When he offered the next one, his owner waved him off, intent to discuss the standard yakuza code instead. That topic was easy to get lost in, and his owner seemed to learn more from 27 than 27 did from his owner.

He hopes that his owner won't brush him off again. ‘ *Pick three numbers.* ’

His owner sees his signing, he knows that, but he stares back at the notes long enough that 27 nearly repeats himself. Before he does, his owner closes them, looking at his phone before he frowns, and looks back at 27 with that same unreadably blank look.

As much as 27 hated the scrutiny that came with these hero ethics lectures, he did enjoy seeing another face that his owner could wear. Smiles, interest, even frowns. Now they were back to the investigation, back to the reminder of who they were, and why they lived together. A hero and a criminal, forced to live together for the investigation.

“50,” his owner says, and 27 wishes that he didn't. That he had said any other number, that he wouldn't ask for hers.

He knows the sign for ‘dead,’ but he doesn't want to sign it. He doesn't want to make it more real in that way, and he doesn't want to give his owner *anything* about her. Even if he was his owner, he could own everything else that 27 had, but he couldn't have that.

“8,” his owner says, glancing off to the side. “58.”

27 could take all three numbers as his answers, but he wants to play dumb. He will, even if he's not allowed to, just to have this chance to keep her safe. ‘ *Illusion quirk. 3 meter. Affects objects and people. Voice. Appearance. Distraction jobs. Very nervous, easy to confuse. Uses G-U-N.* ’

His owner nods, a bit more than he usually does, and folds his hands in front of him on the table. He looks around them again, likely making sure that this information is secure, before he asks, “Do you remember who attacked you in the cell?”

27 swallows, nearly signs that this isn't how the game is supposed to go. His owner is cheating, and he's asking for very useful information, more than 27 honestly wanted to give him. But he was allowed to be outside, he created this game knowing that risk, and he had to answer to it. ‘ *127. Invisible. 15 meter. Affects objects and people. Theft jobs. Kill jobs. Very important. Never failed.* ’

27 folds his hands in front of him, willing them not to shake. Trying to get Bug's words out of his head, *You won't tell anyone anything about The Miasma.*

"I have his number, then," his owner says in a low, angry voice. 27 looks up, knowing that he shouldn't, knowing that it's stupid to do so, but the sudden change in his owner's demeanor is startling, as is the way that his tone softens. "It's a way of saying that I know who I'm dealing with. I haven't captured many invisibility quirks in my career, but there's a certain satisfaction in erasing their quirk when I do. I wouldn't even say it's sadistic if I had the chance to face this '127'."

There is a tinge of sadism in his owner's words, and 27 doesn't even know what to feel about it. 127 was just doing his job, and he will probably be sent out to do it again. Even if 127 won't be as pleasant as he was the first time, likely irritated that 27 survived and marred his flawless record, he doesn't want 127 to be killed by his owner.

But it's just a little reassuring to know that his owner doesn't want 27 to be killed by 127 either. Even if he knows it's just for the investigation, even if he knows that he will probably be disposed of at the end of it, and maybe even killed by his owner's hand. He can ignore those things if he wants to, and pretend that his owner somehow cares.

It's a nice feeling, but 27 doesn't want to get lost in it. *'Last number.'*

"27," his owner says, without any hesitation. 27 meets his eyes on accident, still trying to figure out what he means by that.

'Me.' 27 answers, though his owner should know that. His owner should know his number, and he shouldn't ask about it. Shouldn't want to know anything about it. His was the most useless number that he could have picked.

"I know," his owner says, as though that makes any sense. "Tell me about '27.'"

27 realizes what he means. He wants to know all of 27's crimes. He knows what he did to Eri, he knows what he did at the 8 Precepts, but he doesn't know about the jobs he did for The Miasma.

He doesn't want to know about his quirk, when his quirk was useless. And he wouldn't want to know 27's weaknesses, when he knew the broken pieces better than he should. He wanted to know about the jobs he performed, what few he did, and would probably keep a record of them so that 27 could face time in jail if he wasn't killed at the end of the investigation. If he wasn't kept, and 27 knows that admitting those crimes would make that goal completely unattainable.

But unlike his owner, 27 played the game fairly. *'Distraction. B-O-D-Y-G-U-A-R-D. Not often. Too small. Just number. Flashy quirk. Three K-I-D-N-A-P-P-I-N-G. Interrogation.'*

His hands start shaking again, almost making the sign incomprehensible. He was used as an interrogation tactic *once*, on his first job, and Boss almost cut ties with Honzo over that. He doesn't remember a lot of what happened, during it or afterwards due to the concussion. But he remembers barely being able to breathe, the sound of his ribs cracking every time he tried, and 10's panicked muttering.

He wasn't supposed to come back from that. Honzo had broken him too much, but 10 said it was a good thing he was young. He was rubbery. He was small, which meant he was young, and Honzo later admitted that he wanted him because of that. On one of the nicer jobs he had with Honzo, just being a Number to fill his ranks, Honzo told him how easy it was to break that police officer by breaking 27. Heroes and police officers, people like that couldn't stand to watch a child being

beaten to death when they could stop it, if they're good ones. And it was such a shame that police officer was one of the good ones.

“-sou.”

27 curls his hands without thinking about it, testing how weightless they were, before he makes the effort to move them under the table, to keep curling them. Yamada's tactic seemed to work.

While he lets it work, 27 looks around, checking his surroundings. He's gotten too lazy with that, too complacent. His owner did it often enough outside, but he should check for himself, he shouldn't trust him like that.

When he feels only halfway in the fog, he picks up the thermos to take a sip. He doesn't know why this coffee is odd, it's unbearably sweet but it doesn't make him feel any more awake. He wishes that it did, that it could clear the fog faster that way.

He looks at his owner's shoulder, and has a sudden urge to breathe as deeply as he can, to prove that he can. That his ribs won't shift where they've broken if he does. And they don't. *'Sorry. Distracted.'*

“No, I'm sorry,” his owner says, and he watches his arm rise, likely to curl around his neck or play with his hair. “I didn't want to talk about the investigation today. I would rather just get to know you.”

27 still doesn't know what he means by that. He knows more about 27 than anyone else does, more than an owner should. He knows about his unmade hand, his dangerous affection for Eri, the things that he likes. *'It's fine.'*

His owner knows how easy it would be to poison 27 with coffee.

27 checks the time on his phone, breathing a stilted sigh of relief. Most poisons take a while to take effect, some linger at the bottom of a drink. He hasn't reached the bottom, only halfway, and if that much was enough to take effect, it would still give him enough time. Only 10 minutes left until he could prove that he was free.

Memory's poisons took 10 minutes. Enough time for her to leave, to cover her tracks. But that wouldn't be enough time for his owner, not when Yamada, Eri, and Mirio were approaching.

Mirio waves as he sprints past, calling that he would be right back, and Eri quickly scrambles into his lap to give him a hug. “Twenny, I missed you! I had a lot of fun today, but I only went to Yama's classes, so I couldn't take notes for Zawa's. But Mirio said he did!”

“Shinsou and I went over the course notes together today,” his owner says, smiling fondly at Eri. “Though I wouldn't mind looking over Togata's notes to make sure that Ectoplasm didn't take any liberties.”

“Oh, had a little study sesh outside, did we? That sounds like a lot of fun,” Yamada says with a tense smile, his hand squeezing his owner's shoulder just a bit too tightly. “Must have been so much fun that you didn't check your phone the whole time, am I right?”

“Yeah, Yama was trying to talk to you all day,” Eri says, playing with the zipper of 27's jacket. She tucks her head under his before she speaks again, almost too quietly for him to hear. “Dad.”

27 forces himself to look at his owner's face, to forget about the risk of being poisoned and the time that he's still waiting for. He holds Eri close, hopes that she earns the right reaction, hopes

that her bold declaration is met with the bold acceptance that she deserves.

It isn't. His owner's eyes widen, his face reddens, and he turns away to look at Yamada. There's a conversation going on between them, without words and without sign, and 27 knows immediately that Eri has already made her intentions known to Yamada. He knows that Yamada accepted them. He has no proof but no doubts either.

His owner looks back at Eri, still shocked. "Sorry, I...was busy. I didn't check it."

27 will *never* forgive him.

DadMic

Chapter Summary

Yamada and Aizawa have an important discussion, but return to the dorm to find that the number of their children has increased again.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None! The fluffiest of chapters for you guys!

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa assigned Bakugo a 100 page essay on the topic of trauma related disorders after he had a fight with Shinsou, which is due at the end of the month and Bakugo will be expelled if he does not complete it in time. Shinsou had been wearing a 'Lemillion' shirt today. Shinsou threatened to fillet Bakugo's hands if he swore around Eri. Class 1-A assumed that Shinsou was sick since he hasn't been at school for the past two days. When Ms. Joke visited, she distributed 'Delete Face' shirts to the majority of Class 1-A, which caused Aizawa to nearly expel them. Bakugo tutored Shinsou in math but that study session ended poorly when Bakugo found Shinsou's stash of objects that are important to him.

As soon as the wards and Togata walk through the door, Hizashi throws Aizawa a bottle of his medicated eyedrops. “You’re going to need that.”

And Aizawa knows exactly what kind of argument this is.

He follows Hizashi silently across campus, to Gym Gamma, and watches as Hizashi dismisses the few students already there, lying that the gym was already rented out for the hour. Aizawa tries not to be concerned with that number, trying to convince himself that this should take 30 minutes at most.

But when his husband turns on his heel to look at him, Aizawa isn’t sure of that, and he uses the eyedropper to prepare himself.

“So! Where to start!” Hizashi says, clapping his hands together as he begins pacing. This will be a bad one. “Oh, how about WHY DID YOU tell Bakugo to convince Shinsou to talk about the investigation?! YOU KNOW what Bakugo is dealing with, and YOU SHOULDn’t have done this little trauma project in THE FIRST PLACE. HE hasn’t slept in three days, SHOU! HIS FRIENDS are worried, and I’m worried too! You should have seen Kirishima, HE’S WORRIED SICK and just- WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?”

Aizawa closes his eyes, placing his hands over them to help them recover a bit faster. His hair has almost worked itself out of its tie, but he won't ask for a break for Hizashi to give him enough time to re-tie it. "I was hoping that Bakugo could convince him. They seem to be close-"

"SO SHINSOU'S FIRST friend should just *manipulate* him like that?! And don't get me started on the little spy ring you've got going on! LET ME TELL YOU, that's over! Done! Your little mole is burned! The KEYLOGGER IS CREEPY ENOUGH, SHOU!"

He's getting out of practice, and has to sign for Hizashi to stop, working two more eyedrops in while he blinks against the light. When he feels like his eyelids won't stick with every blink, he sighs, knowing that this will only get Hizashi started on a much higher note. "I took Shinsou's phone and looked through some of the chat today. I won't do it again."

He knows that he's really done it, because Hizashi just gapes at him. He knows that Hizashi doesn't do it on purpose, but when he mouths silently like that, it's harder to detect when he begins to speak. "YOU TOOK HIS PHONE?! SHOU, you can't- YOU KNOW. YOU LOOKED THROUGH HIS..."

Hizashi spins on his heel, running his hands through his hair to start to free it from the gel. Aizawa knows that he's cutting himself off because Aizawa hasn't used his quirk to do it. He feels like he's more than earned the ringing in his ears at this point.

"Babe," Hizashi says, spinning around with his hands pressed together in front of him. He can tell by the wince that he's struggling to monitor his own quirk, something that becomes almost impossible when he gets that worked up. "I know you and Shinsou don't get along that great. I DON'T- I don't get it, because you're honestly just *so* alike, it's scary. Like, if I wasn't there, I'd swear you were having sex with a woman when you were 16. And *I know* you weren't."

Aizawa still doesn't see what Hizashi does. Cats, coffee, the odd observation about their teeth that Todoroki made. Their similarities are so superficial, and he knows that his husband knows them both well enough to see past that.

"But, seriously, can you *try*? Try to get along with the kid? Forget the investigation, and if you tried to get anything from him today, I SWEAR, I will very seriously consider divorcing you! But just- Shou, really. The kid has been through enough, both of these kids have, and they don't need any more from you."

"I'm trying," Aizawa says, rubbing at his ear while he considers keeping this from Hizashi for the sake of his ear drums, before he decides against it. "He gave me information that could be critical-"

"SHOU I SWEAR-"

"He offered it," Aizawa says, keeping his quirk active until Hizashi crosses his arms, closing his mouth. Hopefully willing to listen. "There's a question game that he plays. I tried to use it just to have a conversation with the kid, but he told me to pick a number. Those numbers are members of the Nomu Organization."

Hizashi glares, but he nods.

"There's a chance that Naomasa can work with that information, and give The Commission a reason not to go through with the meeting tomorrow," Aizawa says, grimacing. "I doubt that it will be enough, but there's a chance. If we offer proof that Shinsou is willing to talk, as long as we don't stress him with something like this."

Hizashi sighs, his head tipping back while he rubs at his forehead. “But Chisaki has better intel, so they *won’t*, the insufferable pricks. *God*, I always thought that Nemuri was exaggerating.”

Aizawa knows, but he can’t sit on the information that Shinsou gave him when there was a chance that it could be useful. “We had a nice day. Talked. He...actually pays attention to my class.”

Hizashi smiles at him, lifting an eyebrow. “He’s a smart kid, Shou. He wants to learn anything, even if it’s your stuffy little philosophy mumbo-jumbo. And maybe, he just likes learning stuff from you.”

Aizawa unties his hair, ignoring that implication. He doubts it too much to consider it a possibility. “He wants a mocha, instead of food. As much as you hate my ‘spy ring,’ making your own is rather hypocritical.”

Hizashi rolls his eyes.

“How was Eri today?” Aizawa asks, knowing that if that little jab didn’t set off another argument, then the argument was well and over with.

Hizashi looks nervous, trying to smooth over his hair while he tries to look anywhere but at Aizawa. “Uh, you know. Good! A little down about Shinsou staying home, but you know. She called me ‘Dad’?”

Aizawa bites down on an incredibly irrational thought, an illogical bitterness that Yamada was called that first, and sighs. “It might be the separation. I knew it was too soon for them to be apart for that long-”

“Babe, uh,” Hizashi interrupts, fidgeting with his headphones. “Maybe it’s not? I mean, we’re... You know, taking care of her, living with her. She’s a little kid, and she needs a dad, or two dads, and I wouldn’t... be opposed?”

Aizawa doesn’t know what to say to that.

Hizashi is being so completely irrational that it stirs up something illogical in him. Something that feels like it’s clicking into place, that conversation about legal names, the red eyes that Eri drew on his birthday present. How easy it is to relax with her warm little weight on his chest, to smile at every little accomplishment she makes. How often he’s caught himself wondering about school districts, when he knows that Eri won’t be able to attend a proper school until she’s gained control over her quirk.

“It’s been a month,” Aizawa says, unable to say it to Hizashi’s face, instead looking at the nearest sparring court painted on the ground. “We shouldn’t be thinking like that.”

“But,” Hizashi says, walking towards him to drape an arm over his shoulders, pulling him in close so he can’t escape. “You wouldn’t be opposed either?”

“We need to give it time,” Aizawa answers, which is a non-answer that he knows his husband can see through immediately. He just hopes that he can still hear the part that means caution, awareness. Eri has been through enough, and she deserves to have a place and a family that will give her the best in life.

That might not mean two heroes with five jobs between them, whose life expectancies are shorter than other industries. She’s terrified of the sight of blood, and Aizawa can’t promise that he can always hide that from her when his patrols line up with Hizashi’s, and they both come home wounded.

But that wouldn't be for lack of trying. They would both try to give her the best in life, but they need to consider whether they can.

"We'll give it time," Hizashi says, wrapping his other arm around Aizawa. "And Mirio called me 'Dad' too, so--"

"*Hizashi.*" Hizashi *almost* won that argument with Todoroki, but he won't let him win with Togata. "Togata has a father."

"Who hasn't called him since the raid," Hizashi argues. "Who didn't even *visit* him in the hospital--"

"Togata," Aizawa starts, considers leaving out the truth before he remembers who he's talking to. The man who would see through it before the words even left his mouth. "Didn't want him to. He asked me to make sure he wouldn't."

He feels Hizashi recoil a bit, not pulling away from the one-sided embrace completely, but enough to know that information is shocking. "Why would he do that, Shou? He needed someone there, especially after...."

Aizawa shakes his head. "In one of his assignments, he mentioned that his father had reservations about his becoming a hero. I imagine he didn't want to hear any reassurances that he could still take over the family business."

Togata wasn't meant to be a grocer, despite the warm smile and cheerful demeanor that Aizawa had no doubt would fall off his face within a week. Permeation was a quirk that most wrote off as pedestrian, but Togata worked hard to mold it into something heroic. It was that kind of willpower hiding beneath the surface that left Aizawa with no doubts that he would regain his quirk and be a better hero for it. If Togata had already changed his quirk's utility to suit his needs, he had no doubt that he could do the impossible, and mold his current circumstances to fit his vision of the future.

"If he wants that support from you, that's good. But that doesn't mean you should start filing for adoption for every student who calls you 'Dad,'" Aizawa says, tipping his head back to his husband's shoulder as he tries to imagine how many children they would have adopted by this point. The dorm situation had not helped, but it was a common enough slip of the tongue beforehand, to the point that a new instructor couldn't truly call themselves a teacher until it happened.

"If you say so," Hizashi sighs, his hands wandering a bit lower than they should, considering that they were in a building that Aizawa *knew* Principal Nezu had surveillance cameras.

"I need to call Naomasa," Aizawa says, trying to pull himself away from his husband, only to be pulled back even tighter.

"Mm, text him. We've got 45 minutes and you've got two hands," Hizashi whispers into his ear, before his voice drops lower. "And I bet I can make you call me--"

He can't silence Hizashi with his quirk anymore, but the hair that catches in his mouth is enough to do the trick. "*Never.* Say that. Again."

It takes much longer to text Naomasa than it should have.

*

27 places the shirt back in his closet, relieved that Mirio hadn't seen him wearing it, and looks back

at Eri.

She's kicking both of her feet pretty hard against the edge of the bed, holding Mocha close to her chest. She isn't even distracted with the chance to touch his scars, so he knows she's upset. And rightfully so. "Eri, I can't pick another shirt."

She frowns up at him, kicking one of her legs higher than the other. "I want you to wear that shirt. Big brother Mirio would be really happy if you wore it."

"Maybe, but it's embarrassing," 27 says, wavering before he returns to the T-shirts in the back of his closet. He needs to be able to remind himself, to be able to look at the empty space where his skin became his again. That victory over Chisaki for when he wavers, when he thinks about it.

"Is Mirio gonna be your son or your brother if Yama and Zawa get to be my dads?" Eri asks, and 27 has to cover his mouth to stop from laughing. To imagine calling Mirio his son. As nice as it was to have kept Eri sheltered from the likes of Rikiya, she probably needed to know how babies were made. Eventually.

"Definitely not my son," 27 answers, though he doesn't let himself wonder what he would be if the game worked perfectly. The thought of being his owner and Yamada's son was equally ridiculous.

"Is it okay if I call them my dad?" Eri asks, and he doesn't need to look to know that it's one kick. "It's okay if it's not, you're my mom and you can tell me no. And I don't think they like it anyway."

27 tugs the Delete Face shirt off its hanger without a second thought. "Yamada does. And it doesn't matter what Aizawa thinks. Even if he's too stupid to realize it now, he likes it too."

27 pulls the shirt on, and turns to face Eri, to find that angry pout that he probably deserved after that slip. "Zawa's not stupid! You're being mean, Twenny!"

"I didn't..." 27 stops, because he *absolutely* meant it, before he decides to lie for Eri's sake. "I didn't mean that. I just really want this to work out for you, and I wish that he would be honest for once."

Eri cuts her eyes in another glare, before she starts staring at the floor. 27 runs a hand through his hair, trying to settle himself before he sits down and wraps an arm around her. She doesn't lean against him like she usually does, and he tries not to get lost in wondering if it's another sign that she doesn't need him. That she has her fathers now, and doesn't need a mother. That she's slipping away that quickly.

"I've only ever wanted you to be happy, Eri. To be safe, and taken care of. And even if I was a little stupid at first, I know they would do that for you," 27 says, and finally gets that lean, that warm little weight against his side. "We just need to be patient for a while."

Eri's fingers start tracing the back of his hand, wandering over the scars there. The claw marks, the knife wound. At least she seems content enough to ignore the Bug scars. "If you called them 'Dad' too, then maybe it would be okay."

"It wouldn't," 27 says, recoiling at the thought. He can't even *imagine* how poorly that would go over for him. "It's different for me. But it's not for you, and that's good. That's all I need."

Eri looks up at him, her lips still in a tiny pout, but he knows that she's putting it on at this point. He might have fallen for it a thousand times before, in a different room and for different reasons, but this time he just pats her arm and sighs.

“Trust me, I can’t. It’s just really good that you can,” 27 says, before he hears a familiar voice that couldn’t be more out of place.

“ Ho fucking ho, what the fuck even is this? If that shitty extra handed me a bag of trash to bring up here- ”

27 rolls his eyes, he doesn’t want to deal with Blasty today. The Hero Ethics lecture was enough, and he doesn’t think he can stand to stare at any more numbers today. He doesn’t trust himself not to see the Numbers behind them, to get lost and fall away if he does. Especially if he sees 50.

But another voice cuts through, and all he can tell is that it’s from one of the female students, before Eri throws herself off the bed, jumping up and down in front of him. “Ocha’s here! C’mom Twenny, Ocha’s here!”

He *especially* doesn’t want to deal with Floaty, but Eri takes his hand, and he can’t refuse being dragged along behind her. She lets go once they get to the end of the hallway, and 27 fights the urge to bolt back into his room when he sees how many people are standing in the living room, staring at him.

Floaty is holding a large pot for some reason, requiring both of her hands which prevents her from returning Eri’s affection when she holds onto her leg. Red Shark, Izuku, and Mirio are standing awkwardly together, shoulder to shoulder as if they’re trying to hide something, and doing so poorly.

But Blasty just hisses between his teeth before he stomps over to 27, trying to grab his shirt before 27 deflects on instinct. “Oi, you want to have this out here or take it some place private? Bitch, you *never* check the fucking chat, so I had to drag my ass out here with all of these goddamn extras-”

27 twirls the knife just for show, and levels a glare at Blasty before he glances at Eri.

“Cool it with your fuck-friggin’ creepy ass obsessed *bullshit* ,” Blasty hisses, but he throws his hands in the air, and Mirio’s panicked waving makes 27 sheath the knife.

“Um, we brought soup!” Floaty oddly interjects, holding the pot upwards as though that would explain anything about this situation. “We thought you... but it doesn’t look like you are, but it’s still pretty tasty!”

27 wonders if Mirio has ever used his quirk to sink through the floor, just to avoid awkward situations like these. ‘ *Thanks.* ’

If they were still staring at him, expecting *him* to fill the silence, then they were stupider than he thought.

“Dude, I like your shirt!” Kirishima says, placing his elbow on Izuku’s shoulder to try to appear more relaxed than he really was. “Sensei really lets you wear that, though? He got so mad when-”

“Can you extras just fu-” Just a glare is enough now, though Blasty returns it. “LEAVE, already?! I told you, he’s not freaking sick!”

“Yeah, maybe we are intruding a little,” Izuku says, before staring at Blasty intently, his eyes a little too wide. “So maybe we should *all* leave, instead of bothering Shinsou when he’s not supposed to be at school. Right, Kacchan?”

Eri shakes her head, and he doesn’t need to look at her expression to know that she’s already sealed his fate. “But I missed you guys! I didn’t get to see you at all today!”

These heroes were *weak*, falling over themselves to comfort Eri and reassure her that they missed her too. Blasty tries to take the distraction as an opportunity to make another grab, but 27 swats him away, and tilts his head towards his room.

It wasn't a concession, it was an escape. And a way to keep Blasty's foul mouth away from Eri.

Blasty kicks the door closed, and he should be trained better than that. Eri could have kept the others occupied for a while if he didn't make their exit so noticeable. "Don't *fucking* tell me you want to do this shit. It's fucked up, it's not happening, and you're just going to have to sort through all that Stockholm bullshit in the next 10 minutes because that's all I'm fucking giving you before I just beat the shit out of you, alright?"

'*Time limits good. Increases anticipation. Proud of you, Blast-chan,*' 27 signs, knowing from the blank look on Blasty's face that he has no idea what he's signed, other than the sign name that earns another hiss.

"Get your fucking phone out, I'm not dealing with this shit," Blasty growls, before he throws himself on the bed, groaning afterwards. He seems tired.

27 doesn't care. Blasty's made a nuisance of himself, he swears in front of Eri. He rooted through his collection and revealed its existence to Yamada, and 27 was lucky that didn't turn into another horrible review of his trash. Blasty could wear those under-eye circles and look like the corpse he constantly compared 27 to. He didn't care.

"Look, this shit is fucked up, and you can't handle it. Half of those idiots standing out there don't know about it, but if they did? They'd beat the shit out of Shitsei for pulling this," Blasty says, and he still sounds too tired. 27 still doesn't care, at all. "After all the shit they went through to rescue your dumb ass, you think you're just going to walk into a room with that trash bird ass bitch and get away with it? Fuck no. Just fucking tell Sensei what he wants to hear."

Since Blasty still won't get off his bed, he has to accommodate him. "*Ca-an't tell him anythi-ing. I'm mu-ute.*"

Blasty throws a pillow at him, but his aim is horribly off, and 27 can't even catch it. "Pay attention, smart ass. You're fucked in the head, and Chisaki is going to skull fuck you even more. But that shit ain't happening, alright?"

27 looks at Blasty again, making sure that he would struggle to get to his feet more than 27 would, before he sits in his chair. "*You were a-at the raid?*"

Blasty scoffs. "Bitch, we wouldn't be having this conversation if I was. Bitch ass bird would be in fucking *pieces*."

27 stores that mental image away for later, before he types again. "*I lo-ost every fight o-on purpose. I do-on't have to lose no-ow.*"

Blasty sits up, eyebrow raised, but 27 ignores that insult. He beat Rappa a few times, and even if these hero students didn't believe it, 27 could always know it for himself. He could know that he won something, even while he was losing.

"*I wa-ant to fight hi-im and win.*"

Blasty just shakes his head before he collapses back on the bed, throwing an arm over his face. Then he laughs, sounding all the more exhausted for it. "You're fucking crazy. Crazier than shit, shitface."

He's heard that before. From Bug when he pulled a particularly stupid stunt, and amused her a bit more than angered her. From other Numbers when he picked a tougher opponent that day, or when some of the jumpier ones were disturbed by his silent gaze. Even clients tried to take advantage of it, telling him to widen his eyes, not blink, and smile as much as he could beneath the mask. Look crazy, look dangerous. *It's more disturbing because you're young.*

Being broken and being crazy might not be different in some ways, but there was one important distinction. 27 never wanted to be broken, but he was proud to pull off something crazy, something that no one believed he could do.

But there was something different in Blasty's red eyes when he rolled over on his elbow, that snarl replaced with amusement. Something that might mean that he believed that he could.

"Fine, you want to do this stupid shit? I'll give you the fucking hacks. But if you log out, I swear to fuck I'm gonna tear Shitsei a new asshole."

27 stores that mental image away as well.

*

Yamada watches Shouta open the door before he closes it, and braces his arms against it. "Zashi. How many students called you 'Dad' today?"

Yamada can't help but grin, just to egg him on, before he fluffs Shouta's hair to cover up what the missing capture scarf couldn't. "How many little herolets are behind door number one?"

"Too many," Shouta says, offering a half-hearted glare before he glances over his shoulder. "It's Togata's responsibility, he can tell us when they leave-"

"Hey!" Mirio says, opening the door with a smile and a wave, though both falter. "So, a few of Shinsou's friends wanted to stop by and bring some soup, I hope that's okay. It's really tasty! You should try some!"

Shouta didn't give him a headcount, which was worrying enough, but with the strain behind Mirio's eyes, Yamada is worried that most of Class 1-A has crammed themselves into their dorm. Between himself and Shouta, he's definitely the more sociable one, but even that would be pushing his limit. "Yeah, yeah, sounds good! We should try some, that was very thoughtful of them!"

When Mirio backs away from the door, Yamada breathes a sigh of relief to see only five herolet invaders, though he doesn't miss which ones they were. Other than Bakugo, almost every Class 1-A student who participated in the raid had decided to show up, and he can tell by how Shouta stiffens that he doesn't miss that worrying implication either.

Then he notices what shirt Shinsou is wearing, and wonders if his husband noticed the students at all.

Shinsou is sitting at the table, eating a bowl of soup, but from the way that Bakugo is crouched so close to him and watching every spoonful he takes, it seems less and less willing. It looks like a slightly different method of force-feeding.

Uraraka seems a bit concerned about that too, standing in the kitchen as if on guard to keep the force feeding from becoming something more forceful. Though she seems a little distracted by the Sailor Moon episode that Kirishima, Midoriya, and Eri are watching. Eri seems a little distracted herself, making a mess of Kirishima's gelled hair to work in as many decorative hair ties as possible, and Midoriya sits behind her to give her two lopsided pigtails.

There's also a giant black bag sitting at the corner of the couch with a blanket thrown over it, that Mirio immediately stands in front of.

Maybe things had gotten a little out of control for their babysitter/possible son while they were fooling around in Gym Gamma. And *maybe* Yamada had no idea how to manage it. But if he doesn't say something soon, Shouta will just start glaring and threatening to expel all the thoughtful little herolets who made the effort to check on Shinsou, and Yamada wouldn't stand for that.

Especially when Bakugo was proving to be very effective, dumping another ladle of soup into Shinsou's bowl, which Shinsou met with a rather catty sign. But no hesitation in continuing to eat it.

"Well, it looks like we're a little late to the party!" Yamada says, trying to ignore the messy and deflated state of his hair, and the urge to pull his collar up a bit higher just in case a telling flash of red showed.

"The one being thrown in our own home," Shouta deadpans, which always made for great commentary at the Sports Festivals, but was not helping the awkward vibe.

"Sorry for intruding! We just noticed that Shinsou wasn't at school today, which might have been related to the- uh, thing! But it might also have been because he was sick, and we would have asked permission or about the situation if we thought of it during English, but Ectoplasm-sensei didn't know the situation either, and-" Midoriya's ramblings cut off when Mirio placed his hand none-too-gently on his head, almost slapping it like it was a 'Stop' button.

"And, you know, can't let good soup go to waste! It was my fault, really," Mirio says, wincing after he does. "But maybe it's time to leave?"

Eri pulls a pout when she looks at Mirio, and Yamada begins to suspect that this is truly the most adorable hostage situation that they've ever walked into. "But we're having fun! It's a party!"

Shinsou in particular looks like he's having a *blast*. So much so that Yamada can practically see the life draining from his eyes as he drops his spoon into the bowl, prompting Bakugo to offer encouragement. "Oi, weak ass twiggy bitch, you gonna let the *soup* win? Can't even finish a full fucking meal, and you want to talk all that shit?"

Shinsou look at Yamada, the plea plain in his eyes before he sign whispers it. ' *Help.* '

"I'm sure the herolets will be happy to throw an even bigger party this weekend at the dorm! That way, everyone's invited to boogie down and clown around!" Yamada offers, trying to negotiate with the little terrorist who has *too many* heroes and hero students wrapped around her little finger.

Including him. When that pout turns to him, he has to look away, to stay strong for Shinsou's sake, but luckily the heroes win this time. "Okay," Eri concedes, her chin tucked to her chest while she looks as pitiful as she possibly can, but Red Riot is there to cinch the victory.

"Yeah, we were already thinking of ordering pizza! We can watch a few movies, have a fun time, and you can *definitely* make my hair this super manly again!" Kirishima says with a grin that betrays nothing, but his hands are already working fast to pull out every plastic butterfly or cat that's currently adorning his hair.

" *Please study* ," Shouta grates out, his concern about missing a day the week before midterms flaring back to life. "There's already one interruption to your study schedules that you need to

compensate for.”

“Ah, sorry about that,” Midoriya mutters, scratching the side of his head before Shouta waves him off.

“All of you have been given the appropriate amount of time to do well, and if you fail to take advantage of it, it’s on you,” Shouta adds, earning the title for Biggest Party Pooper Ever in record time. “Now leave.”

And there was that signature Shouta Charm that Yamada grew to love. It was easy to love as it was to hug a cactus, but it definitely did come in handy.

Each little herolet bid their goodbyes to Shinsou and Eri in turn, though Bakugo whispered something after slapping Shinsou’s shoulder, and Yamada tried not to wonder why Shinsou didn’t lash out in return. If this weird little friendship forming between Shinsou and Bakugo was actually a bit of bullying, Yamada wouldn’t hesitate to switch Bakugo’s midterm exam with Ashido’s. It would be a *very easy* mistake to make.

Before he could stop Mirio from making his exit, Mirio picks up the black bag, having to wrap his arms around it to hold it. “I hope you don’t mind, but I got this for Shinsou. Surprise!”

Shinsou does look surprised, if not a little wary as he gets up to take the gift from Mirio. And once it was in his arms, he looked like he was a little at a loss for what to do with it. Until Eri jumped in to help. “Open it! I wanna see what big brother Mirio got you!”

Shinsou set it on the floor to start untying the knot at the top, but once he started pulling it out, he quickly pulled the giant plushie into the air with a rare, unguarded smile.

And Yamada *wished* he had thought to record it, not just to capture that smile from Shinsou, but because the oversized Pokemon plushie was wearing the same one. But then he looked at Mirio and saw that he was a bit more prepared, snapping another picture from his phone.

And Yamada decided he *didn’t care* what Shouta thought, if Mirio wanted him to adopt him, he was ready to sign the papers *now* . His son was an amazing hero, so smart and compassionate and thoughtful.

“Oh, can you hold it like this?” Mirio asks, demonstrating a bear hug. And there’s something in his eyes that betrays *exactly* how thoughtful his possible son is. Thoughtful in a way that’s borderline a little creepy.

In a way that explains why Mirio so insistently wanted to know the exact length of Shinsou’s arms and waist.

But when Shinsou does, he can’t really complain, because it’s *adorable*. The plushie is so big that he can’t quite wrap his arms around it, and so long that it swallows up his torso to his knees. The smile might have faded away, but it’s replaced by a *blush* that makes Yamada want to bury his face in his hands to make sure his own face isn’t heating up.

He *needs* Mirio to send those pictures to him immediately.

Shinsou signs ‘ *Thank you* ,’ struggling with the plushie still held in his arms, and Yamada wishes Mirio had taken a video instead. Especially when Eri reaches up to pet the plushie, and he realizes that it’s bigger than she is. She could use it as a *bed* , and that’s entirely too adorable to even think about.

“It’s no big deal! I’m glad you like it!” Mirio says, putting his phone away, though Yamada won’t let him leave until he sends those pictures. “Gregar is your favorite, right?”

That half-smile works up over Shinsou’s face as he nods, but when he notices Eri’s attention, he lowers the plushie to the floor, to confirm that Eri could *absolutely sleep on it* , and if she did, Yamada might die. He nearly does when she wraps her arms around it, and can’t even begin to reach around. Shinsou repeats himself more clearly, ‘ *Thank you.* ’

“ ‘Thank you’ for the ‘Thank you,’ ” Mirio says with a laugh, signing a little awkwardly. “I haven’t learned ‘You’re welcome’ yet, but I’m working on it!”

Shinsou signs it first, but that’s not stopping Yamada. “Well, we can work on some JSL while we’re catching up on dinner! Whatdya say, sport?”

Yamada regrets it when he sees that falter in Mirio’s smile, one that disappears as quickly as Shinsou’s rare expressions. In the back of his mind, he knew that Mirio might have called him ‘Dad’ for Eri’s sake, to take it upon himself as her own personal hero to help her work up the courage. That he might be acting a bit too fast and too bold here, but he’s always had that bad habit. Shouta *tries* to be the brakes to his speeding car, but sometimes he’s a bit too fast for him.

But Mirio is a good kid, and he smiles like he means it this time. “That sounds great! As long as you’ll have me!”

Shouta could say whatever he wants, but between Mirio’s eager signing, Shinsou’s persistent help, and Eri’s quick progress on her own JSL knowledge, the soup they shared wasn’t just tasty.

It felt like a family dinner.

Taking Off His Gloves

Chapter Summary

27 has to meet with Chisaki for the investigation, and he knows that he needs to do it. He needs to keep Chisaki from telling anyone anything about The Miasma, to keep his place at UA with Eri. He wants to win against Chisaki.

But can he?

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Child bedwetting, Dissociation, Mention of Bug and The Red Room, Mention of 50, Smoking, Anxiety attack, Mirio thinking about Sir Nighteye's death,

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou had a tattoo of the word 'Dog,' his name at the 8 Precepts, but it was removed shortly after arriving at UA, and now only the black band covering up his Number tattoo remains. Shinsou was forcibly submerged in bath water treated with bleach several times while living at the 8 Precepts. Shinsou gave Aizawa two descriptions of other Numbers from The Miasma thinking that it was useless information, and Aizawa passed that information along to Naomasa in hopes of stopping the meeting between Shinsou and Chisaki. Shinsou is scheduled to meet with Chisaki for Chisaki to formally apologize to Shinsou, and Chisaki has promised to hand over information about The Miasma in exchange for that meeting. Shinsou's right hand shakes and is uncoordinated after Chisaki Unmade it, and Aizawa learned from Eri that she had witnessed that incident. Shinsou had been using a unique JSL sign 'Away' to communicate to Eri if he had dissociated before they were rescued, and Yamada and Aizawa have both been aware of what it means. Shinsou had searched online for ways to help traumatized children, intending it completely for Eri because he doesn't believe he's traumatized but instead broken, and he searched on a laptop that has a keylogger installed. Shinsou was scratched badly by Todoroki's cat named Soba, and Aizawa helped clean the scratches but at first wanted to let Shinsou do it himself. Shinsou refers to a type of dissociation he as where it happens with no build up and enters a full dissociative spell as 'Thunder claps.' Yamada has guided both Shinsou and Eri through hand-curling exercises to help ground them after a dissociative spell or a panic attack. Yamada promised to take Shinsou, Eri, and Class 1-A to Disneyworld during an English class after Eri demonstrated that she could say "Are you from America? Can you take me with you?" Mirio stated that if Chisaki were dead, Shinsou wouldn't have to meet with him. Hari told Eraserhead that Erasure inspired them to make the quirk erasing bullets. Yamada developed temporary mutism during middle school. Eri recently called Aizawa and Yamada each her 'Dad.' Recovery Girl stated she wanted to give Shinsou a check up in a week, last Friday. Shinsou was fused with Chisaki at the end of the raid, and while Chisaki was trying to use his quirk, Shinsou was conscious of that. Ashido has been trying to give Shinsou a high five for 13 chapters. Shinsou has threatened to kill or maim Bakugo several times if Eri ever

swore.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

27 looks at the black band on his arm, turning it to the side to see the empty space. *Victory.*

He looks at the giant Gengar at the end of his bed. Another victory, but a different one.

He looks at the Lemillion shirt, trying to remember exactly the way that Mirio had moved in that fight. Sinking into the floor just to spring up, throwing blow after blow at Chisaki. Forcing him to dodge, forcing him to retreat. That billowing red cape flowing with every movement.

He looked at the cape before he saw Chisaki's face, before he saw the widening of his eyes, before he saw the change in his stance, before the hand-

He forces himself to remember the cape when it billowed. Forces himself to remember how Mirio stood in that hallway. He presses his feet against the bed and tries to focus on how it feels, how the sheets are soft, and even if his eyes are closed, he knows they're gray.

He opens his eyes and looks at Eri, sleeping on his arm with Mocha abandoned at her back. Her hand still on his stomach, still grasping at his shirt. He takes in every detail, from her hair, to her closed eyes, to how small she still is, to the cats smiling in repeated patterns all over her pajamas. She hasn't had nightmares for a while, or night terrors. She feels safe, and cared for.

Victory.

That's the one that 27 wants to keep. He beat Chisaki. He stole Eri from Chisaki, and undid all of his work, all of his plots to return the 8 Precepts and the yakuza way of life to its former glory. Chisaki didn't care for Eri, but he wanted her more than anything else, and 27 took her from him. He already hurt Chisaki in the way it counted the most.

He can win. He knows he can.

He falls asleep thinking of his plan, calling up all of Chisaki's weaknesses, but he wakes up in terror.

Eri is sobbing, tears already streaming down her face, and she shakes her head at him in a way that he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand why she's standing next to the bed, why she isn't next to him, clinging to him after another nightmare, but then he feels it.

She hasn't had an accident in years.

"M' sorry-y," Eri gasps out, and 27 pulls himself to his knees to avoid the stain, but nearly stumbles in his urgency to pick her up and comfort her.

"It's okay, Eri, it's an accident," 27 says, holding her close to his chest while he helps soothe her, tracing circles on her back to help guide her deepening breaths. "It happens, it's fine."

She should be past this stage in her development, but it's a symptom of trauma in children. He's not sure why it's flaring up now, why she was able to avoid it while they were at the 8 Precepts. He doesn't know if this happened while he was away from her.

But he knows exactly what to do to fix it.

Once Eri quiets down, still not completely calmed but he doesn't expect her to be, he carries her to her bedroom, careful not to make a sound. He knows how to work against the squeaky hinge on her door, how to lift the handle to avoid that noise. He picks the first outfit he finds from her pajama drawer, and then makes his way to their bathroom.

She clings to her new set of clothes, watching him set out a towel and start the bath, and the look in her eyes is too familiar. She's older now, but she was always this quiet when it happened. He pulls out the basket of soaps that are meant for bubble baths and bath bombs, and encourages her to pick one. He doesn't need to tell her to smell each one, because she already knows this trick well enough. He smiles while he watches her, happy that she has more than one option now.

She picks a bath bomb, and he sets it in the tub before he realizes that the plastic around it wouldn't let it dissolve, like he imagines it's supposed to. He corrects that before he tests the temperature again, testing how deep the water has gotten. It's almost full enough.

Eri curls her toes against each other, her frown deepening again with the threat of another crying fit. "M' sorry."

"It's okay," 27 says, trying to get her to look at the smile he wears for her sake. "Chibi-Usa has accidents too. Sailor Moon is just mean for making her feel bad about it, and she shouldn't. That's why I don't like Sailor Moon, she's my least favorite."

"I like her," Eri mumbles, at least distracted from her embarrassment. "She eats a lot like Momo."

"Momo looks more like Sailor Pluto though," 27 says, tugging the clothes out of Eri's arms so she could get undressed. "But she acts like Sailor Mercury with how smart she is."

"Who's your favorite, Twenny?" Eri asks, and he takes her hand to make sure she can step into the bath safely, settling a hand on her head after she settles in the tub.

"Chibi-Usa," 27 answers, smiling again to make sure that Eri will fine on her own while he cleans up. "I'm gonna be back, so just wait if you need help getting out." Eri nods, and busies herself with splashing in the water a few times, chasing the still dissolving bath bomb as it spins with white foam and tiny pink blossoms.

27 is glad that Yamada showed him how to use the washing machine, which would definitely be easier to use than the bathtub. He makes quick work of stripping the bedsheets, but frowns when he realizes that the mattress would be much harder to clean than the futon was.

He hesitates before he reasons with himself. He can't just leave it, the smell would be obvious, and he doesn't want his owner or Yamada to find it. He's been very careful with his possessions, and he doesn't want to make them angry. He doesn't want them to blame Eri either.

He starts the washing machine before he grabs the bleach.

He makes sure to pick a white towel, knowing that he can wash it in bleach in case it gets stained. He only pours a little on the mattress, not wanting to soak it, before he starts rubbing the evidence away. It's not working as well as it should, not without the benefit of running water, of being able to squeeze the futon and wring it out with his hands.

He's been trying to hold his breath because he hates the smell, but when he breathes in, it catches him off guard, and he coughs, even though he tries to muffle it with his hand, and

Yamada wakes up with a hand on his shoulder, and forces his eyes open to see Shouta pointing to his ears, to tell him to put his hearing aids in. When he sits up, he sees Eri wrapped in a towel, clinging to Shouta with her arms wrapped tight around his neck, and as he puts his hearing aids in, he hears her panicked words over the whine of the devices' adjustment. "-enny's 'way 's my fault 'm sorry!"

"Eri, it's alright," Yamada reassures, finding the towel around her wet when he puts a hand on her back. Shouta looks at him, and Yamada reasons with himself that they only reason that Shouta isn't going to Shinsou is because Eri needs his focus instead.

He tries not to run, because he doesn't need to worry Eri, but he sets a quick pace to Shinsou's room, and doesn't like what he finds.

Bleach , goddammit, why hadn't he thrown that out?

The bottle was still held in Shinsou's hand, the other cupped around his mouth, and Yamada pieces together what happened in the back of his mind. Eri with a towel wrapped around her shoulders, her hair wet, the bed stripped. He doesn't even question why Shinsou didn't wake them up, he knows the kid wouldn't have thought to do that. Not with how long he's been taking care of Eri.

He needs to get Shinsou out of the room, opening a window might not be enough and Shinsou's room doesn't have a window anyway. But he's more than a little worried about how to do that.

"Hey, Shinsou," Yamada calls, hoping there's an answer. A startle. Anything other than the frozen teenager in front of him breathing too slowly, too still other than the rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathes. "Shinsou, Shinsou, Shinsou?"

He reaches out and manages to take the bottle out of his hand without touching him, but Shinsou still isn't responding. He still needs to get out of the room.

He hopes he can do that without Shinsou lashing out. "Hey, Shinsou, it's Yamada. Current Loudspeaker guy. I'm gonna take you out of the room, alright, just get some clean air. Fresh air, it'll... It'll help, okay?" Yamada keeps rambling, touching Shinsou's shoulder gently at first. He waits for a reaction, and finds himself hoping that Shinsou might stay lost in the spell long enough for him to guide him outside. "You know, it's just me. We're here in your room right now, but I'm gonna need to walk you outside, so just come with me, alright?"

Shinsou turns when he pushes against his shoulder, stumbles along as he guides him out of the room. Yamada doesn't know what else to say but to name every action, every room they cross, everything in that room. He knows that Shinsou can't hear him right now, but he hopes that if the spell breaks, he'll recognize his voice first, before he recognizes that someone is touching him.

He tries not to think of broken fingers, broken noses, broken wrists. He knows Shinsou well enough to know he never meant to do that, probably doesn't even remember it. He's not afraid of the kid hurting him, but he's terrified of having to restrain Shinsou, or failing to. Of Shinsou coming out of the spell with Yamada's blood on his fist.

It's cold outside, and he rambles about that for a bit without really hearing what he's even saying, and walks Shinsou a few more paces before the teenager jerks away from him. He's breathing faster now, like he just ran a marathon, and now Yamada is worried that this will spiral into a panic attack.

Shinsou looks around, his head moving too fast to really take anything in, and the hand around his mouth moves halfway to his hair before he stops and freezes.

And throws his hand down hard against the back of the bench, hard enough to know that Yamada still needs to worry about broken fingers.

“Hey, buddy, it’s alright! We’re okay, we’re at UA-” Yamada stops his attempts to remind Shinsou where he is, wincing as Shinsou starts signing.

‘ *No broken not no E-R not E-R* ,’ Shinsou’s hands move quick, as rapid as his breathing still is, his eyes are still too wide. He’s probably too panicked to even register the pain in his hand, and Yamada has to stop himself from reaching out and grabbing his hands to stop him from doing any more damage.

“Eri is inside, she’s okay, just- you know, let’s take some deep breaths,” Yamada has done this a million times, he knows how to act when civilians are in a panic, but Shinsou isn’t a civilian, he’s *Shinsou* , and Yamada can’t keep his tone as even as it should be.

‘ *Not Eri. Broken. Lost. Dog.* ’

It’s that last sign that breaks him. Yamada goes numb, just staring at Shinsou as his breath catches for a moment, but his eyes remain too wide, unblinking.

‘ *Dog. I’m Do-* ’

Yamada catches Shinsou’s hands in his own. Even when he can’t stop himself from reaching out, he keeps his grip on Shinsou’s palms, careful not to touch his fingers. “No. No, no, no, you’re *not*. Shins...”

Fuck , how long had he been ignoring this? How could he not have seen it? Shinsou was good at hiding things, but Shinsou was his *ward* . He read his case file, every gruesome detail in it. He looked at the photograph of that tattoo, even if he couldn’t bring himself to look at it when Shinsou was wearing a shirt that displayed it. He read Tabé’s statement, the only one that they got from any member of the 8 Precepts regarding Shinsou, that one line. *It was Chisaki’s idea to name him Dog.*

He’s never heard him do it, but Shouta did. He ignored it, he *stupidly* thought it was over. That they could replace it with better memories, happier times. That it was better not to confront it, to stress Shinsou out like that. That Shinsou never really *believed* his name was Dog, that he was able to hold out that long because of it.

But 3 years and 8 months wasn’t going to go away that easily. Not after what Shinsou had been through. Not with the threat of tomorrow still hanging over him, hanging over both of his wards, and Naomasa still hadn’t reached out with an answer.

That left Yamada in the lurch, and he wanted *desperately* to tell Shinsou that it was over. That it was enough, that what he told Shouta was enough. Enough to *stop this* . Even if he couldn’t tell Shinsou that there was hope, he could tell him this, “You are Shinsou Hitoshi. You are *not* , and you never were Dog.”

He forces himself to look up, to take in Shinsou’s still panicked stare. He only feels one of his hands shaking, but he doesn’t feel them try to pull away.

“A lot of people tried to take that from you, a lot of people have hurt you. You’ve been through a lot, too much, but you’re still here. You’re here, and you’re safe, and Eri is safe because of you. Because you *never* gave up, Shinsou. You never let them win, so don’t you *dare* let them win now,” Yamada says, biting his lip when he feels Shinsou pull his hands out of his grasp.

‘ *Lost. Away,* ’ Shinsou signs, that right hand still shaking. It doesn’t always shake that badly, but

Yamada imagines it's too hard for Shinsou to hide it right now. After what Shouta told him, he knows the reason why.

“That’s not losing, Shinsou,” Yamada says, shaking his head but unwilling to look away from Shinsou’s eyes, still locked on his. “You’ve been through a lot, and sometimes-”

‘ *Broken. Not E-R-I. Broken.* ’ Shinsou’s eyebrows furrow together, insistent and confused all at once, and Yamada regrets ever letting himself believe that part of that little research that the keylogger picked up on was for Shinsou’s own sake.

All of the searches that he made were targeted towards children who had dealt with trauma, but he knew by copying those searches that most of the websites also mentioned adolescents. At the time, he had been a little proud of Shinsou for trying to get help for himself, but he never imagined that it could run this deep.

‘ *Not E-R-I. Not pers-* ’

Yamada feels him try to tug away immediately, and in the back of his mind he knows that it couldn’t be more wrong to take away the only way Shinsou could communicate right now. But he’s not going to let him finish that sign. He *can’t* . “Shinsou. You’re...”

Yamada clenches his teeth, trying to take a deep breath. He can’t cry, he can’t cry, this isn’t about him and Shinsou *needs* him right now. He doesn’t have anyone else. He needs to hear this.

“You are the *strongest* person I know. You went through a lot, and that can leave-” *fuck his stupid fucking mouth why can’t he just* “You’re not broken. You’re *not*. You’re not broken, Eri isn’t broken, Shou isn’t broken either. All of you had to go through things that no one was meant to, and no one could come out of without injuries. It’s not breaking, it’s...”

It’s a conversation that they should have had a long time ago, and it needs to be a *conversation*.

“Let’s go inside and talk about this, alright? With your *phone* , after I check your fingers because I know what a broken finger sounds like, and I know how bad it hurts to sign with one. Or four. Pro tip! Don’t try to punch a lead pipe that’s being swung at your face! It doesn’t work like you think it will,” Yamada says, finding himself rambling from his frayed nerves and the knowledge that sometimes his long windedness is the only thing that can calm Shinsou down.

But he finds himself entirely too relieved by that little eye roll, before he sees Shinsou raise his hands to sign as soon as he lets him go, and he nearly makes another grab before Shinsou huffs and lowers them back down to his sides.

But Yamada still finds himself smiling, to see that rare flash of ‘teenager’ in Shinsou’s attitude. It’s something that he wants to see more often as time goes by.

*

There were times that Quirk Training wasn’t as serious. Chisaki called for one, but he ended up just standing against the wall on his phone rather than making sure that the 8 were punishing him. If that was ever the point of Quirk Training. 27 has never been able to figure that out.

Deidoro and Tengai had a game that was all Deidoro’s idea. Deidoro would use his quirk on 27, then they would all take turns throwing him into Tengai’s barrier. 27 would be so disoriented, so close to puking far before the end of it, and even when he closed his eyes or tried to dodge the hands that grabbed at him, it didn’t help.

Even when it wasn't brutal, when that was the tamest that Quirk Training ever was, it was humiliating. To hear them laughing. For him to fall on the floor without anyone's hands on him, to fall without being shoved. As often as 27 lost, losing that game felt the worst.

'Pinball.' That's what they called it.

27 feels like he's in that game right now.

Yamada took him to check on Eri first, to see her fast asleep on top of his owner's chest. Her hair was still wet, but she was changed into another set of clothes, not the ones that he picked. Both of them were asleep under his owner's yellow sleeping bag.

"It's a sleeping bag night. It's... It helps her to have a heavier blanket. There are some that are made especially for that, but she likes Shou's sleeping bag, so..."

He stumbled into the barrier without anyone's help a few times. He tried to pull himself back up to standing by leaning against it, but then someone would tell Tengai to drop it and he'd fall. He eventually learned not to do that.

Yamada went to his room to get the phone, but wouldn't let him follow. He gave him the phone then went to his and his owner's bathroom to get the medicine kit, and set it on the kitchen counter just like his owner did after Soba scratched him. But he told him to wait instead of treating himself, and started boiling some water.

He's never been burned with water, never come across a quirk that does that. He's heard it's painful to have hot coffee or tea spilled on you, but no one has ever done that either. He wonders when someone will, if his owner will get angry and spill coffee on him. If it would even hurt him right now.

Yamada tells him to flex his fingers, and winces at what he sees. The middle and ring finger are broken, but 27 only knows that because he can see the red line right below the knuckle, can see that they can't curl as far as the others.

He doesn't feel them.

His unmade hand goes numb sometimes, as though it wasn't really remade at all. Like Chisaki didn't have enough materials to remake it, but somehow made an illusion of it. Chisaki always said it was important that Eri finish her meals, that she had the materials, but he didn't care if 27 did. He called for Quirk Training on days that 27 traded a meal for a trip. He wouldn't have had as many materials as he would have on other days.

Yamada asks if it's okay for him to wrap them. That he has to touch his hand. He talks about every move he makes, where he's going to touch him before he does it. It's odd, he's grabbed his hands often enough before this. He's taken his hands.

Took his voice.

Chisaki took his

Pinball.

27 feels like this is a Pinball match, and it's the part where he's just trying not to throw up. He's thrown up in a locked mask before, nearly died that time. Sometimes, he thinks that's the way he doesn't want to die the most, but usually he just doesn't want to end up dying in the Red Room. Whichever way he would die there, by Bug or Memory's poison or just something simple. If he

filled up a locked mask with puke in the Red Room, that'd probably be the worst way to go.

There's a startling sharpness that he feels when Deidoro drops his quirk. Everything that spins stops, everything blurry becomes clear. It's annoying when he starts and drops it rapidly, it's more disorienting, and Deidoro knows that. He only does it when he doesn't get to drink enough.

Yamada puts a mug in front of him, filled with hot tea. The mug has a cat on it, with the word 'Caturday' in a swirling English script. Yamada sits down in front of him and sighs, his own mug close to his mouth but he doesn't drink from it. Yamada looks at him, and 27 realizes how green Yamada's eyes are.

Deidoro's quirk drops.

"So, um. 'Away,'" Yamada says, repeating that unique sign. 27 knew that he knew it. "That's called 'dissociation.' It's a way for your brain to kind of 'check out,' to protect you from bad stuff that's happening. It happens to a lot of people, and it can happen in a lot of different ways. For a lot of reasons. It's... you probably noticed it happening a while ago. A long time ago."

27 tests the splint, it won't let him bend his fingers. He can barely sign anything now. He was wondering when they would get a mask, and now he wonders if they'll use this as one while he picks up the phone. "*I read about it.*" He doesn't know how the drop gets sharper, but it does. "*Noticed before.*"

Before he was sold to Chisaki. It didn't happen as much, though. Not enough for anyone to notice.

"*How.*" It doesn't matter. He's broken, Yamada knows, and he's always known. How he knows, he doesn't know. How he notices.

"How does it work or..." Yamada trails off, looking back at his mug before he tucks his hair behind his ear. "How do we know? Well, it's tough to spot, but Naomasa... told us enough. And there's training that me and Shou went through to get certified for wardships. How to spot it. What, um. What does it feel like for you? Is it totally blank, or like you're looking down on yourself, or..."

"*Thunder claps.*" 27 knows he's not making sense, but Deidoro started using his quirk again. "*Blank.*"

Yamada nods, a half smile that barely reaches his eyes. His eyes look back at the mug. "Yeah, a lot of people have that happen. They're not broken, they have PTSD. You probably read about it," Yamada nods again, to himself, and spreads his hands so that they're open, heel resting on the counter. "So, even when bad things aren't happening, dissociation can still happen. Your brain sees something that it recognizes as a part of that bad thing, or a warning sign. That's a trigger, and most people avoid them. Bleach is, you know, probably a trigger for you, and I kind of knew that, or figured- I'm sorry, I should have gotten rid of it."

"*Avoidance.*" Blasty told him about that. "*Showers.*" He didn't know the word for it, he just knew that he didn't want to take baths anymore. That sometimes, he couldn't even look down and see a tub around his feet, to see that he was in a tub even if he was standing in it.

Yamada keeps nodding, but he cups his hand around his mouth and looks away, looks at the cabinets for a minute before he looks back. "Yeah, baths and bleach are probably triggers for you. There's probably others, and we can avoid those too. Just like we do for Eri. And when we can't, there's ways we can help you come back after that. Grounding exercises we can do."

“*Bla-asty told me. Ha-acks.*” Feet on the ground, looking at things. Remembering good things. Trying to stay. Trying to remind himself that he won.

“That’s good! I’m glad that Bakugo... you know, Bakugo did that,” Yamada says, that same half smile that he doesn’t like seeing. “And, you know, working your hands like this. I should have told you at the time, but-”

27 raises the unmade hand, showing the splint. He just wants Yamada to stop smiling like that, and he does, but not the way he wants him to. He’s not play-mad, he’s not laughing. He doesn’t get the joke.

He looks like he’s going to cry. “Well, yeah. Hold off on that one, I guess.”

Deidoro’s quirk dropping has never been so sharp. “*I do-on’t want to lo-ose tomo-orrow.*” It’s probably today, it’s probably that late. He doesn’t know what time it is, even when he stares at the numbers on his phone. It’s late, or early.

Yamada presses his fingers together, his hands in front of his face. A deep inhale, a deep exhale. A breathing exercise. He might have PTSD too. “I don’t want there to be a tomorrow. I don’t...”

27 doesn’t know if he wants a tomorrow either. Or today. However much time he has, how little he has to prepare. He usually has a day or two at least to prepare for jobs, but he didn’t for the first one. For Honzo. Bug was angry that it happened, he hadn’t even been numbered yet, but Honzo offered so much money. A lot of money.

Numbers were supposed to be able to leave after they paid back their debt. A lot of them kept track of it, a lot of them guessed how much time they had left. 27 probably made Boss a lot of money, just from Honzo. Enough to leave then, when he was still small.

Leaving was a joke, though. 27 never kept track of how much money he made Boss. Never tried, not after 50.

There’s no leaving. No escape. Not from The Miasma, and not from tomorrow.

He just wants more time. He doesn’t care if he loses it, if he’s away for almost all of it. He wants to be here, even if he’s not. It’s not entirely for Eri’s sake either, it’s something that he wants selfishly. It’s something that he doesn’t deserve.

He just wants to *win*. Once. *Once* against Chisaki.

Yamada laughs, barely a laugh with how short and airy it is, shaking his head before he pulls his hands away. His eyes are closed and when they open, they look down. “Who knows, maybe one of Shou’s informants can make a passport really quick. Yours is on lockdown, but there’s ways to still get out of the country. Smuggle you out of the country.”

“*Di-isney World.*” 27 doesn’t actually want to go there, he just wants Yamada to stop crying. Even if he’s trying to hide it from 27, maybe he’ll smile and laugh. Forget whatever reason is making him cry.

Yamada does, he smiles and laughs, and it sounds a bit better this time. “Exactly. We’ll go to Disney World. Start a new life in America. Shou’s accent is *horrible*, it’ll be hilarious. And you...”

Deidoro’s quirk makes him feel too much at times. That’s why 27 laughs. “*My a-accent is horrible too.*”

Yamada doesn't laugh, but he smiles. His eyes are still green, but they're red too. "You're an amazing kid, Shinsou. I... I want to help. Honestly, I want to stop this whole fucking fiasco, and I'm not the only one who's considered a little bit of vigilantism to do it. But, um. Tell me how I can help."

27 is still a little surprised that Yamada swore. That he's that angry about it. It's an interrogation, it's 27's job. There's nothing that will stop it.

27 can't tell him how to help either. It's his fight, his job. He's only had a few jobs with other Numbers, usually just filling in ranks and they were told not to act like they knew each other too well. And they didn't anyway.

There was one kidnapping job that he did with 58. 58 had to do double duty, to change 27's appearance and voice to look like the target's ex-wife, and to cause a distraction so that the target's gang wouldn't notice that their leader was walking away.

Distraction. "*Distra-action.*"

Yamada finally smiles in a way that 27 likes. It's close to that wincing smile, that smile that doesn't meet his eyes, but it does meet his eyes. Just not fully. "Well, you're talking to the right guy! I'm *plenty* distracting. Shou kicked me out of so many study sesh's when we were in high school, because I'd just start rambling or get distracted and he couldn't concentrate. Just me and my big mouth, running a mile a minute."

27 likes it. 50 would talk like that sometimes. Just to fill the space he couldn't. Sometimes she'd talk for him, have a conversation that was really with herself, but she knew him. She always knew what he wanted to say.

"So, we've got some tea! It's my drink of choice, Shou is the real coffee fiend. He can drink it all day, but if I have two cups, I start buzzing. Tea is, you know, more calming. Turns the volume down, and you know how much I need that sometimes," Yamada says with a short laugh, the one he uses in class while he mimes adjusting the dial on his speakers. "Have you ever had tea?"

27 shakes his head, but shrugs. He's not sure. He can't remember drinking it, but he knows what it is. He thinks it tastes bland.

It doesn't. It's not sweet, but it's not bitter. Maybe it's what flowers taste like. Floral. That's the word.

He likes it.

"Well, I guess we've got several options," Yamada says, curling a hand around the back of his neck. "I just kind of guessed that sleep would be a no go for a while, maybe not tonight, but if you feel tired, just let me know. I can fix up the bed really quick, we have plenty of spare sheets. We could watch a movie, listen to some tunes, work on your tests, do some- well, not JSL, not until we see Recovery Girl, and she doesn't want to see us right now. Talk, or... you know."

Yamada shrugs, just a quick lift and lower of his shoulders. It's almost relaxed, so relaxed that it's hard to see the tension, but Yamada has been tense this entire conversation.

"Whatever you want me to do, listener. Just tell me, and we'll do it."

That's almost like his quirk.

When he first started quirk training at The Miasma, he used to be a little amazed that he could do

that. As soon as he pulled that string, sealed that disturbing look over someone's face, he could make them do almost anything. Just by telling them to do it.

Even if they were angry, and trying to hurt him. If he riled up a Number enough, even if they knew better and they knew how his quirk worked, they'd answer and he'd pull them under. That disturbing look on their face replacing rage.

Rikiya let him have fun with it a few times. He would stop the match and tell him to make the quirked underling do something embarrassing. Make them dance, or pick their nose. He would take a picture of them doing it if that underling made Rikiya mad earlier, for something that happened outside the room. Some offense he didn't need to know about.

Yamada is almost telling him to use his quirk, but it's different. When 27 gives a command, there's no 'we' following it. 27 isn't doing anything with the person he has under his control.

It's almost like his quirk, but it's different. It's so different that it's almost scarier than his quirk.

But he likes it.

“Ta-alk. But no-ot really. I'm mu-ute.”

*

When Aizawa wakes up, he makes sure that Eri is still fast asleep, that her deep and shallow breaths don't hitch when he slowly moves her onto her bed and off of his chest. He feels guilty for leaving her, but tucks the sleeping bag around her, folds it over itself so that it's heavier. He still feels that rising anxiety, that desperate desire to check his phone and see if Naomasa has responded yet.

His phone isn't on the nightstand, but the drawer beneath is slightly opened. He pulls it open a bit more and sees that the Stress Stash has been taken out.

Shinsou is asleep on the couch, his feet angled towards the ground as if he didn't mean to fall asleep. His head is propped up on the armrest, his phone held loosely in his hand. Aizawa considers putting a blanket over him before he decides that the risk of waking him up with the action would be too great.

He imagines that he and Hizashi need to have this conversation privately.

Hizashi only spares a glance in his direction when he walks outside, his hand tucks into the pocket of his lounge pants where he knows the cigarette carton is. But he doesn't light another one until Aizawa lifts his hand, and he hands it to him while still refusing to look at him.

Aizawa breaths in the smoke and holds it, and waits.

“He said no, it's still happening,” Hizashi says, tone too even, as he flicks the end of his cigarette. “They said they have concerns that Chisaki might be attacked, and I *fucking* hope so, Shou. I don't know...”

Hizashi purses his lips when he shakes his head, and he doesn't need to say it. Aizawa has taught restraint to the students under his charge, tried to be an example of it, but knowing what he knows now, he's unsure whether he could have any himself.

It was different during the raid, when he knew Eri as a little girl and Chisaki as a villain who was hurting her, and only had a brief suspicion that he wrote off as paranoia. Now that Eri isn't just a

little girl to him, now that he knows that Chisaki was hurting Shinsou too, and that his paranoia wasn't just unfounded, but confirmed by that bastard Hari, he doesn't know.

He doesn't know if he can lay eyes on Chisaki and not try to snap his neck.

"I fucked up," Hizashi says, rubbing at his eyes. "Big time. Shinsou was saying things, and I.... I couldn't handle it, Shou. I've done it a million times, being calm, being Present Mic, being a hero. I couldn't do that, Shou. I couldn't pretend that I could handle it, I couldn't wave it off and smile. He was...."

Aizawa forgets about the cigarettes, he's far more concerned with the way that Hizashi is talking. Too many pauses, too close to silence.

"He called himself *Dog* . And *broken* ," Hizashi shakes his head, more firmly this time, then finally looks at Aizawa. His eyes are more bloodshot than his own, more irritated and not from the smoke. "I didn't *fucking* see it. He seemed fine, fine as he could be, and I didn't even see it. I'm his hero, I'm his caretaker, and I couldn't be any of that, Shou! And I can't...."

"Hizashi," Aizawa says, resting a hand on his husband's shoulder before he squeezes. He's seen doubt in heroes much younger and inexperienced than Hizashi, and there's a threshold at which he stops telling them to reconsider whether this is the right path for them. There's a point where it really isn't doubt, it's a mess of 'what should have been done's' that tangle up into guilt and disillusionment. Hizashi has long since passed that. "He's asleep."

"I wouldn't be out here if he wasn't, Shou. I wouldn't leave him alone after-"

"He's asleep, on the couch," Aizawa interrupts, with another squeeze, harder this time. "Without Eri next to him. When he knows what's going to happen today, and after realizing it in the worst way."

Hizashi looks away, probably still blaming himself for not throwing out the bleach, but it was Aizawa's fault as well. They talked about it briefly the night before bringing Shinsou to UA, going through all the things that they needed to change for his sake, ways to mitigate risks or make things easier for him. At the time, they thought that he wouldn't have a reason to be in the laundry room. That he would be as unlikely to do his own laundry as any other teenager they knew.

"He's asleep after that, because you calmed him down. You reassured him enough. You took care of him," Aizawa says, bringing his hand up to the back of Hizashi's neck, stepping closer to press against his husband's arm, still limp at his side. "If there's nothing else we can do-"

"I can't, Shou," Hizashi says, his voice breaking before he covers his mouth and swallows, tension in his shoulders rising all at once as he tries to hold it in. "I've fucked up enough, I didn't see it, I didn't say anything! He thought that he was broken because he dissociates, because he *doesn't think he's a person!* "

Aizawa hadn't allowed himself to dwell on it. 27 and Dog. Tattoos that were brands, the same way animals were identified. The implications of that. The reasons behind those methods, and how effective they could be in shattering a person in a wholly unique way.

Hizashi huffs, quick and harsh, almost a laugh but far too rattled for that. "Bakugo taught him how to do grounding exercises. Bakugo saw it--"

"I told him eno--"

"We were told more," Hizashi growls, cutting his watery eyes at him. "We can't help him, we

can't get him the help that he needs, and I *can't* hurt him more. I can't just drive him to the station and pretend that this is fine, Shou! Because it's not!"

"15 minutes won't kill him," Aizawa says, and activates his quirk almost out of habit, just from recognizing that subtle difference in the way that Hizashi inhales. "But Mind Slice will."

Hizashi breathes out through his clenched teeth, pressing the heels of his palms against his forehead. "*Fuck*, Shou."

Aizawa agrees, for more reasons than Hizashi has probably realized. Chisaki was barely a lesser evil, but certainly a torment in and of itself.

But The Commission of Wardship Affairs could cause far more suffering. Mind Slice could take the information they needed in a matter of hours, leaving Shinsou in a catatonic state afterwards. Possibly for the rest of his life. They could remove either ward at any time, and separating Shinsou from Eri would undoubtedly leave him in a state similar to that. And Eri could be ripped away from the heroes that taught her the meaning of safety, how to smile. From him and Hizashi, heroes that she regarded as her fathers.

Chisaki called her his daughter.

Aizawa hadn't realized it before, had only considered the bedwetting to be a sign. But Eri had been so oddly insistent that the hero students stay with her, had clung to Togata until he promised to buy her a giant plushie of her own to keep. He heard Shinsou reading to her an hour after they went to bed, but imagined that was only due to how infrequently he did so.

Eri was suffering too. And he hadn't seen it.

"Shou," Hizashi says, wiping his tears from his eyes before he looks at the cigarette, almost brings it to his lips before he tosses it to the ground. "I need you. I need you to be there, doing your 'Steady Shou' thing. To keep me from bringing the whole building down, because I *swear*. When I see him, I'll want to kill him."

Aizawa nods, wraps his arms around his husband's shoulders when he's pulled into an embrace.

But he doesn't know if he can.

*

Sato doesn't like getting up early, but he usually does. It's kind of a force of habit, since he's been waking up at unreasonable hours since he was a little kid to help out at the family bakery, or at least say good morning to his parents before they leave.

Even if he's woken up at 4 AM more often than not, and falls back to sleep more often now that he's pushing his mind and body to the limit at UA, that early morning hour still has a sense of oddness. There's a word for it that he can't remember, but it has something to do with doorways. The part of the day that isn't really day or night, and it just feels weird to be awake because of that.

But it's not just the time that's weird this morning.

Iida is a familiar face in the dorm kitchen at 5 AM, but it's usually just to say 'Good morning' and refill his water bottle before he goes on his run. But today, he's just running in place while he types on his phone, barely looking up to greet him.

Bakugo is up occasionally, but always groggy enough not to bother with words. If he says anything

to Sato, it's usually a grunt or growl that might be aimed at the coffee machine. But today, he's snarling at his phone and shooting glares at Midoriya across the table with his coffee cup already almost empty.

Sato almost never sees Midoriya, and if he does, Midoriya always tells him 'Good morning' with bright eyes and a chipper tone, and asks if he wants any help if he's making breakfast. But Midoriya is so focused on his phone that he doesn't look like he's blinking, thumbs working faster than should be humanly possible, and the bags under his eyes suggest that the phone charger connecting Kaminari's mouth to his phone should be one meant to recharge humans, because he looks like he's on 1% and very aware that he's dying.

Kaminari looks dead, poking at his phone rather than typing with his head slumped on his arms, but Todoroki looks the same as always. Just sipping on a glass of orange juice while he looks at Sato, and doesn't really say anything.

Sato kind of feels like someone should say something, but he's a bit too tired to do something as complicated as asking. Especially when he knows he can just pull out his phone and find out.

And he's not surprised at all that it's the group chat with Shinsou that's so active.

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: There isn't a reason for this. But I want you to roast Chisaki.

Sato looks up after confirming his suspicions, having scrolled up until he found the evidence he was looking for, and sighs. Then he starts making himself a glass of orange juice.

It's not like he dislikes Shinsou or anything. He's a ward, and that means he kind of needs all the support he can get. He's been through a lot, even if he barely talks about it, and Sato's kind of glad he doesn't. Sato imagines that 'bleach baths' weren't the worst thing that happened to him.

But Shinsou has a habit of dropping into the chat and saying stuff that gets everyone worked up, then dropping off for a few days. He's not sure if it's even helpful for him, if he's just got so much stuff going on that he's too busy to say anything unless he needs something, or if it's just to start drama. Because it is kind of starting drama.

And it couldn't have happened at a worst time, because midterms are next week. Everyone is already feeling the pressure, especially Sato. He's had half of his peers already put in their requests for study snacks, and he kind of hopes the other half forgets that he offered, because he's not doing too well in Art History and needs to focus.

But he's almost certain that Shinsou will drop another bomb or three next week, and no amount of rabbit petting or sugary snacks will help them deal with the fallout.

But, they're heroes. Sato is a hero, and that means going beyond his limit. He can't really complain with reading about whatever crazy stuff Shinsou is dealing with when they're training to go into disaster zones and villain fights. They're training to risk their lives, and possibly lose them to protect others. To help people like Shinsou.

Even if he'd rather just bake him some deserts and call it good sometimes.

Mighty Boiii: Are you sure? I don't have a problem with that at all but Aizawa-Sensei said not to talk about the raid and maybe there's a reason for that and

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: What do you want for it

Mighty Boiii: Nothing! I just want to make sure you're okay? You're up really early or really late and maybe you should sleep because you seemed kind of tired earlier today but I don't mind even if I'm not that great at it

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: CHISAKIS REAL NAME IS CHISUCKI BECAUSE HE SUCKS

Provost Piston: Chisaki is a horrible villain who deserves to be imprisoned for his heinous actions far beyond the end of his life. This is also due to the fact that no one in society should have to share the same space that he occupies.

Pls sleep Kacchan changed their name to FUCK CHISAKI

FUCK CHISAKI: DEKU JUST FUCKING DO IT AND DON'T FUCKING DISAPPOINT ME YOU WIMPY FUCKING ASPARAGUS BITCH

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: I'm fine. I can't respond a lot, but I want to read it. I can't tell if it's early or late either.

Soba Boiii: I would roast Chisaki with my quirk.

FUCK CHISAKI: I CAN'T FUCKING BELIEVE HOW SHIT YOU ASSHOLES ARE. FUCKING DEKU. ROAST. THAT. BITCH. OR I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU.

Mighty Boiii: @Kacchan go to sleep or bad things will happen on Sunday. @Shinsou Okay! I'll do my best!

FUCK CHISAKI: BITCH WORE A FUCKING CODPIECE ON HIS FACE BECAUSE HIS DICK IS TOO SMALL TO FIT IN ONE. HE GOT HIS EYEBROWS PLUCKED BY A SHARPIE.

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: CHISAKI IS A BAD PERSON WHO SHOULD FEEL BAD.

FUCK CHISAKI: FUCK YOU DEKU. GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP DINKY SHIT, YOU SUCK AT THIS

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: I think Hari did his eyebrows, but Nemoto might have been joking.

FUCK CHISAKI: CLOCK BITCH FUCKED UP HIS FACE BUT HIS HAND FUCKED UP HIS OWN DICK

Provost Piston: @Bakugo Though I am aware that the nature of roasts often devolves into insults of a sexually degrading nature, I believe your comments are unnecessarily so. Midoriya never utilizes that tactic, and he is regarded as the best roaster among us.

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: oh fuck I can't believe you've done this

FUCK CHISAKI: DEKU IS FUCKING DEKU HE CAN'T DO SHIT BETTER THAN ME. HE HASN'T SAID SHIT FOR 30 MINUTES. AND YOU DON'T KNOW SHIT ABOUT ROASTING EITHER SHITTY FOUR EYES

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: CHISAKI IS SO UGLY HE MADE HIS HAPPY MEAL CRY

Soba Boiii: There's an ancient Babylonian technique of roasting a person inside a metal statue of a bull. I think it should be revived for Chisaki.

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: oh fuck dark shit man dark!Todoroki has been activated

FUCK CHISAKI: CHISAKI WASN'T FUCKING ALLERGIC TO GERMS, GERMS WERE FUCKING ALLERGIC TO HIS BITCH ASS. THE FUCKING PLAGUE WOULDN'T FUCK WITH HIM BECAUSE IT HAD STANDARDS.

Lofi hip hop beats to chill and study to: chiaskis only chance of geeting laid was crawling up a chickns ass n waitingg

FUCK CHISAKI: DEKU I FUCKING HYPED YOU UP BITCH FUCKING DO IT

Soba Boiii: He's still typing. Does anyone have a samsung charger?

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: @Midoriya PULL THE TRIGGER PIGLET

FUCK CHISAKI: I TOLD THAT BITCH TO GET FUCKING SPARES. @MCFUCKINGD'S GO MAKE YOURSELF USEFUL

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: As you wish, Princess Buttercup

FUCK CHISAKI: I WILL END YOUR SHIT BEFORE CEMENTOSS DROPS YOU IN THE FUCKING OCEAN WITH CEMENT SHOES BITCH @JIROU WAKE THE FUCK UP YOU USELESS FUCKING LESBIAN AND GO FUCKING IN ON TRASH BIRD'S ASS

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: I hope they're gucci. U know I'm that kind of swag bitch

FUCK CHISAKI: DEKU. FIVE FUCKING MINUTES BEFORE I BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF YOUR DOOR AND WAKE EVERYONE'S ASS UP TO DO YOUR ONE FUCKING JOB

Soba Boiii: We're not there.

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: It's fine. Don't worry about it.

FUCK CHISAKI: WHERE. THE FUCK. ARE YOU. I'M FUCKING HITTING SEND FOR YOUR DUMB FUCKING ASS

Soba Boiii: In the kitchen. Do you want coffee?

FUCK CHISAKI: STUPID FUCKING QUESTION GG ASS BITCH

Soba Boiii: Good. I made decaf for you.

FUCK CHISAKI: I'M FUCKING ENDING EVERYONE'S SHIT I FUCKING SWEAR I WILL FUCK YOU THE FUCK UP YOU FUCKING DOUBLE QUIRKED PIECE OF SHIT Fucker

Soba Boiii: It was a joke.

Provost Piston: When Chisaki was born, the doctor who was attending the birth attempted to throw him out the window for reasons obvious to us all, but the window rejected that action and threw him back.

FUCK CHISAKI: FUCKING IMPROVEMENT, BUT I KNOW YOU STOLE THAT SHIT FOUR EYES. AND FUCKED IT UP.

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: It's fine. You should sleep. I didn't know about midterms.

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: Nah dude its cool! My brain thingy was doing the wakey wake, and we're all like insomnia squad anyway.

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: Yamada is doing a review, but Aizawa won't. They're arguing about it. Yamada might win.

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: shisnou pls steal the answers for the tests im begging u

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: Aizawa is suspicious that I'm talking to you. I won't have time, and I don't know where they would put that.

FUCK CHISAKI: FUCK SHITSEI. BONEY FUCKING ASSLESS BITCH CAN CHOKE ON A FUCKING CHEERIO

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: Is Yamada more highly ranke

Provost Piston: When Chisaki happens to be walking down a street, he causes many people in the vicinity to turn their heads. This is not towards him, but in fact away from him, to keep themselves from having to look at him.

Soba Boiii: @Shinsou It's better to ignore it when your parents are arguing. I have a picture of Soba wearing an All Might hat.

Soba Boiii: *Tap to open 24 KB file*

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: ilu sobaaaaaa i wanna cry does he know i love him too????

Soba Boiii: Yes. Koda made sure to tell him.

FUCK CHISAKI: YOU TWO FUCKHEADS ARE SITTING NEXT TO EACH OTHER WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING THIS SHIT. AND FUCK THAT FUCKING CAT.

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: He looks uncomfortable. Thank you.

Provost Piston: Present Mic is technically more highly ranked than Eraserhead, because as an underground hero, Eraserhead is not ranked in the same manner as most Pro Heroes are. The Hero ranking system has many proponents and opponents, regarded as either a distraction from the duties that Pro Heroes are entrusted with or a symbol of reassurance for civilians or a source of information to guide marketing strategies utilized by hero management agencies which dominates 13% of Japan's economy. It is hard to say how well Eraserhead would do if he was a ranked hero, but as merchandising and media presence tends to affect those ranks, I believe that Present Mic would still be more highly ranked than Eraserhead.

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: It's fine. You should sleep. Eri had a bad night, and she'll want to spend time with you. Don't say anything about Chisaki. And I just wanted to read it before 5 today.

Sato looked up from his phone to see if anyone else was thinking the same thing he was. Iida had stopped in his tracks, one foot still raised, and Kaminari rolled his head to the side, frowning in confusion. Todoroki's eyes widened a bit before they narrowed, and he turned his phone towards

Midoriya, who hadn't noticed.

Bakugo growled and slapped Midoriya's shoulder. "I fucking told you, Deku! Just send that shit already!"

Midoriya did look up, his eyes widening when he read the message from Todoroki's phone, before he turned back to his with a deep set frown, thumbs typing faster.

Sato just stared.

When he was in middle school, he wasn't sure if he wanted to become a hero. He knew that he wanted to help people, to use the strength he was given to protect people that were weaker. He spent a lot of time wavering between UA and the high schools in his hometown, between a lofty dream that he wasn't sure he would see come true and something more sensible. Between a costume he couldn't stop drawing as a kid, that he wasn't sure he could fit into, and a TV character he's seen on a million sitcoms.

He could have just stayed home, and become a police officer after graduating. He could have used his quirk only to help at the bakery, he could have spent more time helping at the bakery. He could have gone to a police academy, and listened to the same three jokes about how good he was at making donuts while he patrolled his hometown, working with the heroes but keeping his quirk out of any fight that came.

He knew how investigations worked. He read a lot of detective novels and watched a lot of crime shows while he was trying to decide, to figure out whether he could really be smart enough to catch that little piece of evidence that breaks the case.

He knew that sometimes, victims had to still see their perpetrators. People who were hurt had to point the finger at the person who hurt them, to provide the accusation and statement and evidence that the police needed to do their jobs. It always felt wrong to him.

But he never considered what it felt like for the victim. And he can't imagine what Shinsou feels like now.

But if Shinsou felt like a roast would help, then Sato knew his way around the oven.

Stress Bake BB: Chisaki named his gang the 8 Precepts of Death, because he couldn't count any higher. He didn't know that thumbs counted as fingers too.

Bakugo snorts through his nose, but Sato isn't done. His new classmates probably don't know this, but he kind of got a reputation back in middle school among his friends. He just hasn't really had the opportunity to show it off at UA.

Stress Bake BB: Chisaki wore a mask all the time so that his gang could be unique, but that wasn't the only reason. Villains don't have dental.

Stress Bake BB: Chisaki's teeth are so crooked that if he flossed with piano wire, it could play Beethoven's 8th symphony all by itself.

Bakugo slaps the table and whispers "*Fuck,*" before he starts laughing.

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: dark!Sato unlocked omg sugar daddy how are you doing this

Soba Boiii: Keep going.

Stress Bake BB: Some villains try to say that they had a rough home life to explain why they turned to crime, but that isn't the case for Chisaki. His parents kicked him out of the nest just like any other pair of seagulls would.

Yeet Me to the Moon: I woke up to our sweet sugar man going OFF who tf hurt you?

I Shall Be #5 Nevermore: Hidden depths beneath the sugar glaze.

Stress Bake BB: Chisaki's villain name is 'Overhaul,' but he should have went with 'U-Haul.' Maybe 'Dump Truck' would have worked better, but U-Hauls can still work for hauling around giant piles of garbage.

Mighty Boiii: *Message failed to send due to exceeding the character limit.*

Sato looked up slowly, in the corner of his eye he saw the rest of the 'early morning' gang doing the same. Midoriya didn't look like he was breathing, the bags beneath his eyes starting to look even darker as the color drained from his face.

While Bakugo began screaming at him for not sending the roast in smaller sections, Sato looked back at the phone, ignoring the possibility that one of those explosions could send his glass of orange juice flying off the table. Again.

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: Midoriya.exe stopped working.

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: Oh my god he's not breathing who knows cpr????

Yeet Me to the Moon: THERE'S A CHARACTER LIMIT???? I legit sent a 5 page essay on LNE before!

Lofi hip hop beats to chill and study to: KAMINARI WE ALL KNOW CPR

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: bold of u to assume I can remember that

Not haxing the midterm server stuff 4 me :'(: The limit is set to 99999 characters per message....

Mighty Boiii: @Hagakure do you still have that webcam and your printer?????

Not haxing the midterm server stuff 4 me :'(changed their name to C me fail

C me fail: Yep! Just let me get ready real quick, it won't take long lol

God is a woman and her name is Yaoyorozu Momo: Who needs help and what with?

RIP to our ADHD phone charger: hooooomg we need marshmallows this is gonna be a live roast my body is READY

Yeet Me to the Moon: Printer??? Are we getting a powerpoint presentation of Chisaki's failures and sins because I am READY.

C me fail: L...can't with that. IT'S NOT POWERPOINT IF IT'S P R I N T E D

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: It's really not that important, it's fine. You really need to study.

Yeet Me to the Moon: Shinsou dude, this is still definitely about you, but this is also for us. I want

this. So bad. To happen.

Melting into a puddle of tears and failure: ROAST ROAST ROAST ROAST

**Melting into a puddle of tears and failure: SHINNYYYYYYYY COME TO SCHOOOL
PLEAAAAAAAAAAAAAASE I MIIIIIIIIIISS YOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU**

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: They don't want me to. Eri is though. Make sure she's busy.

Shinny bb i miss uuuuu: Thanks Stress Bake.

Sato smiled to himself before he got up from the table, watching Midoriya race to the stairs before Todoroki called for him to take a glass of lemon water to prepare.

He's not really a flashy guy like a lot of other students. His quirk isn't the most powerful, or the most unique. When he applied for UA, he wasn't surprised when the interviewer representing the management department told him that if he did find some success as a hero, he would never be able to break the top 200 hero ranking.

He just wants to help people, and the little things count too. Making a baker's dozen for a customer who seems a little down, or offering a sample to a little kid who was staring at a pastry that his parents weren't going to buy. Making food was a simple way to comfort people, even if it wasn't a grand gesture, and it was usually taken for granted.

But it helped. He helped. He could help a little more.

Stress Bake BB: No problem! Just tell me what you want to eat for the dorm breakfast this weekend. I'm making everyone's favorites.

*

Aizawa was surprised to see Recovery Girl smiling when they entered, until she spoke. "I'm glad you remembered your appointment without having to be reminded."

Aizawa completely forgot. And Recovery Girl realized that as soon as she saw Shinsou's hand, a cheery smile becoming too sharp and not at all cheery when she turned to him.

"Of course," was all that she said, but there were far too many comparisons to Midoriya in those two words. Far too many accusations. But she didn't need to speak them, especially in front of Shinsou, when he imagined that at the end of this appointment she would still make plenty of time for that. "Let's take a look at that hand, then."

Shinsou sat on the cot while Recovery Girl unwrapped his fingers, patting the back of his hand before she kissed it, deciding that even if Shinsou was tired throughout the rest of the exam, it wouldn't matter.

Though Shinsou never seemed to be affected by the exhaustion that should come from Recovery Girl's quirk, his eyelids did fall a bit more closed while she clipped a monitoring device on his thumb, and remained that way while she took his height and weight.

It might be better if Shinsou did fall asleep at the end of the exam, so that Recovery Girl would be more willing to watch over him. Aizawa had few other ideas for what to do with Shinsou.

Neither he nor Hizashi could take today off and stay at the dorm with Shinsou. They had students that needed their attention, especially in Hizashi's case. While Aizawa was sure that no amount of

review or preparation could make a difference at this point for his homeroom, and he was already ahead of his lesson plan in Hero Ethics, Hizashi had missed a lot of class. His rubric was a mess, and he needed to sort it out today for his students.

Shinsou couldn't be left alone at the dorm, but he imagined that the usual schedule of taking him to class would also be overwhelming, even with Eri by his side. He seemed to be unaffected so far after waking up, but if he broke down so readily with Hizashi, then Aizawa knew better. Even if Shinsou could hide it, it was still there.

“I-It shakes. Nu-umb sometimes,” Shinsou's text-to-speech app broke through Aizawa's distracted thoughts, causing him to look up to see Recovery Girl looking at Shinsou while he held up his hand, still slightly trembling. *“Wa-as unmade. No-ot remade right.”*

It's the 'right' that Aizawa can't stop thinking about. The suggestion that Chisaki's quirk was so familiar to Shinsou that he could tell when it was poorly done.

Sir Nighteye told him that at the end of the torture that he saw, Chisaki would use his quirk on Shinsou to undo some of the damage. He knew that this torture must have occurred more than once, that it wasn't unfamiliar to Shinsou, but he hoped that it hadn't always been so brutal.

That it never was worse than that. That Shinsou hadn't also been *reset*.

Eri hasn't talked about that part of the raid, but Aizawa hopes that if she did, she wouldn't ask what Chisaki meant by that. That somehow, it had been forgotten about, or she was unable to remember. There were things that they had to be willing to discuss with her, to explain, but he knows that he can't do that for that moment. That vague admission and the horrors behind it.

There was a possibility that both of his wards had died and been brought back to life, repeatedly. And more than the weight of the horrors that they lived through, that possibility was heavier in a different way. Something unfathomable, something without research or accounts of others who had gone through the same thing. Aizawa had no idea what it could feel like to die and come back, and he hopes that neither of his wards do either.

He hopes that if there was a memory of it, it stays buried.

Recovery Girl smiles at Shinsou after pulling away the portable X-ray, and Aizawa doesn't miss the fact that Shinsou had quickly looked away from the screen when it turned on. That he hadn't looked at it for the entire exam. That he wasn't curious at all to know what the inside of his hand looked like.

Aizawa wanted to kill Chisaki.

“I'll be sending those images to some friends of mine who specializes in orthopedics and neurology, and I'm sure we can have that taken care of,” Recovery Girl says with a smile and another pat, before she walks to the table beside the cot to pull out a UA branded messenger bag.

One that has a purple cat paw embroidered above UA's logo.

“I have a few snacks packed away in here, along with the usual gifts that come with the bag,” Recovery Girl says, smiling at the flicker of a grin on Shinsou's face when his eyes lock on the embroidered patch. *“It's important that you eat whenever you feel like you have an appetite.”*

Recovery Girl won't mention the patch, or the fact that it's clearly hand-sewn. That she not only took the time to personalize Shinsou's bag with something that she knew he would like, something that she learned in the short amount of time that they had spent together, but that it had probably

been difficult for her. Her own hands weren't as healthy as they used to be, Arthritis still at an early stage, but there nonetheless.

It's a touching gesture, one that makes Aizawa feel all the more guilty when she levels another accusation with her stare. He had just assumed that Shinsou would find himself welcome to Eri's snacks as well, though Hizashi did mention wanting Shinsou to order a backpack for himself online. At some point. "I need to speak to Aizawa in my office, but do let me know if there's anything you like in that bag. I have plenty more stocked away in here."

Shinsou nodded, lifting the flap, and Aizawa followed Recovery Girl to her more secluded office prepared for a rather deserved scolding.

Instead, she sighed as soon as she sat down, full of disappointment, and that was honestly enough for him. Enough for her as well, as she lifts her notes on her clipboard. "He's gained just a little weight, but I do hope that this is the lowest I ever see him at. His metabolic rate is improving as well, he's more hydrated. His temperature was steady throughout the exam, and oddly low."

Aizawa glances towards the door, cupping a hand behind his neck. "He's been apart from Eri the past few days. Since she is the only person he can speak to, it might have an effect." Shinsou's quirk might be weakening rather than flaring up and going wild due to the lack of using it, but Aizawa knows that might not be the case. "He used it on Eri when her quirk erupted. He was only controlling her, but he still had a nose bleed. I erased his quirk, and he was unconscious and feverish."

"I remember," Recovery Girl chides, flipping to an earlier page in her notes where she must have recorded the incident after Hizashi reported it to her, asking for her advice. Though there was little that any of them could do. "He recovered in a few hours, but seemed lethargic afterwards."

"Did my quirk have an effect on his?" Aizawa asks, forcing himself to. It wasn't the same as his quirk inspiring the bullet that took away Togata's, but the possibility was nonetheless horrifying. That he could have somehow harmed Shinsou's quirk when it seemed to be in a fragile state, doing so thoughtlessly.

"I doubt it, but it must have been a shock to the system," Recovery Girl says, reminding him that she was not a quirk specialist. But it seems that she had been educating herself. "Rejected quirks can often cause unpleasant side effects, and it's more clear when evaluating the quirk factor itself. I haven't been able to get the police to authorize a specialist to look at Shinsou's quirk factor, since it would be more identifying than anything else."

Aizawa nods, heartened that at least Recovery Girl was able to reach out to some specialists, and Shinsou could receive better care through her. And more than a little relieved to know that his quirk might not have affected him the way that he thought.

Shinsou's quirk factor might have been growing steadily more volatile, more at risk for quirk slips and those unpleasant side effects, which in Shinsou's case might be as benign as a migraine or severe as a seizure. But if Erasure nullified that quirk factor, rendering it dormant for the few seconds it took to snap his control, it would take time to work up to that pitched frenzy. Time enough that it might not have the opportunity to cause issues, if Shinsou was able to speak to someone other than Eri.

If he had been fully convinced that he wouldn't inflict Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome onto that person.

"His hand," Recovery Girl says with a shaking sigh. Aizawa is immediately concerned. "I don't

see anything wrong with it.”

Aizawa doesn't understand. “The damage must be severe. It's noticeable.”

“Very much so,” Recovery Girl says, closing her notes to fold her hands over them on her lap, looking up at Aizawa. “There may be something that I'm missing, which is why I'll be getting a second opinion on the matter, but there's a possibility that this is a psychogenic condition. A healthy hand, but a clear reason why it doesn't behave like one.”

Aizawa is unfamiliar with the term, but Recovery Girl offers enough explanation for him to have an idea what it means. Shinsou's hand wasn't damaged by Chisaki, but Chisaki had done enough damage on his own. And more than any other injury that Chisaki ‘repaired,’ Shinsou's hand held onto the memory of it.

And after what Eri told him, he doesn't question why it would be his hand.

Chisaki had destroyed Shinsou's hand in front of Eri. Had shown it to her, and Aizawa knows that as painful as that experience was for Shinsou, it must have been more painful because Eri was involved. And he imagines that Chisaki took great pleasure in knowing that.

“I'll email you as soon as I know one way or another, but I'm glad to see that he's doing better. Broken fingers notwithstanding,” Recovery Girl says with narrowed eyes, ones that Aizawa instinctively looks away from.

He imagines that she wouldn't take too kindly to his request, and nods, knowing that words are useless at this point. As much as he could argue that Shinsou seemed to have a knack for getting injured all on his own, it would be pointless. He and Hizashi were Shinsou's caretakers, and they should be doing a far better job.

Shinsou looks completely unphased by the treatment, much like Aizawa imagined that he would be, though he hoped that it would be different. He slung the bag over his shoulder before he signed to Recovery Girl. ‘*Thank you.*’

“Please, do be careful with that,” Recovery Girl scolds with a gentle tone. “It would be better to avoid using your fingers for a few hours at least.”

Shinsou pulls his phone from his hoodie pocket, the barest hint of a frown lingering on his face while he types. “*So-orry. And tha-ank you-u.*” He must have remembered that Recovery Girl didn't know enough sign language to know what he signed.

But he would be surprised. “Just be careful,” Recovery Girl said with a chuckle, before she signed. “And ‘You're welcome.’”

And Aizawa had to say that he was surprised himself, but only for a moment. He had known and worked with Recovery Girl far too long to be surprised that she wouldn't make that effort. It brings a smile to his face nonetheless.

But a glance at the time quickly wipes it away. “Thank you, Recovery Girl. If there's anything else, please send me an email.”

They needed to collect Eri from Hizashi quickly to get to homeroom in time, and though that wouldn't offer Shinsou much time to decide whether he would like to stay with Hizashi or himself, he hoped that Shinsou would still make the right decision.

Class 1-A's homeroom would not be the right decision.

*

27 made a mistake. Several mistakes. Consecutively.

Eri had placed another note on his desk, while he stared at the test that he wanted to be a distraction, and tried to ignore it. He didn't want them to notice that he was there, he didn't think about it, *he wasn't thinking at all he was stupid.*

He refused to look away, because he knows what he'll see. His owner's irritation already carried far too well in his words, and he could feel the weight of their stare anyway.

He hates this game. He never should have started it, never should have encouraged the heroes or asked anything of them. What little they gave in return was nothing compared to the price of it. Their stares, their attention. He was entirely too bleach soaked to deal with it.

He had opened the first note, curious. Curious if it could be interesting, distracting, could be useful. It wasn't.

' The roast was AMAZING, have you seen it? Also Kiribro said you have tats, but I didn't want to bring it up in the chat since it might be embarrassing, but you can tell me. ;) What do they look like? And are you a student now? You have a bag, did you transfer from villain school? Can you still steal Present Mic's midterm answers even if you did? If that's okay? I need it? Anyway, how was your morning? I was super tired after... '

He didn't know which one of the heroes wanted him to read a full page front to back filled with questions and statements and words that required too much from him, but they would be disappointed. They all would be. He could only hope that would make them leave him alone.

The buzzing had only gotten stronger, until he had to focus on breathing, realizing that he was forgetting to. He tried to breathe, tried to breathe, but it was getting harder. He knew what that meant, and he didn't want it to happen.

Yamada told him to use the phone if he needed to, and he did. He messaged Yamada that he wanted to leave, in a space between the rising panic where he didn't care whether he was allowed to tell him that or not, didn't care if it was troublesome for Yamada.

But he didn't pick the right chat to send that to.

"I wonder if we can sneak into the staff room," Mirio mused, matching his quick pace before 27 realizes he was walking too fast again. He didn't even know where he was going, why he needed to get there so quickly.

He had no idea why Mirio was here either. " *Sorry. Mi-idterms. You do-on't have to.* " He didn't know about midterms, he shouldn't be bothering the heroes, his owner didn't want him to do that. He would distract them, they would do poorly. Mirio shouldn't be here, Mirio shouldn't be doing whatever they're supposed to be doing, he has no idea what they're supposed to be doing, he doesn't know why he wanted to get away from Eri, why he would be so stupid, why he would cause so much trouble he's causing a lot of trouble he should be better than that he's troublesome troublesome troublesome

"Breathe," Mirio says, gently. Hands rising and falling again. Kind smile. They're stopped. He's trying to breathe, trying not to be troublesome. Trying not to make trouble. "In." He can, he can breathe in, if Mirio tells him to. "Out." He's getting better. He's not completely lost, he's not a lost cause, he won't be thrown away, he can breathe.

He doesn't know why he keeps crying when this happens, but he wonders if Mirio notices that it doesn't stop as quickly as it should. Even when he's breathing better, when he's breathing right, he can't really stop, it's troublesome. There's a troublesome ache in his chest, a stinging in his hands that goes numb, but not like it's supposed to. He's troublesome.

He doesn't want to think of being troublesome, doesn't want the words to stay in his mind, but they are. They're in his mind, because Chisaki left them there. When he stole his voice he put the words in there.

He hates it.

"Really, don't worry about it," Mirio says, waving his hand. "I don't really have to worry about midterms that much, and Neji and Tamaki take better notes than me anyway! And Ecto-sensei-"

"Has found you," the villainous looking hero approaching from down the hall says. Mirio stiffens and presses his palms together in front of his chest, to ask forgiveness when it's 27's fault. 27 is troublesome, so incredibly troublesome that he's troubled Mirio that much, troubled that Ecto-sensei person, troubled everyone around him and even people he's never met before. "It's fine."

Mirio sighs relief before he cups a hand behind his head, wincing. "I'm sorry, Sensei, I really should have said something before bolting out the door like that."

"You *should* have, but you didn't. And now that I can see why, it's a forgivable offence," Ecto-sensei glances at 27, giving him a nod, but not a wound. Not a punishment for causing trouble. It's weird. "It's not entirely your fault either, and Eraserhead and Present Mic will be hearing about it from me. But as long as you feel it's necessary, you can be excused from class."

27 doesn't know how to make his fingers move. He should tell Ecto-sensei that it's not Mirio's fault, it's not Yamada's and it's not his owner's. It's his. He's troublesome.

But he leaves after Mirio thanks him, and Mirio turns back to him to try to convince him that it's fine. That he likes being with 27 anyway, and he really doesn't have to worry about midterms. That they should try to sneak into the staff room, or maybe the cafeteria. Maybe go outside and enjoy the day, or go to Yamada and his owner's dorm. Or to Mirio's dorm.

27 still doesn't know how to make his fingers move, but his feet do. They're just very slow. He just wants to stand still, but he can't. Not when Mirio is walking, but slowly. Looking at him.

There's a chime that he barely hears before there's too many people and it's loud and he's standing in the way and he knows that he can feel them staring he can feel them moving around him he knows that he needs to move but he can't. He's troublesome.

There's a brush against his elbow, it knocks his arm forward a bit and the word out of his mouth. "Troublesome."

He hoped that Mirio didn't hear it, because he's supposed to say something else when he speaks to him. Anything else, anything that makes sense. Mirio is a hero and he wanted to hear something else from him when he speaks, because he places too much importance on that. For some reason, he doesn't care that 27 is broken and instead finds it funny. Or not funny. He doesn't know what Mirio thinks of it.

But Mirio smiles too much to cover up the falter, and puts a hand on 27's back. It's warm, it's large, it's solid. Maybe it's pushing him, but he moves before it can and it still follows, still rests there.

“I don’t think it’s troublesome at all, Shinsou,” Mirio says as they walk. It’s quieter than he usually talks, softer. It’s gentle, it’s warm, it’s kind. It’s confusing, but it’s almost believable. “Let’s just hang out here until the crowd dies down a bit.”

It’s an alcove in the hallway, a space that people are ignoring, have no reason to linger in. 27 stops when Mirio does, and it takes him too long to realize why it’s wrong. Mirio is standing between 27 and the crowd, he’s taking the guard position. It’s not entirely effective, there are still many angles from which one of the students could still attack him, but Mirio is turned so that there are fewer. So 27 can’t see as many of them.

But 27 can’t move to correct that, can’t do anything but stand and feel the weight of Mirio’s hand on his back until the crowd thins, until the chime rings again. Until Mirio smiles at him again, even wider. “Now we’ve got the whole place to ourselves again! Do you feel up for a little adventure?”

27 nods, he just doesn’t want to be troublesome. Anymore than he already is.

But something about that unwavering smile and that warm weight on his back is making that word disappear while they walk.

*

Bakugo is fucking pissed.

Shitsou clearly has some fucking anxiety issues and shit, and he shouldn’t be dragged around UA when he’s having a fucking breakdown already. Fucking Shitsei and Micsei should know that shit, but they did it anyway. And all the asshole extras in homeroom couldn’t fucking contain themselves. Fucking Ashido is so hellbent on this high five shit that even Shitsei knows it, and he was too busy glaring her ass down to even notice Shitsou.

Bakugo tried to keep an eye on him, because fucking someone should. The corpse is quiet as shit, but he didn’t say shit to Eri, even when she was talking to him, and that’s a red fucking flag right there. Fucker goes deaf sometimes because the anxiety shit gets to him. Shitty Hair said he didn’t seem to hear a fucking word he said after he tried to go to the lunch room and had that fucking episode.

But apparently some fucker installed an anxiety chip in Shitsou’s brain, because that creepy Tin Tin looking bastard strolled in and Shitsei didn’t bat an eye. Just fucking nodded at the bullshit line about needing Shitsou to help him with some shit, and let them leave like it’s some kind of shit he expected to happen.

Shitsou’s been gone all English, and he should probably stay missing until he gets his shit sorted. Or gets fucking *medicated* , but that would require some kind of fucking effort on Shitsei’s part, so it’s not happening.

Eri is doing that kick thing a lot. That creepy fucking shit Shitsou might be on to something, because everytime Shitty Hair turns around to smile at her, she stops for a while. But she’s doing that fucking test kick too much and someone needs to take her home or some shit, because she’s clearly not fucking alright and fucking dandy being here either.

The bell rings and Micsei starts going off like a fucking sprinkler trying to wrap up the fucking review, but Bakugo doesn’t need to hear that shit. He’s been fucking paying attention all fucking term, this shit’s not easy but it’s not hard, and he knows he’s got this shit in the fucking bag. He’s almost out the fucking door when he feels some shit pulling on his jacket, and he looks down to see Eri looking back at him.

The brat wants something pretty fucking bad to look that worried, and she needs to spit that shit out because it's a done fucking deal. Whoever's shit he needs to fuck up, whatever shit needs to go down, he's gonna fucking do it.

"Ugo," actually, *fuck that*, he's not doing shit for her until she stops that shit. "I want you to teach me how to be mad."

Fuck.

Fuck, is this really happening? Now?

Bakugo grabs the front of his shirt, his fucking heart is racing and shit, he's not fucking ready. He's not ready for this shit, he needs some fucking supplies or some shit, he doesn't even have any fucking candy. Eri is *asking him* to teach her how to be mad, and he can do that shit, but he needs to make sure he can do it *right*.

"Bro," Shitty Hair says like he's about to fucking *cry*, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so happy for you-"

"*Fuck off*," Bakugo hisses through his teeth. He doesn't fucking give a shit, fucker is just insinuating some shit because he has fucking hair for brains, because Bakugo *doesn't fucking care* about this shit at all.

But he's still going to help the brat out, because he's a hero and shit. And because Shitsou is going to lose his fucking marbles when he finds out, but there's a fucking method to this shit. It's fucking necessary, and his impending shitfest is just a bonus.

Bakugo kneels down so he's fucking eye-level with the brat, because that shit helps communicate with tiny people and shit, and she just looks at him with her giant fucking red eyes. "Say 'Fuck.'"

"Fuck," Eri says, right before Micsei starts screeching like a dropped microphone. But he can cut that shit off right fucking now, because there's a fucking method to this shit, and Bakugo knows his shit. This is *his* fucking shit, and the brat knows it.

And she's a quick fucking study.

*

Aizawa looks up from the completed expulsion form, and looks to his husband. Hizashi's frayed nerves are a bit too apparent now, and the swears being muttered between bites of curry are not helping matters.

"Mirio checked in an hour ago, but they're not answering their phones," Hizashi says, with a long sigh and long stretch that doesn't relieve any of the tension in his eyes. "But I'm sure things are fine! I'm sure they're just getting something to eat, or maybe just hanging out. Having a lot of fun. Just like we are, right, little bean?"

"Fuck yeah," Eri answered, in a chipper voice that didn't suit those words at all. "Fuck...him. Fuck...."

Aizawa looked back at the expulsion form and tried to convince himself to hand it over to Principal Nezu. He knew that Bakugo meant well, he knew what he was trying to accomplish. But if he knew that Aizawa would be listening to Eri swearing like a broken record for the better part of two hours, he might have rethought his plan of action.

Or he might not have.

“Fuck Ch...”

Aizawa crumpled the expulsion form in his fist.

*

Shinsou tipped his head back against the wall, mouth still hanging open as he breathed hard, but he still had a little bit of a smile on his face. And he definitely earned it.

“And hydrate,” Mirio said, handing Shinsou a water bottle that he opened and drank from a bit more readily than he followed the cool-down stretches. He didn’t need to be told to do warm-ups, but cool-downs were a little confusing, and Mirio didn’t need another reason to hate Chisaki, but he had several. Shinsou not knowing how to do cool-downs was the least of them.

“I-I fought Rappa-a. You-u won’t hu-urt me.”

Mirio definitely didn’t believe that at first. Didn’t want to believe it. And definitely didn’t want to see Shinsou prove it to him, but there was a look in Shinsou’s eyes after he said that. Even if Shinsou didn’t outright ask, his eyes seemed too desperate for it, and Mirio convinced himself that as long as he went easy on the kid, then maybe this would help.

Tamaki says that it feels like feeling too much, like a surge of electricity that knocks out the power. Mirio imagines that Shinsou feels way too much, and it’s probably worse because he doesn’t have an outlet. He can’t tell anyone about it to let out the pressure when it starts to get that bad.

Tamaki says that exercise can help sometimes, and that’s why Mirio took Shinsou to the 3-A dorm workout room. They stretched, they ran laps, and Mirio was starting to see the difference. Shinsou was starting to loosen up, like all that electricity was slowly seeping out before it could fry him again, but then Shinsou started looking at the sparring mat, and eventually stopped running.

“I wa-ant to fight you-u.”

Mirio didn’t want to fight Shinsou, even if he was going to fake it. He really hoped that Shinsou would make the first move, that maybe he could just fall to the ground and let Shinsou have that little victory. But Shinsou beckoned for him to go first, and he moved his arm slowly, knowing his fist would go right over Shinsou’s shoulder.

And then the rest of him did.

His legs were still dangling over his head, chest tight as he was bent in half with his shoulders on the floor and arms braced outwards to balance himself. Shinsou just raised an eyebrow when Mirio asked if he was okay, before Mirio realized it and laughed.

He made sure that Shinsou taught him the sign for ‘Stop,’ that he’d use it as soon as he needed to. Shinsou never did, and Mirio never went all-out on the kid, but he was starting to see that Shinsou wasn’t quite as much of a kid as Mirio thought he was.

But Shinsou smiles a lot easier when he’s winning. And he knows when he’s going to win before he does it, when he sees that one opportunity before he takes it. Mirio wouldn’t say it’s a *nice* smile, it looks a lot like Aizawa-sensei’s smile before he doubles their essay’s page count or assigns a new project with an incredibly short time frame to do it. But it’s a smile, and Shinsou doesn’t smile nearly as much as he should.

“You did great,” Mirio tells him again, watching Shinsou catch his breath and take another long drink from the water bottle. He definitely should have been firmer with Shinsou about taking off the hoodie, but Shinsou almost never refuses to do something, from anyone. It’s something that Aizawa-sensei is working on, that he told Mirio to look out for, so Mirio just kept an eye out for signs of heat exhaustion instead.

Shinsou isn’t smiling anymore while he pants, but he pulls out his phone and says something that Mirio kind of wishes that he didn’t. “ *Te-ell me about the-e raid.* ”

Mirio sits down slowly, lifts his own water bottle before he realizes that he’s very clearly stalling, and Shinsou knows it. Shinsou stares at him, and he sees that same look in his eye, the one that he already couldn’t refuse, even if he should. Even if he definitely should, especially today. “Maybe that’s not the best idea. It’s kind of heavy stuff, and Aizawa-sensei knows more about it than me.”

“ *Su-upposed to be-e willing to ta-alk about trauma-atizing events wi-ith trauma-atized childre-en,* ” Shinsou says, and Mirio feels a cold trickle down his spine that he knows isn’t from sweat. Yamada had also told him that Shinsou can be a little manipulative sometimes, but the more than Mirio thinks about it, he doesn’t think that’s the case.

It might just be an honest request from a traumatized child. “Well, maybe we can start from the beginning. And if you want me to stop, just say ‘Stop,’” Mirio signs, then runs a hand through his sweaty hair. “Well, Sir Nighteye, my mentor, got a tip that The 8 Precepts of Death were doing something fishy. He and Bubble Girl were doing recon work, while me and Midoriya were on patrol. And that’s when we ran into Eri.” Mirio pauses, a small smile working over his face as he remembers what Midoriya had mentioned to him. “She talked to us because you told her to, right?”

“ *Plan H, fi-ittingly eno-ough,* ” Shinsou says, his eyes narrowing at his phone for a moment while he types. “ *Di-idn’t think it wou-uld work.* ”

Mirio smiles, despite that. Even if Shinsou didn’t believe in heroes before, maybe he did now. “It’s a good thing she did. We couldn’t help her then, even though Midoriya really wanted to. We didn’t know enough, just that she was really scared, but other hero agencies were noticing things. The, uh. Bullets.”

Shinsou nods, his eyes falling a little more closed before he looks at Mirio again. That same look in his eye.

“So, Sir Nighteye contacted those heroes and a few others, and started doing recon work for a raid. We had proof that the 8 Precepts were up to no good, but we needed to be sure that we knew where they were. And Sir Nighteye met you at the bookstore, right?” Mirio asks, even if he’s not sure if he should. If he really wants to hear Shinsou’s side of the story, and hear another piece of the life that he didn’t realize he’d miss so much before it was taken. To have another piece of Sir Nighteye when he wishes he had known sooner, had spent more time with him to have more pieces to remember him by.

“ *Yes. So-orry. Shou-uld’n’t have stolen. Knew i-it was wrong.* ” Shinsou looks away from him, low and to the side. He’s a good kid, and Mirio never doubted that. Never doubted that Shinsou would have turned out far different if his circumstances had allowed it.

“It’s okay! It actually kind of helped,” Mirio reassured, waving his hand. “The bookstore was close to the compound, and the owner of the bookstore noticed that you, you know. You seemed like you needed help. Sir Nighteye staked it out because he thought you were maybe just a kid who was working for the 8 Precepts, but he used his quirk and it... It helped a lot. We knew where Eri was.”

Sir Nighteye had been quiet when he got back to his office. He didn't speak for hours, just writing down what he observed from his quirk. When he finished, he sighed heavily, and folded his hands together in front of his mouth before he said anything. "*The raid has two objectives now. But the second is unlikely to come to fruition. Prepare yourselves for that.*"

Mirio knows that he's very lucky to have never seen a civilian die. He knows that he probably will at some point. But he doesn't know if it will feel any different from watching Sir Nighteye pass away. "After that, we moved quickly. Uh, remember to stop me if you need me to."

Shinsou nods, looking at him again. Mirio kind of wishes that he knew more about the other parts of the raid, that he wouldn't have to talk so much about his own.

"So, that big Rikiya guy ran out as soon as we got there. Team Ryukku, with Ryukku, Neji, Uravity, and Froppy dealt with him and tried to maintain the backline while the rest of us ran in. It was kind of a mess at first, with the hallways moving around due to that one guy's quirk. We got split up and had to fight villains that way, instead of working as a unit. Fat Gum and Red Riot faced off against that Tengai and Rappa guy. Tamaki had to go against Tabe, Setsuno, and Hojo."

Mirio takes a drink of water, hoping that Shinsou might not want to hear the rest of it. He can't talk about The League, he imagines that Aizawa-sensei doesn't want Shinsou to know anything about the villain group that had already attacked UA. Shinsou was familiar with too many villains already, and he didn't need another group to worry about.

"And, you know, I got to you and Eri," Mirio says, and waits. He waits for Shinsou to say something, to sign 'Stop,' but he doesn't. He nods. "You...know how that went."

"*More,*" Shinsou says, looking at his phone. "*I-I don't remember a-all of it. Or a-after.*"

He doesn't need to say it, and Mirio wasn't going to go into detail about it either.

How Eri had trembled and whimpered while Chisaki taunted her with Shinsou's voice. How Mirio had to clench his jaw so tight to keep from answering, from telling Chisaki that he *wasn't* going to leave Shinsou. He had no idea how to unfuse him, but he wasn't going to leave him either. He just needed to get Eri to safety first.

"Well, when I showed up, I tried to fight Chisaki. I was really hoping to knock that stupid mask off of his face, because maybe he'd get into such a hissy fit about it that I could get you and Eri out while he was distracted."

Shinsou's mouth twitches into a smile for a moment, and for more than one reason, Mirio wishes that he did knock that mask off.

"But jeez, I was taking a long time to do that, and you... you were trying to get him to answer a question, weren't you?" Mirio asks, and Shinsou nods. "That's why your quirk is so amazing! I mean, you could have ended the fight right there! I was trying to hard to knock Chisaki down and out, but you could have ended it without lifting a finger!"

Shinsou looks back at his phone, but doesn't type anything. Long enough for Mirio to know that if Shinsou has something to say to that, he doesn't want to say it. Not right now.

"And I caught Eri. She was pretty scared to be away from you, but I was running to try to get her to safety. We couldn't really do that, and a big fight happened at the end. Midoriya punched Chisaki right in the face, knocked his mask *clean* off. It would have been nice to take a picture of that," Mirio says, skipping over all the other parts that he doesn't want to mention.

That he left the group, and Eraserhead was taken by Chronostasis and nearly killed. That sting from the bullet in his back and that electric feeling of his quirk factor cells dying all at once, like a hand was being cut off. That Sir Nighteye sacrificed himself there, let himself be impaled by the cement and rubble that Chisaki was manipulating.

That when Chisaki asked Nemoto if he was willing to die for his sake, and used his quirk to take him into his body, Mirio couldn't stop thinking of Sir Nighteye's words. '*The second is unlikely to come to fruition.*'

But it did. Eri's quirk was strong enough to pull Shinsou out of that fusion, unharmed. She was brave, braver than any little girl should ever have to be to put her hand on Chisaki and pull Shinsou free, that she tried to reach for him immediately. And it looked like Shinsou was trying to reach for her.

"Since Eri was using her quirk, but couldn't control it, Eraserhead had to stop it. Both of you were unconscious. You were taken to the same hospital, and you would have been in the same room if there wasn't a risk of Eri's quirk still being active," Mirio says, remembering the tours that he went on, that he knew Aizawa-sensei went on as well.

Whenever he felt too heavy to move, he would force himself to, to check on Eri and Shinsou. Remind himself that it was worth it. Even if Eri twisted and thrashed in her sleep, feverish and unresponsive, she was free. Even if Shinsou was so small in that hospital robe, so *thin*, with scabs and scars across his nose, cheeks, chin. The mask was gone, that brutal black thing was off of him.

"And, you probably know the rest of it better than I do. We visited you before you woke up, but then you weren't there. And now you're here!" Mirio says, forcing a smile on his face. "Now you and Eri are both safe, and it all started with your plan. With Eri talking to us."

Shinsou stares at him for a moment, eyes wide. He's seen that look on Midoriya's face a hundred times, before he starts sputtering that it really wasn't anything, before Mirio cuts him off with a hand on his head to ruffle his hair. But Shinsou doesn't need a hair ruffle.

He smiles, even if it's small. Just a half smile that he keeps to himself, eyes almost closed. It's not anything like the smiles that he wore while they sparred, but it's no less proud. No less victorious. "*I wo-on.*"

Mirio can't help but smile at that. "Yep, you won! Deku might have knocked Chisaki into next week, but he couldn't have done it without your help! Or Eri's!"

Shinsou's smile starts falling, more slowly. He almost offers to check in to see where Eri is so that Shinsou can see her before he starts missing her too much, but then he realizes it. It's not missing Eri that's setting in. It's remembering what time it is.

It's remembering that in a couple hours, Shinsou will have to face Chisaki again.

Mirio doesn't have a quirk, and never really wanted another one when he had one, but right now he wishes that he had one that could stop time. He'd use it as long as he could, to stop it as long as he could. To keep Shinsou in this place, this sweaty gym where he felt like he could smile. That he could win.

But Shinsou taps on something that makes a loud noise that he startles to, and taps again to mute it before he looks up at Mirio and shows him the phone.

Mirio can't help but laugh when he reads it, and pulls himself to sit against the wall, next to

Shinsou instead of across from him. “We should watch it!”

And that’s all the encouragement that Shinsou needs before he presses play.

Midoriya is standing in a living room that looks exactly like the one in the 3-A dorm, with Chisaki’s mugshot tapped to a wall behind him. But there are pieces of paper below that with shaky, jagged lines that come together to look like the rest of him, like someone tried to make a life-size cardboard cut-out of Chisaki but didn’t have the supplies.

A lot of other people are gathered around by the sound of their chanting of ‘ *Roast roast roast roast*, ’ and they all fall silent when Midoriya lifts a long, thin pointer and slaps it against Chisaki’s hair.

“ *Hair: it looks like Chisaki goes to Supercuts 5 minutes before they close, but that’s not the case. He does his own hair with a noodle strainer and sheep shears*, ” Midoriya says, ignoring someone yelling out ‘ *Fucking weak* ’ before he moves the pointer to Chisaki’s eyebrows. “ *S curves like these are banned from road planning for a reason*. ” Chisaki’s earlobes. “ *He didn’t get those piercings from Claire’s, but he wishes that he did. He thought that the studs would make him look like a ‘Stud,’ but they just set off metal detectors the same way that braincell detectors go off, but for a completely different reason*. ” Chisaki’s eyes. “ *Mascara. Expired, clumpy mascara*. ” Midoriya circles the bruise that’s still prominent on Chisaki’s jaw. “ *This is my proudest moment in my hero career. You can’t see it from the picture, but this man? You can’t see it, but I know it in my heart, that this man’s teeth are absolutely, situation fucked*. ”

“ *Izuku!* ” One of the girls scolds, which causes Midoriya to startle, that determined look in his eye wavering for a bit.

“ *Ochan, let him have this, kero*. ”

Before Midoriya starts again, Shinsou pauses the video. Mirio watches as Shinsou’s bottom lip is pulled in, as his eyes narrow, but before he reaches out, Shinsou puts the phone in his lap and pulls at his sleeve. Pulls it up to his elbow to reveal those painful scars, that black band.

When Mirio saw that tattoo in the hospital, it looked different. It was too painful for him to look at after the first time he saw it. But he’s glad that it looks different now.

Shinsou breathes out, his hands raise to sign before he stops himself. Then he signs anyway. Mirio doesn’t recognize the sign, but he knows what Shinsou says anyway.

‘ *I won*. ’

*

Eri really, really, really hates today.

It’s really bad, it’s the worst day in the whole world. Zawa and Yama are worried and Twenny is gone the whole day, and Eri is trying really hard, but she can’t get it right.

“Fuck Chisa...”

Eri holds her favorite unicorn stuffie close to her chest and lays on her bed. Yama said he was making apple bunnies as a snack, and she’s kind of hungry, but she really wants to get this right first.

‘Fuck’ is a bad word. Eri already knew that because Bakugo uses it a lot. ‘Fuck’ is supposed to

make people feel mad a lot better, because it's a mad word. But so far, Yama and Zawa just don't like hearing it.

Eri wants to be mad. If she's mad, she won't be scared, and she's really scared. She gets so scared that He's going to hurt Twenny when he sees him that she forgets that Yama and Zawa won't let that happen. She can't really think about it without thinking that maybe they won't. Maybe they'll reach out like Mirio did but be too slow to stop Him.

"Fuck Chisa...."

Eri should be mad at Him, because she hates him. She knows she does. She's just really scared, so scared that she doesn't feel mad or hate like she should. It's not okay to get mad at Twenny, when Twenny is really good and he's the best person that Eri knows, and He's the worst.

"Fuck Chisak...."

Sometimes, Eri hated going to The Chair. Even if she liked The Safe Place, sometimes she didn't want to go there. Sometimes she would get mad at Twenny for trying to put her there, but then she'd look and see that he was really sad. He was really sad and scared all the time, because he didn't want to take her to The Chair. But He made him do it.

"Fuck Chisaki."

Eri holds her unicorn really tight. She feels like He might be standing there, He might be looking at her with that scary look.

But she looks and he isn't.

And she remembers that she gets to live with heroes now.

Yama and Zawa won't let him come back. They won't let him hurt her, or hurt Twenny. And there are a lot of heroes that they get to live with that would stop him from even coming close to them.

It's really easy to feel mad. She doesn't feel scared at all, but she feels really mad. It makes her feel kind of bad, and a little like she has a tummy ache after eating a lot of cinnamon rolls, but she can say it. She can yell and no one will get mad, like Twenny told her they would. She can kick, and no one can tie up her legs. She kicks her legs a lot, and breathes in really deep so she can make a big yell like Yama, and get all of the mad out of her. "FUCK CHISAKI."

Yama runs to her door, and he stops and has a big smile on his face. She was worried that he would be mad that she was yelling, because she wasn't supposed to do that, but Yama gets to yell all the time too. And Yama yells with her sometimes. "Fuck Chisaki!"

Eri nods, because she really wants to do a concert with Yama again. "Fuck Chisaki!"

"Fuck Chisaki!"

"Fuck Chisaki!"

They get to do that a lot, until Eri hears the door open, and she knows that it's Twenny finally coming home. She runs over to him, and hugs him a whole lot because she missed him, even if he was having fun with Mirio. And she wants him to know that he doesn't have to go see Chisaki anymore.

"Fuck Chisaki!" Eri says, and Twenny doesn't look like he likes that. Mirio doesn't either, because

his face gets really twisty and weird before he covers his mouth, but Twenny *really* doesn't like that. And he looks really mad when he looks down the hall outside.

"Where are the fucking shits- *fuck yes* ," Ugo says, and he walks up to the door with a bunch of candy apples in his hand and a really nice smile on his face. Ugo doesn't use that smile a whole lot, but he probably should. "Here. Fucking congrats on tha- *FUCK* ."

Twenny really doesn't like Ugo sometimes, but Eri thinks that Twenny actually kind of hates Ugo right now. Twenny has a really mad and scary look on his face, and his hand is pinching Ugo's shoulder really hard, and it looks like it's really hurting Ugo.

But Ugo hits Twenny's arm away and looks really mad at him before he grabs his shirt and starts shaking Twenny. "Oi, I've put in all this fucking work and done all this fucking shit for you, so keep your little sister complex to your goddamn self, alright? Fucker?"

Twenny hits Ugo's arm away, and still looks like he wants to hurt Ugo, before he looks at Eri, and stops looking so mad. He just looks really tired. "Saying that word helps."

Eri nods, and holds her unicorn tighter. "It's a mad word, and it helps me not be scared. So I'm not scared of him anymore."

Twenny smiles, even if it still looks a little sad. "Okay. If it helps."

"Yeah, it *helps* , so cool your fucking shit, *Mom* ," Ugo says like he's trying to make Twenny mad, even if he shouldn't now that Twenny is his mom too. "It's not like you talk like a fucking nun either, Shit-Chan."

Ugo and Twenny both start talking with their hands a lot, after Ugo gives Eri her apples. Yama doesn't look like he really likes what they're saying, because he claps his hands together and talks kind of loud. "So! Nice of you all to drop by, I'd love to host a little get-together sometime, but we're kind of on a time crunch so maybe--"

"Here," Ugo says really mean, before he grabs the plastic bag around his arm and holds it out for Twenny. "Not that you'll *fucking* appreciate it, but we got you some shit. And since I had to play fucking delivery boy, I'm not leaving 'til you learn to say 'thank you.'"

Twenny knows how to say 'thank you,' but he doesn't. Even if he kind of looks like he likes the white thing that he pulls out of the bag.

"Since you have issues with talking and shit," Ugo says, but he says it kind of quiet, and he doesn't really want to look at Twenny. "And Trash Bird doesn't know sign language, but that's no fucking reason you can't tell him to eat shit and die."

Twenny kind of smiles, but he still doesn't say 'thank you,' but he still has more presents from Ugo. He pulls out a shirt, and he holds it out to show a picture of Izuku with his arms straight out and a serious hero look on his face. The words on top of it say 'I Punched You In The Face And It Was Awesome.'

"It's the *stupidest* shit I've seen in my goddamn life," Ugo says, and his hand goes over his face like he's trying to 'wipe that look off,' like Yama tells Zawa to do sometimes when they're play fighting. "Yaoyorozu's IQ got fucking nerfed by Kaminari's bad ideas, and this fucking abomination was born."

Twenny really likes it though, so maybe he likes 'abominations.' He likes it so much that he says 'Thank you' with his hands, and still kind of smiles at Ugo. Then the smile looks more like Zawa's

mean-happy smile, and he says something else with his hands that Ugo doesn't like.

"Fuck off, Shit-Chan. Just, fucking," Ugo stops and looks really serious, before he looks back at Twenny. "Remember your shit. And fuck that Trash Bird up."

Twenny nods, and Ugo slaps his shoulder really hard.

"And show me how to do that bitch ass pinch shit, I'm gonna use it to fuck up Kaminari when he starts fucking around instead of studying." Ugo doesn't want Twenny to show him now, but that's okay because the heroes are going to have a pizza party tomorrow, and Twenny can show him then.

Yama and Mirio go outside to talk for a while, and Eri gets to cuddle on the couch with Twenny while they do that. Eri hopes that Twenny falls asleep, and he can't see Him because he sleeps through it and Yama and Zawa don't wake him up.

Eri gets up to get a blanket, because even if Twenny looks tired, he's still not falling asleep like Eri wants him to. Even if he looks really tired when Eri tucks him in, he just smiles at her. "That's the first thing you did."

Eri doesn't know what Twenny's talking about, so she tilts her head to try to think about it better, and that just makes Twenny pull his hand up and behind his head, maybe because it helps him think better.

"After... The first night that we were together, you put a blanket on me. You were still too little to talk, so you don't remember," Twenny says, and he looks a little sad about that. Eri wishes that she did remember, because she wants to remember the first time she met Twenny. First meetings are important, because Zawa and Yama talk about the first time they met a lot. "But it was the nicest thing someone had done for me in a long time."

Twenny had to live at The Bad Place for a long time, and it was a really bad place. Twenny is still really scared of it, because people at The Bad Place do bad things to people who know about them. That's why Twenny doesn't talk about it, because he doesn't want bad things to happen to Eri.

"I'm glad I met you, Eri. I'm really, really glad," Twenny says, and Eri feels really funny when she thinks about that, even though she feels the same way. She doesn't even want to know what it would be like if she didn't have Twenny as her mom.

Eri falls asleep on Twenny's chest, but she wakes up alone on the couch, with Mirio sitting beside her on his phone.

And Eri is still scared, so scared that she can't help but cry.

*

27 sits in the chair, and tries to call up all of his victories.

The mocha coffee on the table in front of him, the shirt that makes the empty space so visible. The taunts from the shirt and the face mask, the ones that made that stern woman frown and complain, but she couldn't force him to take them off. His owner wouldn't let her.

The officer with the too honest eyes wasn't allowed in the room. His owner didn't lie, but he didn't have the right information. His owner was angry about that, but it didn't matter. The man that sits beside him ignores him anyway.

The door opens, but not for his owner. Not for Yamada either. 27's hand falls to the pocket of his jeans, but not to the knife that they've already taken. To the box that Yamada gave him.

"So, you can put these guys in your ear whenever you want. They work kind of like my hearing aids, but they play white noise that cancels out any other sound, instead of helping you hear it. Even if you have to be in the same room with him, you don't have to look at him. And now, you can put him on mute!"

It would have been nice to do that. 27 hasn't looked up, and Chisaki hasn't said anything, but just the sound of him clearing his throat makes 27 feel paralyzed. He can't be, not now. Not here. Not with what Chisaki knows, and what he's promised to tell them.

He can't let Chisaki tell them anything about The Miasma. He has to fight him. He has to win this fight.

27 looks further up the table. Chisaki's hands aren't resting there. He sees the flash of the orange jumpsuit and follows it up to the shoulder, then to the ear. His piercings have been taken out.

It takes too long, he's aware that people are talking around him, but it's not Chisaki's voice. Not his either. 27 stares at his ear for too long, before he can look at Chisaki's mouth.

Naked. Unnatural. There's no mask, no mask on 27's mouth either, and that makes them too similar. They're still joined, he's still inside him, still fused. The bruise isn't there because there never was a bruise, Chisaki was never defeated, and they never got out.

They did. 27 feels the cloth mask around his face. He has a mask, and Chisaki doesn't. 27 looks at his arm, open on the table for Chisaki and himself to see it. There's an empty space where Dog was, before he killed him. He needs to kill him again.

He looks at Chisaki again, fully this time. Convinces himself that he can, that he can meet those eerie golden eyes when he looked away too often, looking anywhere else. He's not Dog. he's not Dog. He's 27, and he has a job to do.

"You're looking well, Dog," Chisaki says, and despite himself, despite who he is, 27 flinches at his words. "Far better groomed, but ill-mannered as ever."

Chisaki's teeth are fine.

Chapter End Notes

Class 1-A Chat Usernames:

Shinny bb i miss uuuu - 27 (Shinsou Hitoshi)

Mighty Boiii - Midoriya Izuku

RIP to our ADHD phone charger - Kaminari Denki

Provost Piston - Iida Tenya

FUCK CHISAKI - Bakugo Katsuki

Soba Boiii - Todoroki Shoto

Lofi hip hop beats to chill and study to - Jirou Kyouka

Stress Bake BB - Sato Rikido

Yeet me to the Moon - Sero Hanta

I Shall Be #5 Nevermore - Tokoyami Fumikage

Not haxing midterm server stuff 4 me :(> C me Fail - Hagakure Tooru

God is a woman and her name is Yaoyorozu Momo - Yaoyorozu Momo

Melting into a puddle of tears and failure - Ashido Mina

Overhaul

Chapter Summary

Overhaul (verb) : take apart (a piece of machinery or equipment) in order to examine it and repair it if necessary.

27 has a job to do. To keep Chisaki from talking about The Miasma. He has to win.

Can he?

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: A meeting between an abuser and a victim, Dissociation, Dehumanization, two mentions of 50.

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou had been living in an interrogation room for a month before he was taken in as Yamada's ward. Before Shinsou was rescued, he had developed chemical pneumonia and had coughing fits and fatigue that he tried to hide from both Chisaki and Eri. Two of the scars Shinsou received from Bug were still healing when he was sold to Chisaki, and the bleach bath caused more pain because of that. Chisaki had a reward game for every match that Shinsou won while fighting members of the 8 Precepts. Ms. Joke gave Aizawa a book about bonding with feral cats to help him improve his relationship with Shinsou, and Mirio had sparred with Shinsou when he was having severe anxiety issues, which seemed to relieve some of that. Aizawa isn't aware that Shinsou refers to him as 'his owner,' but he is aware that Shinsou seems to treat him more fearfully than anyone else and has taken that to mean that he's a stand-in for Chisaki in Shinsou's mind. Shinsou thought that Aizawa and the investigative team were close to finding The Miasma because he was only questioned about Boss' name and the location of the compound.

Aizawa feels the scarf adjusting itself around his neck, and can't be bothered to care. It's taking far too much effort to keep himself from ripping the door open and storming into the room, and even more to keep from throwing the scarf towards the representative from the The Commission and throwing her into the nearest wall. "This was supposed to take place in a conference room."

The representative doesn't bat an eye, just a robotic mannequin wearing a well-tailored suit. She sold her soul for that suit long ago. "A ridiculous request that was denied. This is the purpose of an interrogation room."

Hizashi spares a moment from glaring down Chisaki through the observation window to cast a murderous look in her direction. If looks could kill, they could be on their way to a cat cafe by now.

Aizawa forces himself to look at the meeting, feeling his scarf lift higher when he lays eyes on Chisaki. He looks smaller in the jumpsuit, stripped of his mask, but that's not enough for him. He

doesn't look nearly as defeated as he should be, and he can hate The Commission all the more for that.

"You're looking well, Dog. Far better groomed, but ill-mannered as ever," Chisaki says, and Aizawa steps towards the door to end this charade before the representative's crisp voice cuts through the haze of anger.

"I wouldn't." Two words carrying through enough threats to make her a villain. Threatening a hero is still a misdemeanor, still enforceable. Excessive force might be more heinous, but no one could convince him of that right now.

"The purpose of this meeting is for a formal apology," the other representative mediating this farce reminds, with a tone far too calm for the words that have already been spoken. *"That doesn't sound like you're apologetic at all."*

Chisaki huffs a short laugh, a smile so fake that Aizawa aches to tear it open. He wishes the bastard would forget himself, raise his hands to reveal that they aren't there anymore, but they've allowed him to keep his arms in his lap, the stubs hidden under the table. *"My apologies, but that's the only name I know him by."*

"You won't be receiving his legal name," the representative reminds Chisaki, which only draws a sigh.

"Ah, well. There was another name that you went by. 27," Chisaki says, and his eyes are turned back to Shinsou, just to watch him flinch again. *"Of course, it's odd to refer to someone as a num-"*

Shinsou coughs. Aizawa has been avoiding looking at Shinsou, avoiding the sight of the coiled tension in his shoulders, knowing that he couldn't bear to watch him tremble and shake. But the tension is barely there now.

Shinsou pulls his hand from under the face mask and lays in on the table, palm down, and Aizawa can't help the grin when he sees a flush of hives rising on Chisaki's face.

He's never been more proud in his life.

According to Hizashi and Mirio, this meeting is a fight to Shinsou. One that he wants to win. The shirt displaying Deku T-posing with those taunting words are likely irritating enough for the mobster, and the face mask telling him to 'EAT SHIT AND DIE, TRASH BIRD' is a bit more aggressive. But taunting Chisaki by aggravating his germophobia is a far bolder move.

One that Chisaki can't help but respond to. *"Still not over that, are we? That little cough that you tried to hide. Despite all my best efforts to take care of you, you refused to let me, at times. Perhaps, it's understandable."* Chisaki leans back and sighs, pulling on a mask of regret far more fake and ill-fitting than any that he's seen from his students. *"I sincerely apologize for my actions, 27. My time served has given me distance enough from the criminal underworld to realize what I had done. At the time, I only wanted to make my surrogate father proud, but I fell too deeply into the responsibilities that came with that. I allowed others to influence my actions, and they harmed you."*

Aizawa grinds his teeth, watching Chisaki's lawyer take dictation on a legal pad. If that bastard thought that this would help his appeal, if he thought that he could get away with his crimes after killing a hero, killing Sir Nighteye, he had far more delusions than his thoughts on quirks and Hero Syndrome.

“ It particularly saddens me to know that we’re alike, ” Chisaki says, slipping off that mask to something trying to goad Shinsou with false sympathy. *“ I could have been a guiding force for you after taking you under my wing. The two of us were abandoned to the criminal underworld at a young age, and I imagine it was for the same reason. Our quirks. ”* The tension in Shinsou’s shoulders flares again before he settles, and Chisaki doesn’t miss that, smirking. *“ I did try, though. I’m sure you know that. When we first met, you were so frightened. I had to convince Mimic to rescue you, rather than another one of those num- ”*

Shinsou coughs again, and this time Aizawa isn’t proud. He feels a cold sensation of dread down his spine as the scarf settles around his shoulders.

Shinsou wasn’t just fighting Chisaki. He was fighting the investigation.

And the flare of Chisaki’s eyes and the pull of his smirk told Aizawa that Chisaki knew that as well.

“Take him out of there,” Aizawa growls, unsure whether it’s relief to have a reason to end this charade or irritation that Shinsou would do this. That Shinsou would suffer one meeting with Chisaki just to render it fruitless, and drag out the investigation further. “He’s given his apology, now take Shinsou out of there.”

The representative doesn’t move, and doesn’t have to say anything when she looks at him when he puts his hand on the handle. Hizashi turns and gives him an utterly hollow grimace, the despair in his eyes all the more clear for it. “Have you ever wondered if Naomasa’s quirk works on sociopaths?”

The representative adjusts her arms where they’re crossed over her chest, the only confirmation that he needs for something that he hadn’t even fathomed. Something that Hizashi had been piecing out this entire time.

That’s why Naomasa wasn’t in the room. His quirk wouldn’t be able to read Chisaki, but Shinsou would. They were going to use his reactions to know if Chisaki was telling the truth or not, whether his information was credible in every flinch and note of terror in Shinsou.

Aizawa turns the handle only to find it locked.

“Did we make a mistake in assigning you to his case?” the representative asks, and again, he wants to throw her into a wall, but *harder*.

He wants to stop this, but he can’t. Not when Shinsou’s life is still at risk, when Eri’s happiness can still be taken away. He doesn’t need her to remind him of that, but instead she lays the sickening truth bare to him, the *real* reason why they overlooked two wards living together.

“You better than most should know how important it is to stop the production of Nomus.”

Hizashi puts a hand on his shoulder, curls it tightly enough that he knows that his husband wants to lash out against this too. But they can’t. They’re as trapped in this room as Shinsou is in the interrogation room.

They’ve only been pretending that they were able to take him out of there in the first place.

*

27 can’t move anymore. Not when those eyes have narrowed, when they’ve seen it.

It was a struggle each time he lifted his hand, each time he forced a cough. He felt heavy, straining against himself, and straining not to tremble and shake. To show it. He needed to fight and win.

He can't. He can't win.

But then he sees it. Amusement. The way Chisaki's eyes narrow again when his cheek lifts, when he smiles more. The smile was hidden behind the mask, but that tell has always meant safety. Always meant hope. A beating, not a bleach bath.

27 knows how to win at a beating.

"How did you come into contact with this organization?" the man beside 27 asks, in that same flat tone that betrays nothing. It doesn't have to, he's meaningless, and the game that's just twisted makes him even more so.

Chisaki hums, considering. Rikiya or Rappa. "That was quite a long time ago, but I believe it was Mimic who arranged for it. It's hard to remember the name of that group either, they went by several, depending on their services."

Not even a beating. Just a bark.

"The man I met with, what was his name?" Chisaki muses, entirely for show. He knows how to draw out his lectures, his rants, knows that flat statements can only inspire so much. He tries to use anticipation, but the only thing that 27 has anticipated from listening to them was the end of it. "He had an odd, *bark* ing—"

"*Arf*," 27 answers, without even meaning to.

The twitch of a smile on Chisaki's face only confirms that he knows that too. That 27 didn't even think to answer, didn't think to bark. It's still there, that piece is still there, that piece is still inside him and he can't pull it *out*.

He can't be free. Not even from Chisaki. Not when Chisaki is inside him, inside him again, inside his head putting words there putting noises, manipulating his body, stealing his

Ground. Shoes. The inside of his shoes. Flat on the floor. He's here. He can feel his shoes around his feet, and that means he's not fused. He couldn't feel anything, but now he does.

He's been losing while he was drowning in the fog, and he presses his feet more firmly to the soles of his shoes to force the sounds back into words. Chisaki's voice doesn't help him.

"...you were quite injured at the time. I told Chronostasis to take care that you were treated for your wounds, but he misinterpreted what I meant. I couldn't stop him after that point," Chisaki continues to ramble, his eyes flicker down at an arm that 27 doesn't feel. He wants to float away into the fog again, but knows he can't. "Those awful scars. Two of them were still fresh at the time, and the bleach must have caused a considerable amount of pain. That mask was also causing you pain, wasn't it? You were bleeding when I took it off for you."

Chisaki's eyes narrow at the mask that he wears now. It covers the scars, hides them, and Chisaki knows it. He knows that more than removing those taunting words, he wants to see those scars again. 27's hand is heavy when he pulls it off, and feels all the more cold for it.

"It was unfortunate that we had to use another mask, but you were dangerous at the time. You nearly killed one of our members by controlling another with your quirk, and we had to take precautions to make sure that you could be stopped. But as long as you behaved, you were allowed

to speak. You often thanked me for that, since you weren't allowed to before," Chisaki tilts his head forward, and it's as good as a command to bark. He doesn't know if he can, if the words will shake out, what will happen if they don't, what Chisaki will say.

"Th-th-th..." The words don't fall out, they're trapped, they're taken, *he can't*

"Don't thank me now, after everything," Chisaki says, but behind his voice is a laugh. He finds his stutter amusing, always has. "I tried my best, but there were things you were taught to expect. You had quite a career before you met me, and that kind of violent life isn't easily forgotten, is it? What is your number now?"

There's a threat behind his widened eyes, and it knocks the words out easier. "Two thousand...four hundred-red ni...inty five."

Chisaki sits back with an open smile. "Not very busy, then. You haven't been getting enough exercise, and I know how that can make you. Anxious. *Violent*."

Was he? Was that why he had to fight the underlings? Was that why Chisaki picked that game?

27 doesn't know. He thought he did, he thought he knew himself. He thought he remembered those years, but he doesn't. He doesn't remember anything except what Chisaki tells him.

Chisaki probably wants that anyway.

"I tried my best to care for you, even during those spells. I tried to give you an outlet. I couldn't allow you to hurt Er-"

The tension snaps.

27 moves faster than he can see, between one breath and the next he moves from sitting to standing, his hand relaxed to fisted in Chisaki's hair. He looks down and sees that Chisaki's face is against the table, that the hives are spreading across his neck.

He can feel them against his knuckles, and he *grins*.

He can win. He can be *violent*, if that's what he is. If that's what *Trash Bird* says he is.

"Pretender," 27 spits the word out, it comes easier than it should. He knows by the way Chisaki tries to rear back that it strikes true, it *hurts* him. Hurts his pride, the fake young head of The 8 Precepts. He wants to hurt him more, tear into him, tear himself free by ripping Chisaki apart. How dare he?

How *dare* he say Eri's name?

A stronger hand wraps around 27's arm and shoves him away, Chisaki rises immediately and makes to grab for him, stretching out his hand with eyes blazing.

But he doesn't.

He doesn't have *hands* anymore.

27 laughs.

The first gasp of it feels like bile across his tongue, it shakes him so much that he can't tell if he's shaking from fear or laughter. That stub, the blood smeared across Chisaki's lips and chin like a new mask, his eyes blazing impotently. He was *afraid* of Chisaki? Afraid of those hands?

Chisaki's eyes go cold. "Bark."

"Arf."

27 covers his mouth, tries to stop it. Tries to form a new mask, just to hold it. He wants to keep it, he wants to keep this. "Bark."

"Arf."

"Bark, bark, bark, BARK!" Chisaki roars, manic and frightening and full of rage, and 27 has never seen him that angry. Never made him that angry. There's a terror that makes him grow cold, numb, and paralyzed. Nothing inside him moves, not even his blood, but the sound still does.

"Arf."

It's not his words. Not his words, not his words, not his words, his words are stolen he's using them he's inside him the void the nothingness nothing is here not even his words not even him he's dead he's dead he's *dead*

Yamada's face, the sound of his voice.

He looks around the room and Chisaki is gone.

He lost.

*

Hizashi changes the radio station again, a gesture that has proven so fruitless by this point that Aizawa can't help but seethe with resentment at it.

All of that, for *nothing* .

Not a name. Not a place. Nothing but the ravings of a lunatic that would drive anyone insane, the pressure building against Shinsou until he snapped. He lashed out against Chisaki, causing the representative to call for the end of it, but that moment of clear triumph was paid back with every wound that Chisaki dug into, until Shinsou went still. Remaining that way after Chisaki was taken away.

Aizawa could only watch until the representative unlocked the door, and that was only after Shinsou attacked the other representative.

That was the only flicker of retribution in that ordeal, and the more he thinks on it, the more disgusted he is to have enjoyed it. To see Shinsou lash out and break Chisaki's nose against the table. To see him snap from that eerie stillness to quick, trained motions that swept away the hand that was trying to shake him out of it, bent the representative against the table faster than he could react with an elbow against the back of his neck.

Aizawa strolled purposefully slow into the room in time to hear the pop of a broken finger before the representative started screaming at him to restrain his ward. And Aizawa ever-so-helpfully reminded them that Shinsou wasn't supposed to be touched during a dissociative spell.

The spell broke slowly. After the pop, his hold loosened enough for the representative to pull away, backing away quickly. Shinsou was still again, his breathing slow and shallow, but it fell away in shades as Hizashi kept talking to him. Telling him about coffee flavors, even if Shinsou couldn't hear him. Hizashi likely couldn't think of anything else to say to keep from reminding

Shinsou of Chisaki, of what had just happened.

Shinsou didn't seem to fully come out of it. Even as they walked to the car, his movements were too slow, jerking his head up too frantically, as though he hadn't realized that they had been walking. It wasn't until they got into the car that the stillness set in, even more so.

"He didn't even move, Eraser." Sansa said that about Shinsou's time at the station, and it was hard to believe it.

Aizawa believes that now.

Shinsou isn't moving. There's something in the coiled tension, the terrified wideness of his eyes, that's painful to look at. Neither he nor Hizashi know what will help.

Hizashi tried to hand him the face mask that had dropped on the floor, and Shinsou didn't react to it. He didn't take the coffee either. He was breathing normally, too tense to be dissociating, but lost in his own world nonetheless. Hizashi's attempts at grounding exercises, this radio station switching the latest attempt at it, were having no effect.

It's the tension that Aizawa can't stop thinking about. He knows not to believe a word that Chisaki said, but two of them stay stuck in his mind. *'Anxious. Violent.'*

More like 'Trapped.' And 'Desperate.' He's seen the same coiled tension in a fight between street cats, before it turns violent. It's not a violence that's inherent to the cat, but a tension that builds in response to a threat. The threat of violence from an opponent's claws that makes them freeze, yowl in warning, before they coil up and lash out with their own in a frenzy.

He doesn't believe a word that Chisaki said, but he has other reasons to keep Eri from seeing Shinsou like this. She shouldn't see him in this state, and Shinsou likely wouldn't want her to either. He wouldn't be able to hide it from her at this point.

Hizashi doesn't know what to do, but Aizawa does. The book from Ms. Joke suggests something similar, something that Togata has already found to work. He might have tried it anyway, regardless.

Shinsou deserved to win a fight against Chisaki, and Aizawa could give him that fight.

*

Hizashi didn't approve, but he didn't have any other ideas. Shinsou wasn't responding, hands folded together in his lap. Silent, but he still followed orders.

"Run one lap."

Aizawa took off the scarf and tied back his hair before he put on the weights. Shinsou has the knife again, and he might use it. Aizawa has accepted that possibility, accepted that this is reckless and barely rational, but he does it. He puts on one less weight that he does for the first years' final exams, not because he needs to be quicker, but because the lack of patrols have taken an effect that he can feel. He's weaker for it.

Shinsou likely isn't in the best shape either. He and Togata sparred several rounds, had run several laps beforehand. Shinsou hasn't had a proper diet in either months or years, but Aizawa can see that he's learned to ignore that. He's trained his body to perform on willpower alone, on necessity alone, instead of nourishment. It only gives him another reason to hope that Shinsou makes this easy for him.

He doesn't. Shinsou never makes anything easy for him.

When they meet on the sparring mat, Shinsou hesitates before throwing his leg forward, and Aizawa can see from a mile away that it won't make contact. He steps forward with his own arm thrown, meant to soar right past Shinsou's shoulder, and it does.

They're not fighting, they're *dancing*.

Aizawa knows exactly how difficult that is to do, because he had to learn how when he became an instructor at UA. The weights can only do so much to bring his body's abilities down to a level that a student can compete with, and he has to be careful with each blow that it doesn't fully connect. That it's never at his full power, that he never forgets that he's fighting a student, not a villain. A child, not an opponent.

Shinsou has learned how to fight like this for a different reason, one that becomes more clear in the narrowing of his eyes as this dance goes on. He's been told to fight in circumstances where winning would be more painful than losing.

'Even Rappa could be flipped when he overextended himself.' If he could fight Rappa with his full power, then there was only one person that Shinsou would learn to fight like this.

That makes it all the more important that he wins.

Aizawa claps a hand over Shinsou's shoulder and shoves. Shinsou steps back to catch himself immediately, eyes flaring, and darts an arm out to grab the underside of Aizawa's. There's a hesitation there that tells Aizawa that Shinsou knows several ways to move the fight forward or end it there, it's easy to read in the places that his violet eyes quickly dart over. Where his feet are, how his torso is angled. Shinsou plays out the fight in a dozen different ways in his mind, in that hesitation.

Before he tugs forward and lets go.

It's close, and Aizawa won't give up on him yet. He follows the tug and brings a knee up, knowing that Shinsou can easily twist away from it. Shinsou does, a hand brushing against the heel of his foot but it doesn't push forward to tip him off balance. Aizawa spins on that foot to charge again, an arm braced firmly against Shinsou's chest bringing a glare in Shinsou's eyes.

He kicks one of Shinsou's feet off the ground, knowing that he recovers immediately and uses that foot to step back with a hand curled around Aizawa's shoulder. Aizawa sees Shinsou's knee bend and rise, and he can see himself being pulled into it, the knee knocking the wind out of him. It's a move that's so similar to his own that he instinctively recoils from it, Hizashi's words ringing in the back of his head when he shoves Shinsou away with an arm braced against his stomach.

Shinsou doesn't break his hold on Aizawa's shoulder even when he moves back, and when Aizawa lifts that arm he finally *takes it*.

Shinsou's hands tighten on the top of his shoulder and the underside of his elbow, taking advantage of Aizawa's loose crouch to shove him backwards, foot behind Aizawa's to knock him over. As much as Aizawa trusts Shinsou, he doesn't let his eyes close when he allows himself to fall back on the mat. He doesn't know if Shinsou will follow through, doesn't know if he will choose fists or the knife, but Shinsou doesn't.

Shinsou pulls back and away to standing, too rigid, and too still. Aizawa pulls himself up to sitting while he considers it, when he finds that lingering doubt that this was a bad idea flaring up when

he recognizes the trembling in both of Shinsou's hands, before he raises them to sign. To finally speak.

'Better. I'm better. Not this.' Shinsou's hands rise further to his hair, running through the purple mess, tugging in frustration. Aizawa has seen that look on hundreds of student's faces, when they feel disappointment in themselves far sharper than he could ever inspire, right before they scream or swear.

He imagines that it's more frustrating to be unable to do that. "I know."

Shinsou looks at him, arms dropping to his sides, and for a brief moment, he actually meets his eyes. Aizawa ignores the wideness, the clear fear, to be surprised that his gaze holds. That even if he's afraid, he's listening.

"I know you can fight better than this. I know why you didn't," Aizawa says, and even if he went forward with this plan with the full acceptance that he was still Chisaki in Shinsou's eyes, the evidence causes him to recoil from it. "You still fought, and won."

Shinsou goes still again, breath that was coming faster from exertion catches. But he breathes out, steady but not slow.

"You rattled him. You kept Eri's name out of his mouth. You forced him to reveal himself for what he is," Aizawa says, and he feels all the more proud for it. But that swell of pride dies in the face of their shared reality. "You fought, but you weren't just fighting him. That made it into a fight that you aren't going to win."

Shinsou looks away after he catches what Aizawa means by that, his arms pulling inwards. Preparing for a blow. Aizawa doesn't know how to convince him that one won't be coming, and fights to strip the irritation from his tone when he speaks.

"You did. You fought the investigation, and you won. This time," Aizawa leans back, bracing his arms by the heels of his hands on the mat, as he stares at the ceiling long enough to convince himself. "But there will be another, as long as you don't cooperate. And I can't stop them from doing something worse."

He forces himself to look back at Shinsou when he sees his arm move out of the corner of his eye. Shinsou looks surprisingly relaxed, his arms loose before he raises his hands to sign. His eyes still focused on the mat, lowered and submissive. But there's a hidden plea there. *'I don't want to fight you.'*

A full sentence. A rare thing from Shinsou. Aizawa knows it's an honest statement, and that makes it all the more painful to know it.

It's an honest plea from a child who never asks for anything, not without a trade behind it. A child who has learned not to be honest with what they want, because they've learned it won't be given.

Aizawa wants to give it. "I don't want to fight you, either." An honest statement in trade, before he steadies himself in their reality again. "Tell me why you're fighting the investigation."

He wants to know there's a reason he can overcome. If Shinsou didn't recognize what Iida said in the chat, that by some stroke of luck he doesn't know that he would be separated from Eri at the conclusion of it. Even if he did, that he might believe Aizawa when he tells him that the investigation won't end until the Nomu Organization has been fully taken down, and they have no time frame for that to happen.

But Shinsou's answer is an honest one, and a simple one.

' I will die. '

It's hard to argue when the evidence has been laid out twice before Shinsou's eyes, when the police failed to protect him twice. When Shinsou has likely been told to expect that beforehand, and been proven correct. When Shinsou's hands don't shake, and his eyes don't waver at all when he signs that. He truly believes it.

Aizawa can try to convince him not to.

"It's my job to protect you," Aizawa says, his voice firm. "UA is one of the most secure facilities in Japan, other than Tartarus. That's the reason you're here, and you're never more than 30 meters from a pro hero at all times. Believe me when I say that it would make our jobs a lot easier to know who we're defending you from, but it doesn't change the fact that we will. You are safe here from that organization."

Shinsou's eyes dart to his for a moment, his mouth opening for a moment before he closes it. Whether he was moved enough to try to speak, Aizawa doesn't know, and doubts it when Shinsou signs. *' Name of people. Looking for me. '*

Aizawa feels the corner of his lip twitch in irritation, before he reminds himself that he doesn't want to fight Shinsou. Subterfuge is meaningless if they can be honest. "We don't know it. It would be far easier if you told me. I have informants who might be able to find them just from that. You wouldn't have to worry about interviews or the investigation anymore."

Shinsou's hands start to tremble before he makes them into fists. He's clearly fighting against that suggestion, and Aizawa convinces himself to be proud of that. Even if it wasn't an order, it was close enough to a request for Shinsou to see it as one. It's progress that he won't try to answer.

Aizawa doesn't know whether he wants progress in the investigation or for Shinsou more, whether he wants Shinsou to be safe more than he wants him well. He wishes that the two could coincide to make that easier.

' Can't tell you. Not fight. Can't. Can't. ' He sees Shinsou's hand curl around his wrist, his fingertips resting in the grooves of one of those scars, but before he can move to stop Shinsou, to reassure him or ground him, Shinsou pulls his hand away and faces him, eyes blazing. *' Tell me to bark. '*

Aizawa clenches his teeth against the black, bile-like feeling rising in his chest. He *knew*, but for Shinsou to say it so plainly makes it all the harder. He has to force his jaw to open, force the breath into his lungs. He does so with the hope that he won't hear it. "Bark."

He doesn't.

Shinsou looks as surprised as Aizawa is. He doesn't know who feels more relieved, but between the looseness he can't fight settling into his bones, and the rise of Shinsou's eyebrows, he feels like he wins. That this was a test, this was a fight that he won. That he had to prove he won, and Shinsou forced him to.

But Shinsou is the one that signs it. After he breathes out a heavy sigh, his mouth open for a flash of teeth that almost looks like a smile for a moment. *' I won. '*

Aizawa can't help his own smile when he feels the same way.

*

27 walks through the door and feels the same as he did the first time.

He's tired, so bleach soaked and heavy that he can barely keep one foot moving in front of the other. He takes in the warmth that washes over him forcefully, the chill from the night air swept away in it. He still hates that when he dares to think of how things would have turned out if 50 had lived, that he can't help but picture living in a place like this.

But this time, Eri isn't tugging him forward to see everything, to explain everything. Instead of holding his hand, she throws her arms around his legs and hugs him, so tightly that he nearly has to pry her away to pull him into his arms, though they're shaking with exhaustion.

She's heavier for a different reason, clear in ways he hasn't noticed before. Her cheeks are fuller, her stomach just slightly rounded rather than flat. She's healthy, healthy enough that she might have even grown taller while he hadn't noticed.

He forces himself to smile at that, to bite down on the selfish, embarrassing thought that he doesn't want her to. That he wants to keep her small, and tucked against his chest, but it's hard not to be selfish when she's so warm, with her arms wrapped around his neck so tightly.

"You're okay, Twenny?" Eri asks, barely a question with the way that she says it, so quietly that he wouldn't hear it if she wasn't pressed right next to his ear.

He nods. "You're okay, Eri."

She nods and squirms closer, and he doesn't need another reason to not let her go. He can forget how tired he is as long as he holds her close.

Yamada smiles, though it still doesn't reach his eyes. It's still that worried smile that 27 hates, but he doesn't know how to stop it when his hands have to hold Eri. It isn't until Yamada brings a large, steaming pot to the kotatsu, already set with bowls and plates, that 27 can sign. Eri still refuses to leave him, sitting on his thigh and pressing her back against his chest, but his hands are mostly free.

'*I'm fine.*' 27 means it, but he doesn't know how to convince Yamada. Not when that clearly isn't enough.

"Well, I sure hope so! That little bean probably isn't going to leave your side for a month after being away from you so much the past couple days," Yamada says with a fake smile, but when he pulls off the lid for the pot, it reaches his eyes for a moment. "Hot pot on a kotatsu! Nothing beats that on a cold winter night like this!"

The soup is so hot that it bubbles, still boiling, and 27 would wonder if it was still cooking if he didn't remember reading about it. It's supposed to be hot enough to do that, and the meat is supposed to be the best part. It's good enough to fight over, to the point that someone might throw the rest of it on someone who had stolen all of the meat, knowing full well that it would scald them.

Eri tries to give him a lot of meat, but he takes the ladle from her for a different reason. Because she might get burned if she spills it.

Because he wants to do it himself.

He wants to serve Eri, and she lets him. She tells him what parts she wants, and he gets them for

her, but can't help the smile that keeps pulling at his face. It's ridiculous, he hasn't actually made this soup, and it was probably difficult for Yamada to do it on his own. But he feels like he's feeding her, and it's so similar and so different to the way he fed her when she was younger that it nearly overwhelms him.

But when he takes that first sip, it does.

It's *warm*. It's so warm that his tongue thaws at it, the warmth rises to his eyes and threatens to spill over. The warmth of his legs under the kotatsu, the warmth of Eri seated happily on his lap. This place is warm, too warm, and he wants to stay here.

He wants to stay here, in this moment, forever.

Yamada notices, but not for the right reasons. He isn't even smiling, but his eyes are asking questions that he doesn't have to say. 27 doesn't want him to say them, he just wants to answer them, and he does it in a rush with his lungs still full of steam from the broth.

"Thank you."

He means it. In this moment, for this moment, he's never been more grateful. That he has this, even if it won't last. Whether he dies or loses, he'll have this moment, and it will be real. He will always be able to feel it, in a way that he can't when he tries to imagine escaping with 50.

He never gets to feel how warm their escape would be, even when he tries.

But he wants it to be as warm as this one. He wants Eri to be there too. He wants Yamada, he wants his owner, he wants 50 to be here so bad that it *hurts*.

But he forgets that ache for a moment when Yamada smiles at him. The real one, the one that he didn't figure out the first time. It's smaller, it's so kind that it's too warm to look at sometimes, but he likes it. He wants to keep it. "Thank you, Shinsou. I'm glad you like it."

27 wants to stay here so bad that for a moment, he forgets that's not his name.

Tooth Fairy

Chapter Summary

27 is still reeling from meeting with Chisaki, and that leaves him vulnerable to the devices of Class 1-A. He has no idea what they intend to do to him, but 'Bakusquad' certainly has plans for him. Eri loses something, and gains a new plan of action to help protect Twenny.

Chapter Notes

Early update this week because I will be moving to a new apartment this weekend! I hope you guys enjoy!

Trigger Warnings: Dissociation, Mild flashback, Food issues

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri's nickname for Bakugo is 'Ugo.' Eri can say 'Chisaki' if she says 'Fuck Chisaki,' to help her feel angry instead of scared. Eri has started calling Yamada and Aizawa 'Dad' sometimes. Ashido knows that Shinsou went missing as a child and still believes he was kidnapped. Todoroki's cat Soba attacked Shinsou, and Shinsou has hated the cat ever since. Class 1-A thinks that Shinsou went to 'Villain School' before he came to the 8 Precepts, based on a lie that Shinsou told Kirishima and Ashido. Shinsou believes he 'lost' when he met with Chisaki because he dissociated. Bakugo threatened to 'tear Shitsei (Aizawa) a new asshole' if Shinsou dissociated during that meeting. Shinsou compared Bakugo to Rikiya because he considered both of them friendly to him. Bakugo was assigned a 100 page essay on trauma related disorders by Aizawa after fighting Shinsou in a bathroom. Ashido has been trying to give Shinsou a high five for 15 chapters. Aizawa was given a 'coupon book' for his birthday from Class 1-A, and some of the coupons simply say 'Stop,' to stop a student from doing whatever they're doing. Ashido and Shinsou were friends in elementary school before he was sold. Shinsou is concerned that his quirk can cause Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, and knows that he used it on Ashido. Aizawa and Yamada know that Eri is the granddaughter of the 8 Precepts head before Chisaki took over. Yamada proposed the idea of adopting Eri, and Aizawa didn't entirely disagree but argued that they've only known Eri for a little over a month.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eri likes Ugo, because he gave her candy apples. So even if he's really mean sometimes, he must be trying to be nice other times, because he's a hero. He's just not very good at it.

Eri kicks her feet and looks at the paper strips that Mirio made for her to work on. She already made one for Mirio, because he was working on his midterm stuff before she woke up really scared, and after he made her not scared, they worked on drawing together. Mirio showed her how to make midterm headbands for heroes, and how to write magic spells on them to help the heroes study better. She wants to make headbands for all the heroes she knows, so they can all do really good on their tests.

But she doesn't know what to put on Ugo's headband, so she eats a candy apple to help her think.

She wants to ask Twenny what he thinks Ugo wants on his headband, but Twenny is asleep. Twenny was really tired last night after he had to see Fuck Chisaki, and he even fell asleep before she did. Twenny almost never does that, ever, so he had to be really tired.

And Twenny never ever takes a nap, unless he's super tired, or sick. And if he's sick, then Eri needs to make sure he gets a lot of rest, even if she kind of wants him to wake up and help her.

Zawa is really busy with some teacher work. He doesn't even look at the TVs on his desk as much, because he's writing a lot of stuff and frowning. He was frowning at a bunch of pictures of the heroes while he was doing his Serious Thinking Face, but when he looked at her, he asked her to tell him who she thought should go together on teams for one of their tests. Eri tried to put the heroes with their friends, but some of the heroes didn't have a lot of really good friends, even if they were all friends.

Zawa said that was right, some of the heroes didn't coordinate with others really easy. And he made a really big frowny face when he looked at Ashido and Kaminari when he said some of them didn't strategize good.

Zawa kind of got really quiet and frowny, so Eri went back to her work to help him work on his teacher stuff better. Teacher stuff must be really hard, and it's probably a lot like making headbands, because you have to think about stuff really hard to make sure it's right.

Eri takes another bite of her apple, but her mouth feels really weird after that. It feels like something's missing, and after she swallows, her lip goes in where it shouldn't. Eri puts a finger where her lip felt weird, and then touches her teeth.

But one of her teeth are gone.

"Dad!" Eri yells, and she's trying not to cry but it's scary. Her tooth is gone and she got broken, but she doesn't want to get repaired. "Dad, my tooth is gone! Can you fix it?!"

Zawa looks at her with really big eyes, and he touches her lip even though she shows her teeth really big for him to see it, so he can fix it. But then he gives her a really nice smile, and pats her head, and even if she's still kind of scared, she knows it's okay. "It doesn't need to be fixed. Children lose their teeth when they get older. It's a normal part of growing up."

Zawa reaches for her candy apple, and she gives it to him even if she still wants to eat it, but she really likes Zawa, so she can share. Eri looks over at Twenny, and he's awake now. Probably because she was yelling really scared, because he looks really awake. "Twenny, I lost my tooth!"

She runs over and shows him, and it feels really weird when she puts her tongue where her tooth was. It doesn't really hurt, but it feels really weird, and it's kind of fun to do.

Twenny smiles at her, even if he still looks kind of worried. "It's the first one," Twenny says, but his voice gets kind of shaky and quiet. It's kind of like when he tries to talk to people by talking to

her, but not really. It's kind of different, and she doesn't really know why. "I'm happy for you."

Zawa makes a hummy kind of sound and he pinches something in her apple, before he holds her apple out for her. "Your first tooth is worth more than any other tooth you lose. Hopefully the Tooth Fairy has enough money tonight."

Eri takes her apple back, but then Zawa holds out his pinchy fingers, and puts a tiny white tooth in her other hand. "Tooth Fairy?"

Zawa smiles again, but this time it's kind of like his play-mean smile, but not really, because it's still really nice. "When you lose a tooth, you put it under your pillow, and while you're asleep, the Tooth Fairy comes and takes the tooth but leaves money in its place. Sometimes it's a lot of money, so you need to make sure not to lose that tooth."

"But I lost it," Eri says, and Zawa kind of laughs.

"Don't lose track of it, I mean," Zawa says, before he opens up his desk. "It might be better to put it in here until you go to sleep tonight."

Eri nods, and puts the tooth in the drawer, even if she kind of wants to play with it. It's weird to see something that was in her mouth for her whole life not be there anymore. And it's really weird that teeth just fall out anyway.

Maybe Momo can tell her about it.

"Zawa, can I go talk to Momo?" Eri asks, but Zawa looks at his TVs and kind of frowns before he gets an itch on the back of his head.

"I'll let you know if I see her in the common area, but if she's in her room, she's probably studying, and it's better not to disturb her," Zawa says, and he looks at Eri to make sure that's okay, so Eri nods, and he nods back.

Eri goes back to her headband for Ugo, but she kind of doesn't want to eat her candy apple anymore. Her teeth get kind of sticky when she eats them, and she doesn't want to lose all her teeth, even if she gets money. People talk about money a lot, and it sounds like a lot of trouble, but Eri hopes that it doesn't give her trouble.

But there's stuff that people can do with money, and she wants to do one of them.

*

27 knows that he shouldn't do this.

He looks at the phone, and bites the inside of his lip, looking again to see his owner's turned back. To see Eri still happily scribbling on her project, writing in crayon on strips of paper already prepared for her. She's laying on her stomach, legs kicking above her that pause when she presses the crayon to her mouth, trying to decide how to personalize each gift that she's making.

She's fine. She will be fine. He knows that. He knows that his owner can take care of it.

He knows that he shouldn't bother the hero students because they have midterms. It's a very important series of tests, and his owner is worried about them. He wants them to be prepared, to study. He doesn't want 27 or Eri to distract them, and being at school was distracting for them. Messaging them will be more distracting.

But he needs this information. For Eri. For her sake. He needs to make sure that this goes right.

Last seen being kidnapped by serial stomach puncher: Message back if you're not studying.

Sobbing in the disco changed Last seen being kidnapped by serial stomach puncher to SHINNYYY

Sobbing in the disco: SHINNYYYYYY!!!! WHERE ARE YOU???? AND WHO DID THAT TO SHINNY'S NAME I WANNA T A L K

Cementoss x Gucci Collab: study who? I don't know her

Quietly dying inside: Taking a break.

Yeet me into death(™): Too busy wondering whether Sensei will allow us the sweet release of death, why?

Birds can't read: @Ashido Your enemies are closer than you think, though I don't believe they will hear you.

STFU ABOUT PIZZA: Bakustudy is taking a break, what's up?

Kacchan I'm serious pls sleep: THE FUCK YOU ARE. WHAT THE FUCK DID I SAY ABOUT SELF STUDY SHITTY HAIR

Kacchan I'm serious pls sleep changed their name to FUCK MIDTERMS

FUTURE #2: Taking a break as well. Do you need help with something, Shinsou?

FUTURE #DEAD: You and Soba need to make amends. Come to my room.

FUCK MIDTERMS: ANSWER MY FUCKING CHAT OR I'M HUNTING YOUR ASS DOWN, SHITFACE

Don't disappoint your father: Hi Shinsou! I hope you're doing okay! We are studying, so you don't need to worry about that, but that's very thoughtful of you. How did

Don't disappoint your father: How did helping sempai with that important thing go?

SHINNYYYY: @Deku fine. It's not important. I need help with something.

Sobbing in the disco: who am i fighting????? THESE HANDS ARE MADE FOR THROWING

Quietly dying inside: I have more hands than Ashido.

Cementoss x Gucci Collab: You have my bow. And my axe. But it's body spray

Future #2 changed their name to Yaoyorozu

Yaoyorozu: We're happy to help, Shinsou!

Yeet me into death(™) changed Yaoyorozu to Good Study Mom

SHINNYYY: How

STFU ABOUT PIZZA: You doing okay bro?

SHINNYYY: How do you summon the tooth fairy?

27 waited. He tried closing and opening the chat again, but the minutes passed and there still wasn't a response. He should have been prepared, he should have looked it up when he had access to the Internet. He should have known this was going to happen one day.

His owner said it was okay. It was normal. Children lost their teeth, and 27 knew that, he wasn't an idiot. He lost his teeth too, and he remembers that.

Eri didn't even tell him that one was loose.

He tried to be calm, but he didn't feel calm at all. Eri lost a tooth, she was growing older, she was growing and something about that made him feel unsettled. His owner was better at being calm. He reassured her that it was fine, it was normal. She was growing up, and losing her teeth was part of that. And the tooth fairy was going to visit her, and give her money for the tooth.

27 needed to make sure that happened.

Eri needed to have a normal childhood. So far, she hadn't had one, she had lived very differently from the way she should have. She probably should have lost her first tooth earlier, but Chisaki's quirk likely stopped her from doing that. She could have a normal childhood now, and an important part of that was being visited by the tooth fairy.

He knew for a fact that losing a tooth wasn't enough to summon the tooth fairy, and he needed to know the process to do it. The hero students needed to tell him.

Cementoss x Gucci Collab: oH fuck Sero isn't breathing plz HELP

FUCK MIDTERMS: BITCH WHAT

Yeet me into death™: I dont

Sobbing in the disco: shinny

Yeet me into death™: I can't

Good Study Mom: Did Eri lose her first tooth?

Yeet me into death™: Can you PLEASE BE ON ALL THE DRUGS?????

Birds can't read: The ritual is a simple one, and benign. She hears the call of the newly freed bone when it is placed under a pillow, and responds to it with coin to ply the trade. It happens while we slumber. It happens every night while we're unaware of her travels.

Yeet me into death™: Shinsou is a villain. This is a PSYCHOLOGICAL WAR CRIME.

Sobbing in the disco: SERO

Yeet me into death™: YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS I CAN'T EVEN

TEACHER'S PET CAN'T SAVE YOU FROG FUCK: The tooth fairy is a story told to children. If Eri has lost her first tooth, tell Aizawa-sensei. He will switch the tooth out for money while she's asleep, like any parent does for their child.

Yeet me into death™: HEEEEELP

SHINNYYY: I knew that. I know it's a stupid question but I just wanted to be sure.

Yeet me into death™: NO NO NOPE NOT BUYING IT

Good Study Mom: There are no stupid questions, and I'm glad you asked, Shinsou. I'm very happy for Eri.

FUCK MIDTERMS: NO WHAT YOU FUCKING THOUGHT THE TOOTH FAIRY WAS REAL???? ARE YOU FUCKING WITH ME????

Yeet me into death™: dude you LOST TEETH you cannot tell me you thought the tooth fairy was real

Sobbing in the disco: GUYS SHUT UP!!!! Villain school didn't have tooth fairies!!!!

Yeet me into death™: WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU LOST YOUR TEETH??? DID YOU SEE THE TOOTH FAIRY???? DID YOU SUMMON HER???? WHAT EVEN WHAT

SHINNYYY: I ate them.

STFU ABOUT PIZZA: wha

FUCK MIDTERMS: BITCH W H A T

Don't disappoint your father: Shinsou, are you okay?

Yeet me into death™: no you are YOU ARE FUCKING WITH US

Cementoss x Gucci Collab: Sero is stronking pls call ambulance

Yeet me into death™: no no No nO NO YOU CANNOT

SHINNYYY: I'm not lying.

Yeet me into death™: YOU. ARE. I CAAAAAAANT

Sobbing in the disco: SERO SHUT UP!!!!

Yeet me into death™: He is so fucking with us??? Tooth fairy and EATING teeth and I why do you hate me, Shinsou? Why? Do you hate me?

Quietly dying inside: I don't think we get the joke, Shinsou.

SHINNYYY: The only time the mask was open was when I ate. I had to eat fast. So I ate them. I didn't know how it's supposed to work. Sorry.

He stared for a moment before he closed the chat and turned the phone face down on the bed. It vibrated, but he couldn't bring himself to care, laying back down even though he couldn't bring himself to fall asleep again.

He was tired. He was tired of this place.

He liked it, he liked being here. He liked that he was able to eat more food than he ever thought existed, that he wasn't punished or beaten. The lack of rules was frightening, but after being able to fall back to sleep without his owner saying anything about it, he could appreciate it.

Eri was allowed to grow up here. She was allowed to be healthy, to lose her teeth. To be a normal child. He wanted that for her, more than anything. He wanted her to have this place, to be happy and normal and grow up to forget about everything else that would have kept her from being happy and normal.

But he wasn't normal.

He knew that, it was clear in the way that his owner and Yamada treated him. In the way that the heroes reacted to what he said. He says weird things, because he's weird, and he can't change that. He grew up wrong.

He remembers being able to suck a few of his teeth into his mouth when they came loose, and he could work them with his tongue past the back of his molars, to the inside of his cheek. It probably took hours to do it, but by sticking a finger into that tight space between his clenched teeth and cheek, he could fish out the tooth.

He never thought to put it under his pillow. He would just roll it between his fingers and stare at it, then try to hide it so that Bug wouldn't find out that he had something to occupy himself with in those long, empty spaces of boredom. When he was left in his room to count the bricks and drips from the faucet, having something to hold like one of his own teeth was a treasure. He had something to do when he wasn't eating, wasn't training with Bug, wasn't being taught to read by 10 or visited by 50.

He always lost the tooth eventually. Just like he lost Mocha.

Maybe he would have been more normal if he didn't. If he put his teeth under a pillow, or knew to do that. If he kept Mocha, instead of having to watch him burn to ash. Children were supposed to have toys, and teeth weren't toys.

Maybe he was never normal, because he treated his own teeth like toys. Maybe his mother knew that already. Maybe that's why she sold him.

"Yaoyorozu is in the kitchen downstairs," his owner says, and he hears Eri's knees and hands knocking on the ground in a flurry to bring herself to stand. He waits for her to open the door, to run to one of her favorite heroes to tell her the exciting news, and feels guilty when he realizes he spoiled that for her.

But instead, he feels her small hands on his arm, shaking him. "Twenny, I'm gonna talk to Momo. You wanna come? We can get some apples to share."

He doesn't. He recoils at the idea, almost enough to pretend to continue to sleep. Talking to that hero on the chat was bad enough, but to see her after that, to see her face. The idea was horrifying. She already knew how stupid he was, now she knew how odd he was.

But he knew that voice that Eri was using. She wanted him to come, to be friends with this hero.

His place in her life was too fragile for him to refuse it.

He sees his owner's head turn when he walks with Eri to the door, and imagines that he wants to remind him not to distract the heroes. But he doesn't say anything, and Eri holds onto his hand after closing the door behind them.

The halls and stairs are empty, but he still feels like he needs the mask. The heroes aren't even there to look at him, but he can still feel their stares. They'll probably stare more, now that they know about the mask. They know that it was kept shut, and they'll probably figure out the reason why. They'll probably want to put another one on him, because he's violent.

He wants to wear one, even if he's not violent. And he has one in his pocket. He just can't wear it.

He looks down at Eri, to see her excited to see Momo. She starts jumping from every step, and he can't bring himself to scold her. Not when he wants to have a reason to hold her hand.

She's growing up happy, growing up to be normal. He can't bring a piece of something that isn't normal back into her life. He can't wear a mask and hide his smile from her, even if he wants to. Even if he wants it so bad that he almost misses The Miasma.

He looks normal with a mask. When he was in the bathroom that morning, he took the face mask out of his pocket and flipped it around so that the words were hidden. He put it on and looked in the mirror.

And he looked *normal* again .

His mouth is weird. His scars are weird. He doesn't want to look at them, so he doesn't know why other people do. He knows why Chisaki did, he wanted to remember when they were bleeding, but the heroes just want to see where he looks weird.

Maybe that's why Blasty is staring at him, now that he knows he's especially weird.

Blasty doesn't say anything, but he crouches down a bit and hooks an elbow under 27's knee, a hand finds his arm, and then the world spins and he's draped over Blasty's shoulders. It's such an odd pin that he didn't recognize it, too tired to react when Blasty was grabbing him, but now he's here and he has several options.

He could take out his knife and stab Blasty in the chest, if he reaches far enough he could stab him in the kidney. He could slit his throat, but he can't brace his arm for a sleeper hold.

He sees Eri staring at him, too confused to really know what to do, and he knows that he can't be violent. Not in front of her. Even if the hands on his arm and leg, and that feeling of Blasty's shoulders pressing against his side makes him want to do something violent to break away from it. He can't exactly tell Blasty to let him go either, when one arm is trapped and the phone is in the pocket trapped against Blasty's shoulders.

"Oi, I'm taking this," Blasty says, shrugging his shoulders into 27's side. "Congrats on the tooth shit, pipsqueak."

"Okay, I'm gonna save you some apples, Twenny! Have fun with Ugo!" Eri says with a wave, before she sprints down the stairs. He wants to tell her to be careful, but he can't tell if the words are trapped again, if now they're trapped with her now, or if Blasty's shoulder is just digging into his chest at the right angle to make it hard to breathe.

Blasty growls about how little he weighs as he stomps up the steps to his floor, and kicks the door open instead of releasing one of his hands to open it. But that seems to be Blasty's go-to method of opening doors anyway.

The door to his room was open, but he kicks it shut before he angles himself to toss 27 onto the ground. 27 remembers the knife, considers punching Blasty in the throat for a moment, before he decides he's too tired to do either. If Blasty wants to beat him, it's fine. He might fall asleep while

he's doing it.

But 27 falls onto Blasty's bed, and after the bouncing settles, he refuses to move. If Blasty wanted a reaction, he wouldn't get one, he wouldn't give one. He was too tired to give one anyway.

Blasty sits on the chair by his desk, and 27 remembers when Blasty collapsed on his bed and 27 sat in his chair. When Blasty tried to convince him to tell his owner what he knew about The Miasma, so that he wouldn't see Chisaki. Because Blasty knew he would lose, even if he told him how not to.

Blasty wants to know how badly he lost. "So, you saw that Trash Bird ass bitch?" Blasty is talking oddly, but 27 won't look up to see why. He's oddly quiet, oddly calm. "How'd that shit make you feel?"

27 lifts his head enough to see Blasty slumped lazily in his chair, a foot braced on the corner of his bed, and a clipboard resting in his lap. He has a pen in his hand that he keeps clicking.

Blasty stares at him before he rolls his eyes. "Look shitface, I spent five fucking hours googling this shit, so don't give me that 'I'm mute' crap. Dig out. Your fucking phone. You ass. And talk about this shit."

Blasty taps the pen on his clipboard and glares at him. 27 just lays back and sighs.

He could get the phone. He could try to even sign to Blasty, but that requires a lot of moving. He doesn't feel like moving. Blasty kicks the bed and groans, and he sounds angry. He also sounds tired. "Yeah, it's stupid as shit. Who the *fuck* wants to talk about that kind of shit? But apparently, this shit works, so you're gonna fucking do it."

He doesn't want to. If Blasty wants to make him do it, he'll have to do it like Chisaki did. Throw him into a nothingness and take away his words, steal his voice to make him speak.

"Did the grounding shit work or what?"

27 knows he won't leave him alone until he knows something, until he gets his information. Even if the phone feels too heavy, he pulls it out. "*I lo-ost.*"

Blasty goes quiet, quiet enough for 27 to consider falling asleep, before there's a sharp clatter as the clipboard falls on the desk. "Cool. I'm murdering the fuck out of Shitsei, wait here."

His voice is still too calm, too serious. His face is too, when 27 looks at it after he grabs his shirt, stopping him.

Blasty is a *goddamn idiot*. "Oi, I fucking told you this shit was fucked, and it's his goddamn fault it happened. I'm doing the whole fucking world a favor."

When 27 realizes it, he almost laughs. He feels the grin pull, he feels goddamn *insane* to feel his mood changing so rapidly. It's almost like Deidoro's quirk, one minute he's too heavy and the next he's too light. It's just so *stupid*.

"Wanna share that shit with the fucking class, chucklefuck?" Blasty asks, slapping his hand away. He looks confused, he looks so oddly devoid of anger, just like his voice is. It's just so weird, and he would have figured it out sooner if he noticed it.

'*Friend*,' 27 signs, slowly for Blasty because he knows he's not fluent in JSL. He usually doesn't care, but he wonders if Blasty will get angry again. If he'll be insulted, or only pretend to be.

Blasty recognizes it, his eyes tend to widen a bit when he does, and the anger comes back in his knotted fists and scowl, but it's darker. It's deeper than anger. "Look, if you say some shit about me being any *fucking* thing like that goddamn bastard, I will blow your ass away and then fuck up Shitsei on principle."

But Blasty is *nothing* like Rikiya.

That's the line that he knew Rikiya would never cross. He'd never cross Chisaki, never utter a word against him. Chisaki got him out of debt when the loan sharks were circling, trying to figure out which organization similar to The Miasma they would sell him to. Even if 27 could manipulate him, force him to be kind with every joke and favor and wince when he favored an injury that Rikiya gave him, Rikiya would *never* cross Chisaki.

Bakugo was his friend, but better. He gave him things, he gave him skills to use in the fight against Chisaki. He probably crossed his owner then, giving him those hacks helped him fight the investigation, and he knew his owner wasn't happy about that.

Bakugo gave him many more things than that fight in the bathroom should have earned him. Even if things seemed to come easier here, even if it was all on loan and they hadn't forced him to pay any of it back, Bakugo had given him a lot of things. For free. ' *Not R-I-K-I-Y-A. Best friend.* '

27 doesn't think he's had a friend like that. 50 wasn't a friend, she was so much more, and 10 only did things for him because he felt guilty, he drowned in guilt over every death he couldn't stop or couldn't help but to cause. 27 probably manipulated 10 somehow with that, without meaning to.

But 27 has barely manipulated Bakugo, and he knows that he doesn't feel guilty about revealing his collection. Out of all the heroes that Eri wanted to be his friend, Bakugo wanted to be his, for some odd reason. And 27 couldn't complain about it.

Bakugo looks like he wants to complain. He opens his mouth just to shut it, just to bare his teeth before he growls. "Damn straight, I'm going to be the number one fucking hero, so don't you forget that shit, shit face. If that means I'm going to be the best fucking friend you have, then fucking deal with it!"

27 has no idea what to do with that. He doesn't know how to have friends who admit that they're friends, and manipulation only works when there's something to hide. It's frightening, it's vulnerable, it makes him more naked than not wearing a mask.

But it feels so normal that it almost feels wrong. It makes him feel like he's stealing something, to pretend that he's allowed to have friends. Numbers shouldn't have friends, shouldn't have distractions, but this place makes him forget that he's a Number sometimes. It's probably because he has such an odd name here, a normal one. A human one.

Shinsou Hitoshi gets to have friends.

Then the door opens and his owner glares at Bakugo, and 27 remembers that he doesn't get to decide that. His owner named him, his owner decides what Shinsou Hitoshi gets to have. Even if he gets to have more than a Number should. "Shinsou, are you here willingly?"

His owner asks too many questions, it's too many tests. He's probably been tested more times here than he was at the 8 Precepts and The Miasma combined. And he hates that his owner always makes it difficult, that he never gives away the answer.

But 27 wants to test something. And Bakugo hates his owner enough to make it safe to do so.

' *Yes. With friend.* ' Shinsou answers. Shinsou gets to have friends, gets to answer without considering whether it's safe. Shinsou calls the man standing in that doorway 'Aizawa.'

Aizawa looks too calm. He always does, he never gives any tells, never tells him the answer. There's a movement in his jaw that 27 barely catches, irritation or something to say. To tell him not to distract the heroes.

But he doesn't.

"Good. Remember that you're free to leave at any time," Aizawa says, something odd in his voice making it lighter, softer. Then he turns to glare at Bakugo. "The same rules are in place. Don't make me enforce them."

Bakugo scoffs, crossing his arms, but his owner allows it and turns to leave. But before he crosses the threshold, he stops, hand on the doorframe. "Oh. And your project isn't required anymore."

Bakugo flares up into rage, a scream behind his bared teeth. "TOUGH SHIT! I've got 113 fucking pages for you to read, and that shit will be fucking enlightening!"

Aizawa looks over his shoulder, eyes widened in barely-there surprise. "Exceeding your page count before the deadline. Very Plus Ultra."

Bakugo throws a pen at the door after it closes, tipping his head back in a sigh caught in a snarl. "If he starts saying that 'How Plus Ultra of you' shit I will fucking *lose it* ."

Bakugo didn't have much to lose to begin with. That's probably why they're friends.

Bakugo looks at him and cocks his head, and he looks so odd when he's not angry. "Oi. You ready to talk or what?"

Shinsou still feels too much, still feels too drunk, can't hope to hide his smirk. " *Ca-an't. I'm mute.* "

Bakugo clenches an empty hand, and probably wants to throw something at him. He likes throwing things at Shinsou, it's almost a game that they have. A game between friends. " *Fuck you. Buckle the fuck in, this shit's supposed to take 45 minutes but your ass is stuck here 'til we fucking get somewhere on your brain issues and shit.* "

Bakugo sits down in a huff, looks for the pen before he remembers throwing it, and growls at himself before he grabs another one. Shinsou sits up, even if he's allowed to lay down, he doesn't feel as tired as he did before.

"Welcome to fucking therapy. First, we'll go over all the shit that fucked you up so I know what I'm working with," Bakugo says, again too quiet. "Tell me about your childhood."

Of course. He's just so stupid that he forgot.

The heroes want to be friends with him to get information about The Miasma. Blasty seems to want that even more than the others. Blasty plays a better game, he knows that he has to trade things to get information, and the other heroes are just too clumsy to know that.

They're not friends, not in any new way. But it might be better that way. " *Ba-ad. Weird.* "

Blasty writes that down, rolling his eyes. "I fucking figured. Elaborate on that shit."

“I-I’ll answer questions. A-ask them.” He can’t think for himself as a Number, and he doesn’t want to give anything away for free. If Blasty asks questions, he can deflect them. He can make him think that he’s winning when he only gets empty answers.

Blasty looks up, clicks his pen a few times before he tosses it onto the clipboard. “Ashido said you got kiddy-snatched, but your mom might have done shit before that. Do you remember that shit?”

“No. She-e didn’t.” He barely remembers. Flashes and pictures that seem too vague. When he tries to remember, he’s not sure if he remembers dreams or memories, but some are different from others. Some are clearer.

“You remember getting kidnapped?” Blasty writes something, but he hasn’t gotten any important information yet. He won’t, even if he thinks he will.

“No,” 27 answers. He wasn’t kidnapped, but he remembers being sold. Flashes of it, but they’re clear. Being in a car, holding Mocha, his mother’s eyes in the rearview mirror. He remembers being scared before he had a reason to be, remembers that he had nightmares about Boss before he met him before his first job.

“How does that shit make you feel?” Blasty asks, like he doesn’t really care to know the answer. Too calm, too quiet. That question is just routine, ritual. It’s meaningless, as meaningless as whatever 27 feels.

“No-othing,” 27 doesn’t care about his answer either. He doesn’t care to pick through what he should feel about being sold, because it happened. It happened so long ago that he doesn’t remember it. His feelings on it wouldn’t change that.

“Then, you went to that villain school bullshit, right?” 27 nods, wondering how Blasty is going to try to get The Miasma’s name from him. His owner would probably reward him for being the one to do it, which will only make Blasty more determined. “And they made you wear a mask. It probably kept your mouth shut, right?”

27 has to fight not to roll his eyes. Blasty was bad at this. *“E-everyone did. They did. Chi-isaki did.”* He smiles before he catches himself, he hadn’t realized it before, but it’s funny. *“Ne-ever had it o-off this long. They do-on’t need it.”*

He was too broken for them to use a mask. He already wore one. His words caught behind his teeth even if his teeth weren’t held shut. He wouldn’t try to use his quirk, wouldn’t try to escape. He doesn’t have his quirk, and even if he did, he probably wouldn’t use it. And he doesn’t want to escape, he wants to stay, and that’s probably another mask that they put on him. Another kind, invisible mask. One that still makes him feel too vulnerable.

They probably want him to feel vulnerable like that, to get the information. End the investigation. Whatever comes after that, they want to get to it quickly.

“Right,” Bakugo mutters, too quiet. Still writing too much. “So, voice quirks get fucky when they can’t talk. There’s regulations and shit when they get arrested, and muzzling a voice quirk brat for too long is fucking child abuse. So, that’s fucked up already.”

Muzzling, masks. Dogs were muzzled. That’s probably why Chisaki picked that name. *“Chi-isaki only clo-osed it at ni-ight.”*

“Still fucked up, don’t fight me on this shit because I know this shit front and back,” Blasty growls, tapping his pen against the paper. “How does it feel when you try to talk and shit? Normal

talk.”

“*Li-ike I ca-an’t*.” Like he’s shoving his weight against 98, but worse. When he can’t find the right angle, can’t make one in a fight, can’t bring his opponent down. He feels the words in his throat, in his mouth, and they’re stuck.

“Like bad shit will happen if you talk or you just can’t?”

The phone looks too bright, and 27 closes his eyes to stop it from hurting him. It feels heavy again, he feels tired. “*Can’t. Li-ike the mask.*”

Blasty circles something, a long scrape of the pen on paper, but then it’s quiet. Too quiet, for too long. “Check in, bitch. How the fuck are you feeling now?”

Heavy. Tired. Useless. “*Fine.*”

Blasty draws another long line, and kicks another foot on the bed. “So, fuck that. Let’s talk about Trash Bird. You see his stumpy little fuck stumps?”

27 feels the smile again, and wishes he could have said something like that. He can’t even imagine what Chisaki would have looked like when he heard it. “*Yes. Tried to quirk me-e after I bro-oke his nose. It was fu-unny.*” Blasty makes an odd, choked off noise, and that reminds him why it wasn’t funny. “*Then I ba-arked. Lost.*”

Too quiet again. For too long. “The *fuck* does that mean?”

“*Tell me to ba-ark.*” 27 might. He feels it in his throat when the phone says it. He might do it this time.

“How about fucking *nope* ?!” Bakugo yells, and it’s relaxing. He’s normal again. “Did that fucker fucking *furry-fy* you?! Did he fucking—” Three pops, louder each time. Then a hand slapped on a desk. “Look shit face, there’s fucked and there’s *fucked*, and that is *fucked*. That’s some *fucked up* brainwashing shit, and we’re not bringing that shit into the therapy shit. Fucking. Nope.”

Brainwashing. He was brainwashed. And his quirk was brainwashing.

It’s funny, and he wishes he wasn’t too tired to laugh.

He wishes that he could, that he wasn’t so heavy. That he didn’t feel this electricity inside his body, like he was shocked by a quirk but only on the inside. He didn’t have the burn, the pain that he should.

Blasty kicks the bed. “Fuck it, we’re doing homework now. We’re gonna find a fucking hack that works, so tell me what worked better.”

An order. He can answer it. “*Feet.*”

“Fucking nasty,” Bakugo mutters under his breath, but he writes it down. “So, fucking sensations and shit. I found some fucking weird ones I haven’t tried. I don’t know what the fucking deal is with ice cubes and shit, but it’s fucking everywhere online, like everyone with fucked heads has their own personal icyhot bastard to make that shit.”

“*You-u have PTSD.*” 27 doesn’t think to make it a question, even if it is one. Even if it shouldn’t be, anger is a symptom and Bakugo has it in spades. But Bakugo knew the hacks, said that he tried them. That was an admission in itself, but 27 was stupid. 27 didn’t notice it.

“Fucking,” Bakugo leans back in a huff, and 27 sits up, sees that Bakugo is looking to the side. “Maybe. I don’t fucking know. It’s fucking stupid, because they didn’t do shit to me. Dragged me out to this smelly fucking bar and tried to talk me into joining their little gigglefuck gang. It’s not like they did shit, not before All Might...”

Bakugo’s face tightens, his fist does too. 27 knows the clench of his jaw, the way he stares harder into nothing and doesn’t blink. He knows why he holds his breath.

Bakugo lets it out, his mouth hanging open in something that’s barely a smile. “No, *that’s* the fucked up part. I fucking *ended* All Might’s career. Because I got fucking kidnapped, like some fucking extra. Some fucking nobody. They wanted me to be a fucking villain, and I did that shit. I did what villains have been trying to do for fucking years, to take down All Might. And *I fucking did that.*”

27 snaps his fingers, because he doesn’t want to use the phone, even if it’s slower. He means this. ‘*I-N-S-U-L-T-E-D. B-Y. A-S-S-O-C-I-A-T-I-O-N.*’

Bakugo rolls his eyes. “Shit’s not funny, asshole. You can talk all this shit about how you’re a criminal or a yakuza, but you’re fucking soft as shit. You’re a fucking *mom*, snack bags and fucking hankie stashes and all. So don’t act like you fucking know shit.”

‘*I know. V-I-L-L-A-I-N. S-C-H-O-O-L.*’ 27 knows the rest of the signs are easy enough to piece together, even if Blasty doesn’t know them. ‘*Not villain. You. Hero. Just loud.*’

Bakugo narrows his eyes before he throws the pen at 27. It’s small and thin, and nearly falls out of his hand when he catches it. “Fucking. Fuck this, we’re doing hacks. Get all comfy and shit, because I’m gonna fucking test them, and that means triggering your ass. Tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.”

Even if it sounds more effective, 27 doesn’t want to. He gets the phone, because Bakugo needs to know this. He needs to know that there’s something under his skin that comes out, something that made the underlings avoid him afterwards. Something that Chisaki was probably right about. “*I-I have a lo-ot. But I’m viole-ent.*”

Bakugo just grins, all teeth and menace. “Fucking *same*. I’ll get Shitty Hair to deal with it.”

It still sounds like a bad plan, but he wants it to work. Especially if it works for this one. “*Ha-air.*”

*

Eri feels like her tummy is going to explode. She also feels kind of bad for eating a lot of Tokoyami’s apples, but maybe if she draws one on his headband for every apple she ate, she can make it up to him.

“And then the new tooth pushes through the gum, like this,” Momo says, squeezing a yogurt tube with an apple slice inside it so that the apple slice starts coming out. “The only teeth that don’t go through that process are the four hind-molars that are called ‘Wisdom teeth.’ They erupt through the gum in the very back of our mouths, where a tooth wasn’t before. This happens during young adulthood, usually in your early 20’s, which is why they were named ‘Wisdom teeth,’ with the assumption that you’re ‘wiser’ when it happens.”

“You were probably born with your wisdom teeth, Momo!” Eri says, trying to see if she could see Momo’s wisdom teeth. Momo *had* to have them now, there’s no way she could get any smarter.

Momo gives her the Good Job smile, but it's a little weird and pinchy looking. "Well, most people are, but I actually wasn't born with them. It's probably a good thing, because it can sometimes require surgery to remove them if they're angled incorrectly inside the gum."

Eri didn't think about that, but that's a really good idea. "Momo, can you do surgery on my teeth to get them out?"

Momo's eyes get really big and her lips get thin and twisty, and Jirou drinks her water wrong and starts spitting it out. "N-no, I don't think that's a good idea, Eri. It would be a bad idea to lose all of your teeth at once. It would make it very hard to eat. Especially apples."

Eri frowns, because the apples haven't been working either. She ate a lot of them, but her teeth don't feel loose at all. "I wanna lose more teeth though. Especially these ones," Eri stops and points to the really pointy ones in the back. Momo said they're 'molars' and they're good for chewing stuff. They experimented on that by eating a bunch of snacks and seeing what tooth did what. "I can't really see what they look like in my mouth, but if I looked at them in my hand, I could see them better."

Momo raises her finger like she has an idea, and then she cups her other hand around it. She makes a little frown, but then her quirk makes her skin move up and a tiny white thing comes out of her finger. "This is probably a better demonstration of how teeth grow," Momo says really quiet, before she pinches the tiny white thing and puts it in Eri's hand.

It's a tooth, but it's bigger than the one she lost. And it has four points instead of just being flat on the top. "Momo, you can make teeth?!"

"It's a simple compound, it's just harder to get the details right on something that small," Momo says with her Kinda Embarrassed smile. "But it's probably a good idea for me to focus on creating smaller objects rather than larger ones. It can help me create more complex electronic devices."

"Momo," Eri says, and she needs Momo to know that she's serious. She *really* needs her to help her with this. "Can you make me a lot of teeth? Like, a *lot* of teeth. So I can know all about what they look like and stuff."

Momo looks over at Shoji, and he looks at Eri before he remembers he doesn't like her, and he gets up off the couch to leave.

Shoji seems nice, but he's really quiet. And he doesn't really like Eri. He always leaves when she looks at him, unless they're in school and he can't. But he probably would if he wouldn't get in trouble with Zawa.

Eri doesn't know why Shoji doesn't like her, like all the other heroes do, but she likes Shoji. And Momo likes Shoji too, but she doesn't look like she's happy with him right now. She's kind of frowny, but she smiles when she looks at Eri. "Let's do that, Eri. What are the front teeth called?"

"Incisors!" Eri says, but her mouth makes a weird whistle noise when she says that, and Jirou looks like she might choke on her water again, because she covers her mouth to catch it.

Momo's lips go super thin, and her cheeks kind of get bigger, but she nods and holds out her hand. "That's right. Now, if you watch my quirk, you can see how the tooth erupts from the gum slowly."

Eri tries to count all the teeth she has with her tongue while she watches Momo. She doesn't know how much money she can get for all of her teeth, but maybe Momo can make her even more teeth

than that.

Maybe if she has a whole bag full of teeth, she'll have enough money from the Tooth Fairy to put a hit on Chisaki.

*

27 can't tell if it's getting less effective, or if the training is more efficient than he thought it would be. Judging by how long it's taking Bakugo's hand to start sparking, it must be the same for him.

Kirimon Shark seems to be getting more worried about that, standing between them to use his body as a shield if either of them slip too far. He keeps turning his head, glancing at them, and it's distracting. It's probably his fault that he's barely stuck in the fog now.

Then the fist in his hair tugs harder and he slides deeper in, loses track of his body for a moment, smells bleach sharp in the air. He doesn't feel his body, but he feels Hari close by, and he barely remembers to call it.

He slaps his free hand on Shark Bro's shoulder, only sees his hand tightening on Bakugo's wrist, doesn't feel himself doing it. He sees sparks pop bigger, knows they should be louder, sees Bakugo's eyes go distant before he's shoved back, still weightless.

It's the slow fog, not thunder claps. It's still frightening, he still feels himself trying to fight it before there's something smooth and green in his hand. He squeezes before he remembers they tried that one already, this is the eating one.

He tries to eat it, tries to remember that he looked at it beforehand. Bakugo seems to think it's odd that he wants to make sure his food hasn't been tampered with in a noticeable way. His mouth is open, the green thing is inside, but he can't bite down, he doesn't know if it's safe. If it's not poison.

Hari closes the mask to make him bite down on the dog treat, but the mask is warm. It's odd. The dog treat is soft, there's an odd juice.

It's warm. *Too warm*, too hot, it hurts, the bleach doesn't burn right. His mouth is on fire in a different way, it's wrong, he opens his mouth.

He can open his mouth. There's voices. There's something in his mouth, and he keeps chewing, even if it hurts. He can't spit it out, he can only swallow.

"-it's a fucking *jalapeño*, he's fucking fine."

"No, *what* ." Clap. "The *fuck*. " Clap clap. "Were you doing?" Clap. "To Shinny?!"

27 turns his head, sees that the door is open. Ashi is dangling from Tape Boy's shoulder, she looks angry. Sparky is holding her feet with his arms, his hands occupied with a glass of milk and plate of cookies. He looks back to Bakugo, and he looks fine. Settled back into his own skin, almost relaxed in it. "Training. Now fuck off, he's fine."

Bakugo looks at him, and probably wants to ask if he's fine. He is, even if his mouth hurts. It's been burned worse. And he's on the edge of the fog, enough to feel himself, just not as much as he should. He just has to curl his hands a few times to bring himself out of it.

"I'm not fucking playing, get the fuck out of my room," Bakugo says, but he's still talking in that strange quiet way, just a little louder, a little irritated. The hot peppers must have worked, they

seemed to be more effective than the other hacks they tried. Either that or this training was just that effective.

“But I wanna hang out with Shinny,” Ashido whines, her face hidden as she slumps over Tape Boy’s back, and he adjusts his stance to the change in where her weight is. But she takes advantage of that and springs up, kicking her feet from Pikachu’s hold before she twists from Adhesive Dispenser, ducking under his arm with her eyes locked on him. “High-“

She says something else, but he sees the hand and forgets himself. He forgets that it hurts more if he flinches, if he stiffens. Chisaki finds it amusing, holds his hand in a hover to make him bark for it, forces him to remember the pain from his wounds and choose them over fear.

No wounds. He does the body check out of habit, to find which parts of him aren’t there, are lost in the fog. His eyes, he closed them, and when he opens them he remembers to breathe, to relax. It’s Ashido, not Chisaki. He curls his hands to help remember that.

Ashido looks as frozen as he felt, her smile falling with her hand. “I, uh. Haven’t had a quirk slip in forever, you know. I know it’s kind of scary...acid and...everything.”

27 shakes his head, looks to Bakugo because he can’t remember where the phone is. ‘ *Training. Bird.* ’

Bakugo nods, he taught him ‘Training,’ and ‘Bird’ is easy enough to guess, and looks at Ashido. “Oi, it’s not you. His brain’s fucked because of Trash Bird. That’s the fucking hand quirk he’s worried about, not your weak sauce.”

27 nods, but Ashido doesn’t look relieved like she should. She bites her lip, eyes widening, before she narrows her eyes and becomes serious, determined. “Down low!”

Her hand is stretched out again, but it’s low, palm up. Not a handshake. He’s not sure if she wants him to give her something, but maybe it’s similar to a high five. But if it’s the opposite, ‘down’ instead of ‘high,’ then maybe he’s not supposed to slap her hand. He’s supposed to do the opposite.

He puts his hand on her palm, biting down on the urge to pull it away. He remembers this kind of training, doing it with Eri. He used to jump every time she touched or grabbed him, but he taught himself not to. Made himself used to it. Became just a little less odd for it.

He feels like he’s being odd, feeling the weight of their stares, but Ashido is staring at him oddly too, like she’s confused. But then, she grins and holds his hand, her thumb too hot on the back of his knuckles before she starts swinging their joined hands back and forth.

“Shit face, do you seriously-“

“Shut up!” Ashido hisses, her face twisted in anger at Bakugo, but softening oddly at him. “Shinny knows, he just wants to hold my hand. And I want to hold hands with Shinny.” Her swinging stops and her voice grows oddly cold and low when she speaks again. “And if you take this from me, I will put horse tranquilizers in your coffee before your Lit Midterm.”

Ashido hums when she starts swinging their hands again, and 27 once again wonders if he’s underestimated Ashi. Beneath the excited grins and spastic movements that make her seem like a fool, there’s a colder side. A fearsome one.

He can’t say he doesn’t like it.

He hears a cut off squeal, and looks to see his owner standing in the hallway with his arms crossed,

Sparky crouched low with his arms at a poor guard. Sticky Joints stiffens into a half-salute for some reason. “You’re here of your own free will?” His owner asks, but the low half-growl of it makes it barely a question.

This is another test, and it’s clear he failed the first one. He should say no, he should shake his head, but that would mean returning to the Safe Room. And he knows it’s not safe at all with his owner in such a mood.

“What’s with the fucking ‘Free will’ checks? Shitsou’s fine,” Bakugo growls in answer. “He’s not fucking kidnapped or some-“

“Baku-“ Ashido starts, then starts swinging their hands a bit faster, her hold on his a bit tighter. Her smile tightens as well. “What, he’s *fine*. We’re having fun, Sensei! Right, Shinny?”

That’s even less of a question. Ashi is practically begging him to say yes.

He doesn’t know why, what she plans to do to him. What she wants from him, but it’s clear she wants something. It’s even clearer that his owner doesn’t want her to get it, his eyes narrowing in a rare tell when they settle on their joined hands.

He hears Eri’s quick footsteps before she runs to his owner’s side, her hands tucked in the front pocket of her dress. She looks up at his owner before she looks at him, and her eyes dance with a smile. “Twenny! You’re making friends!”

“Yeah,” he says, because she’s too excited about it. She’s wanted him to do this for so long, he just hopes that the heroes won’t correct him. That if they want something, they’ll wait until the door is closed to tell him.

Ashido seems to want his hand, because her other starts holding his trapped one. “*Shinny*,” she whines, and for some reason it sounds like she’s close to tears. She’s slumped over in some defeated gesture, which makes it hard to see if she really is.

But Eri is so happy that she smiles, that happy and normal smile that should come more naturally to her over time. The one she deserved to wear more often. “You’re doing a really good job! Let me know if you need help, okay?”

“Okay,” 27 answers, and wonders if he should be embarrassed to accept help from a 5 year old. Even if he knows it isn’t necessary.

His owner steps forward, reaching for something in his pocket. 27 only has a second to wonder if it’s dangerous, if he’s choosing something more painful than the scarf to force him to come back to the Safe Room, before his owner pulls out some folded pieces of paper to him. “Here.” 27 takes them with his free hand, fighting to keep his confusion hidden. “These are as good as if they came from me. And Shinsou is free to leave at any time, without question.”

27 manages to unfold the first one, and it just has one word on it, ‘Stop.’ But it’s not his owner’s handwriting.

“Yep, got it, no problem!” Zappy says with a grin that looks a little too manic, his thumbs up and eyes locked on 27. He wants something desperately.

Red Shark crouches to offer Eri a high five, which she takes with no hesitation. They both wiggle their fingers as they pull away, imitating an odd whooshing sound like the after-effects of an explosion, which sounds more like a whistle from Eri. “Aw, you’ve got a train whistle tooth! That’s so cool!”

“Yup! ‘Cause I lost my incisor!” Eri explains, whistling again.

27 immediately decides that he doesn’t want to be here, he would rather be in the Safe Room with Eri to see if she does that again. How many words can make her whistle without meaning to, if it will be easier to teach her how to whistle like that. He tried to teach her once, to use whistling as a code that Chisaki might not figure out, but she got too upset when she couldn’t.

But his owner won’t give him that option, won’t make it easy for him to leave by ordering him to. He just leaves, and Eri looks back to trail after him with another wave. “Have fun with your friends, Twenny!”

Sticky Joints closes the door and presses his head against it, before he turns around with his hands folded in front of his face. “Oh my god, that is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life. I need to do something manly, I need to punch a bear or something.”

“Go find one and fuck off,” Bakugo scowls, before he looks at 27. He jerks his chin up, probably wanting to avoid asking the usual questions to evaluate how well the hack went. He seemed to want to keep it a secret from the others, probably because he was involved in it. Hiding his weaknesses was a smart move.

27 shrugs, tilting his free hand left and right. ‘*So-so*.’ It wasn’t the most effective hack they’ve found, especially when he found it difficult to eat the pepper while he was in the fog, even though he tried to remember that he had to. The pain wasn’t very enjoyable either.

“Uh, maybe we should take a break, though?” Red Shark says, practically pleading with Bakugo in his nervous smile. “The squad’s all here and all, with snacks and everything!”

Bakugo’s eyes narrow at the snacks before he grabs the milk from Sparky, then holds it out for 27. “Drink this, it’ll help with your weak fucking tastebuds. Fucking sweating over a *jalapeno*, that’s some fucking training we need to do.”

27 takes it, and forces himself to lift the glass to his lips. Training. Be less odd. Just drink it, it’s not poisoned, he hasn’t been poisoned yet and he won’t be until he’s given them the information they want. He’s safe as long as he doesn’t give them The Miasma’s name.

The milk soothes away the lingering burn, and he forces himself to swallow it. Bakugo nods, and 27 notices that Red Shark has a hand held over Sparky’s mouth, and Tape Dispenser looks a bit unsettled by something.

“So,” Red Shark says, releasing his hold on Sparky. “Pizza? ‘Cause that sou-”

“*Fucking*,” Bakugo swears, pressing a hand to his forehead before he glares at 27. “Bitch, do you know what pizza is? Because this fucker has been going apeshit all fucking week and it’s driving me fucking crazy.”

27 takes out the phone. Even if Bakugo did know enough sign, Ashido’s hold on his hand seems to be unbreakable. “*Ha-ad once. Didn’t like. Sta-ale and hard.*”

Bakugo and Red Shark exchange a look, before Red Shark raises his fists above his head. “YES! Dude, we’re doing this.”

“Say ‘dab,’” Sparky says, his eyes wide and locked on 27. “Please-”

“Fuck no,” Bakugo mutters under his breath, shaking his head. “Fuck no, don’t you fucking-”

“*Da-ab.*” 27 doesn’t know who’s reaction is more amusing, Bakugo’s apparent despair or Sparky’s wide eyed shock.

“*Fuck,*” Sparky whispers, crouching down as the plate of cookies fall out of his hand. His hands fold in front of his face, and he breathes in shakily. “Fuck, that’s too powerful. You can’t just do that anytime you want, that’s so much more power than anyone should have. *Oh my god.*”

27 holds the phone’s screen out for him, he’s pretty sure anyone can have this app on their phone, but Sparky holds his hand out and turns his head away from the sight, as if the screen was blinding him.

“No, no way! It’s too much power, I know I’m not worthy!”

“Thank *fuck* for that,” Bakugo mutters, swatting at Ashido’s hands still locked over his. “How long are you going to do that shit?”

“Forever!” Ashido argues, sticking her tongue out at Bakugo. “Shinny and I are best friends for life, Bakugo. Don’t be *jealous.*”

“*Traini-ing. Fine.*” 27 wants to train himself out of all of his weaknesses, and that includes this one. He doesn’t want to flinch, he doesn’t want to pull away or feel the panic that rises when someone unfamiliar touches him. He wants to be more normal, or at least be able to look like it.

He doesn’t feel that rising urge to pull his hand away anymore. It’s working.

Even if he’s starting to feel more tired.

*

Yamada takes a few minutes for himself as he holds his phone in his hands. He hopes the news didn’t travel that quick, but he knows that Shouta never calls before he texts when Yamada is on patrol. If his hero manager wouldn’t skin him alive, he’d just go back to UA instead of calling, but he reasons with himself. Shouta can handle it, no matter what Shinsou is going through. He’ll definitely be handling the situation more calmly than he would. “Hey babe! What’s up?”

“*Yama, I lost my incisor!*”

Yamada didn’t expect to hear Eri’s voice, and definitely didn’t expect to hear that adorable little whistle. And it takes him a bit to get his brain to process that before he realizes what that means. “You lost your first tooth?!”

“*On a candy apple,*” Shouta says, and he can practically hear that grin. That’s another bet that Yamada isn’t sad to lose, even if he’s absolutely miserable knowing that he missed it. “*The tooth fairy will have to stop by the Class 1-A dorm tonight.*”

“You don’t carry enough cash, I’m gonna hit up the ATM- what’s our balance again?” Yamada asks, trying to remember if his check from the station cleared before he sets out to cash it.

“*Don’t worry, Eri is going to be one of the richest five year olds in Mustafu,*” Shouta says, laughing under his breath at him before he says something angled away from the phone. “*2000 yen is plenty.*”

“It’s *not*, Shou! This is Eri’s first tooth, and you better not lose it!” Yamada will lose something else if his husband does. “We don’t even have a box for it! Can you- wait no. *I’m* going to order the tooth box, we’re not going through another first outfit again.”

Shouta scoffs, but he has to *know* that much pastel and tulle was an abomination. “ *I owe you 2000 yen. Shinsou is hanging out with his friend now.* ”

Yamada might have wanted to be a hero from the bottom of his very heart before this moment, but right now, he hated it. *Two* firsts from his wards happened while he was on patrol, and he’ll never be able to get that back.

But at least he can be right for once.

“I told you! I told you! They’re getting along though, right? Bakugo’s a little rough around the edges, and Shinsou can get a little mean sometimes. They *are* friends, right? Shinsou’s not being forced or anything, right?”

“ *I’ve made it as clear as I can that Shinsou can leave, but he seemed to be enjoying himself,* ” Shouta says. “ *But that was before Ashido and the others dropped by. I should probably check again, but Nezu has a robot on surveillance.* ”

Yamada can’t help but drop his head and sigh. “Shou, don’t make it weird. This is probably hard enough for Shinsou without you dropping by to remind everyone that he’s a little different from his friends. But seriously, keep me posted on the Rat Robocop feed.”

“ *I’m just making sure he’s not...* ” Shouta trails off before he sighs. “ *He didn’t seem to be in a friendly mood before this. It would be understandable if he didn’t want to deal with anything unnecessary for a few days.* ”

Yamada frowns at the reminder. “Did you hear about it?”

“ *Naomasa emailed me,* ” Shouta answers, huffing under his breath. “ *Despite the Nomu Organization saving us some trouble, it wouldn’t be good for the investigation if Shinsou finds out about it. He’s already concerned.* ”

Yamada tips his head back, grinding his teeth. It would probably help their wards a great deal to know that Chisaki was stabbed to death in a stairwell that he shouldn’t have been in, but for Shinsou, it might just be another reason to sleep with one eye open. “Still, I definitely feel like a little celebration is in order. Think they’ll be up for some take-out?”

“ *Not for a few days, if I’m seeing this right,* ” Shouta mutters under his breath.

*

27 has been wondering what he’s supposed to do in this situation for what feels like hours now. So far, the only answer is to answer Sparky’s questions and let Ashido do whatever she wants with him.

Sparky’s questions are not the ones that he expected to answer. “Do you think hot dogs are like a species of sandwich? Like, they have bread and meat, but they’re not *sandwich* sandwiches, you know? You- wait, you know what hot dogs are, right?”

27 nods, the phone has been too heavy to use for a while now. He ignores the impulse to sit up when it flares again, when he feels the warmth from Ashido’s lap on the back of his head again. He has no idea why she wants to do this, but it’s good training.

He feels her fingers running through his hair again, and closes his eyes for a moment to pretend that they’re Eri’s. It makes it harder to open them again, but he forces himself to. He’s been too tired all day, but this feels different. It feels odd.

Bakugo snorts again, shaking his head before he reaches for that tall soda. Bakugo seems tired too, maybe he's just as drained as 27 is. Maybe these other heroes are causing that somehow.

"Have you been to America? Wait, no, Eri said you *wanted* to go to America, my bad," Sparky continues to ramble, mostly to himself. "Hey, is Mic-sensei going to do another essay on the—"

"*Ha-and thing,*" 27 types, feeling more alert as he remembers. "*In cla-ass. What.*" He feels more alert, but his thumb still feels too heavy.

Zappy blinks at him before he runs a hand over his hair. "Oh yeah, the alphabet thing." Despite all the questions he's been asking 27, he seems like he doesn't want to answer this one. "So, I've got the ADHD thing, and it helps to do something with my hands sometimes, and I can't remember the letters? Like, I know sentences and stuff, but the letters are like. Small. You know?"

27 raises an eyebrow. "*Say i-it. Alphabet.*" He lets the phone drop on his chest afterwards, he won't need it.

"Uh, A," Sparky says, confused until 27 signs for him. Just a fist with his thumb on the side, not the most recognizable sign but Zappy surprises him with wide eyes when he gets it. "*Dude*, how did I not—" Sparky cuts himself off to lean back, like he wants to throw himself on the bed before he leans even closer, both hands making the 'A.' "A! Dude, you are *super* trilingual, that is so cool. How do you say my name with that? Like, with your hands and—"

'B,' 27 signs, and waits for Sparky to copy him. Almost every sign is interrupted by some odd remark or praise that Zappy can't help but say, and it's made worse when Ashido starts copying him too. She's awful at putting her fingers in the right places, even when he shows her where she's messing up.

He doesn't know why they're doing this.

They wanted him to be here, for some reason. They had to want something from him, but they haven't told him what it is. Sparky has just been asking him questions, making the oddest observations out of thin air while Ashido pets him or holds his hands. Bakugo looks over occasionally to grouse at something, usually one of Sparky's more invasive questions. Tapey and Red Hair have been on their phones or watching that cooking show with a very angry man who swears a lot, pestering Bakugo into watching it when he seems to get too distracted in berating Zappy or Ashido.

"A, B, C, D," Sparky starts signing, grinning at his own hand. He's happy with that at least. Maybe now that he has something from 27, even if he didn't ask for it, 27 can leave.

"Whoa, wha- did Todoroki just—" Tapey looks around with wide eyes, hands still curled around his phone.

"Rich fucking bastard," Bakugo growls, before he stiffens in his chair, glaring at his phone. "Fucking *Deku*, I'll fucking...."

27 forces himself to pick up the phone, now that everyone else is staring at it. Ashido starts bouncing, a strained scream held behind her teeth. "I'm getting all the Gucci swag before Endeavor kills me," Sparky says in a rush.

Midterms aren't as hard as MY ABS: yooooo we're getting all the pizza bcuz Shinbro's never had any. Who wants to be a bro n pitch in?

FUCK MIDTERMS: FORK OVER EVERY FUCKING CENT OR DIE.

Les midterms me tueront: 3000 yen. This is good for one pizza, no? It must be 4 cheeses at least!!!

Floating to Failure: 2000 yen, sorry. If I had more I would pitch in!!!

FUCK MIDTERMS: @URAFUCKA KEEP YOUR FUCKING POCKET CHANGE @#2
WHERE'S YOUR MONEYBAG HAVING ASS?

Yeet Fail: Who's better, Tokyo Pizza or that shady New Yorker shack that's always so greasy you can drink it?

Quietly Dying: That sounds like you answered your own question.

Yeet Fail: Right? New Yorker it is

Disappointing ALL MIGHT GUYS HE'S NOT: I have 3000 but let me call my mom really quick????

FUCK MIDTERMS: I'M NOT TAKING YOUR MOM'S FUCKING MONEY DEKU. BROKE
FUCKING BITCH.

Stay Frosty My Friends: 12224332495 12/19 983 Todoroki Enji

Stay Frosty My Friends: Do you need his address to order it?

Yeet Fail: whaaaaa BRO DELETE THAT AFTER I SCREENSHOT IT

Plus Ultra Fail: TODOROKI PLEASE REMOVE THAT MESSAGE. IDENTITY THEFT IS A
CRIME!!!

Lofi hiphop beats to study and die to: @Iida what are you, a cop? @Todoroki thnx for the new
amps babe

Stay Frosty My Friends: You're welcome.

FUCK MIDTERMS: IF YOU'RE FUCKING WITH ME I'LL END YOUR SHIT, HALFSIES

Disappointing ALL MIGHT GUYS HE'S NOT: It's real.

Disappointing ALL MIGHT GUYS HE'S NOT: *Tap to download 22KB file*

27 tapped the message to show a picture of an All Might figurine still in the packaging.

FUCK MIDTERMS: FUCK YOU DEKU YOU FUCKING SUCKED AN ICYHOT
FLAVORED DICK FOR THAT IT DOESN'T FUCKING COUNT

Stress Bake BB: that is the rarest All Might figurine known to man... I'm so jealous it's not even
funny

Disappointing ALL MIGHT GUYS HE'S NOT: @Sato Come over and see it! It's MINT
CONDITION

FUCK MIDTERMS: FUUUUUUUUCK YOUUUUUUUUU

Midterms stay out of my lane: todoroki can i please steal your dads credit card for gucci swag i will do many things for this

Stay Frosty My Friends: Yes. #Treat #Yourself

Sparky dropped his phone then his head into his hands as he breathed shakily. “Oh man. *Oh man.* Todoroki is my sugar daddy, and I can’t say anything about it because he just got me Gucci swag.”

“Hi, yes, I’d like to order one of every pizza to be delivered to UA’s campus,” Tapey said into his phone, using an unnaturally low-pitched voice. “No, this isn’t a prank, and you’ll know it when you hear my credit card information. The name is Todoroki Enji- Yes, that’s correct. And you can have this done in- Well, *Tokyo* said one hour- Oh, perfect. Yes, the number is...”

When 27 opened his eyes, the panic pulled him into sitting. Deidoro’s quirk was making his head swim, but it was wrong. It was too thick, the air around him was too heavy, his head felt too full. This was wrong.

He needed to leave.

“Shinny, wait!” The floor shifts under him, that part’s right, but he’s used to it. He knows how to keep his legs bent, how to fall from a shorter height if he does, and how to shuffle to keep from falling. “Shinny, just-”

He feels a hand on his shoulder and jerks away, stumbles around and notices that Bakugo is slumped too heavily in his chair, that his eyes are closed and loud snorting snores are coming from his open mouth. The others are staring at him, eyes too wide, hands too open and reaching for him.

He forces himself to the door, to open and close it behind him, even if it catches on someone. “Shinny, you weren’t supposed to drink it but if you just sleep it off, and it’ll be okay! Alright? Just-”

Another hand on his shoulder and he jerks away, almost falls even if he knows better. “Don...”

They pried the mask open, and he doesn’t want them to. He doesn’t know how they did it, but it’s not there. He wants it to be there.

Even if he’s odd. Even if he’s ignored. Even if the boredom was unbearable in that dark room, when he counted how many times he counted and still couldn’t get the itching in his head to stop, he wants to go back there. The itching is everywhere, it’s crawling under his skin and he just wants to *leave* .

“Okay, um,” Ashido mutters to herself, he doesn’t like it. He wants her to go, he doesn’t want to feel that nervousness in her tone, it makes the itching worse. “You want to go back to Aizawa-sensei?”

That white electric feeling is too intense, he feels too seen. He doesn’t know what Ashido wants, if she wants him to say yes or no. He just wants to close his eyes and let someone else deal with this. But he swallows and tilts his head down, it’s not a nod so she doesn’t have to take it as one if she doesn’t want him to nod.

“Yeah, I get it,” Ashido says, and she’s disappointed. “I’m sorry, it was really stupid-I just,” Ashido sighs, and he hears her hands slapping against her sides in frustration. “I know you don’t like it, but is it okay if I walk with you there? We don’t have to talk and you can ignore me, but if

you fall and get hurt I'm really going to cry. We just wanted Bakugo to go to sleep, because he's too stupid to do that when he drinks so many energy drinks, and we wanted to have *fun* with you but now you think we're *assholes*, and we are, and-"

27 holds his hand out, even if he doesn't want to. He just knows that she wants him to, that she feels bad about something. He doesn't know why, but he doesn't want her to.

Her hand is warm, and he doesn't flinch. "I know it's weird," Ashido says, her hand squeezing for a moment. "I just want to be your friend again."

He still doesn't know what that means. He tries to figure it out as they walk, as he ignores her free arm reaching around him at times while they climb the stairs. He doesn't know what she wants from this, what she wants from him.

Everyone wants something. It's easier when they do. Even easier when he knows what they want.

"What," 27 makes a mask with his clenched teeth, glaring at the stairs he climbs. His head is too full for him to catch himself, and he hates it.

"I'm not scared of your quirk, you know," Ashido says quietly, swinging their hands forward. "It kind of...felt nice? Like, it was really fuzzy all around me. I can't remember a lot, since it was so long ago, but... That's a lot nicer than mine, right?"

27 shakes his head, doesn't have the strength to explain it to her. "You're fine."

She doesn't know it's a question. "Good! 'Cause I like holding hands with you!"

He doesn't know how she pried the mask off, but he can almost feel it close when he opens the door and sees his owner, and sees his eyes narrowing. 27 should pull himself up straighter, should hide the fact that he can't feel himself as much in an odd way, but it's too much effort to keep his eyes open or himself upright.

"Bakugo drugged him," Ashido says before she drops his hand and runs, but she doesn't get far. 27 recognizes that the white scarf has soared past his arm long after it does so, and turns to look to see Ashido bound at the other end, straining futilely to run.

His owner glares, his red eyes and flowing hair more intimidating. "With. *What*. "

"Benadryl, just a little! Shinsou wasn't supposed to drink it and he only had a little, I swear! Bakugo hasn't slept for a few days, so we made some cookies and milk and put the Benadryl in the milk and watched Kitchen Nightmares, and it was all Sero's idea, so he's the one you need to expel, and-"

"Drugging someone, even with over the counter medication, is a criminal offense," his owner says, closing his eyes before his hair falls, and the scarf pulls back around his neck. "Leave."

Ashido doesn't need to be told twice, sprinting down the hallway. 27 wonders how he's supposed to get to the cot when just standing takes so much effort.

His owner sighs. "You should sleep it off. I'll deal with them later."

27 manages to drag himself to the cot, unable to hide the huff of breath when he falls on it. But as soon as he does, the heaviness grows irritating. He feels sleepless, even if he doesn't want to move. 'Can't,' Shinsou signs, before 27 remembers he's not Shinsou.

His owner's mouth twitches into a half-smile before he tucks his chin into his scarf, sitting down. "That can happen. Other than being drugged, did you have a good time?"

27 half-rolls his eyes when he catches the double meaning. ' *Training useful. T-H-E-R-A-P-Y bad. Spark Rat talks a lot.* '

He sees his owner nodding, just the top of his head visible. 27 can't keep his eyes open much more than that, whatever is in his head that makes it feel so full is swelling. "Kaminari does.... What do you mean by 'therapy'?"

' *Blasty. Bad at it. Not investigation. I don't know what they want. Weird.* ' 27's eyes have fallen closed, and he can't open them. His signs are getting sloppier. ' *I'm weird. Are they weird?* '

It's quiet for a moment before his owner huffs a laugh. "That's not even a question. They're very weird."

' *Good.* ' 27 signs, before his hands fall to his sides.

Friends.

*

As a man who has a deep and abiding devotion to the art of sleep, he has to say he's impressed.

Shinsou has barely moved since the Benadryl took its hold over him again, and didn't so much as twitch when Eri returned. And with the excitement of all the heroes gathered around such a disgusting feast as the one he saw being delivered, it was no surprise that Eri almost forgot about the Tooth Fairy's visit.

It took a little convincing to make sure she would put it under a pillow rather than underneath Shinsou, but her excitement was apparent with every time her head popped up from her attempts to sleep, to stretch a hand under the pillow to make sure the tooth was there.

But finally, both wards were deeply asleep, and completely undisturbed by the Tooth Fairy's visit.

But that's not to say the Tooth Fairy isn't a little disturbed when he reaches under the pillow to feel something he did not expect.

Aizawa pulls out a *handful* of teeth, and has to stop himself from opening Eri's mouth by rationalizing that he would have noticed if she lost all of them. He still finds himself staring at his hand for too long, before once again, he finds himself impressed. He gathers up all of the teeth before he walks over to his desk and takes a picture of the disturbing collection on his phone.

Shou: I need to report a counterfeit operation

Shou: *Image attached*

Zashi: BABE WTF

Shou: She still has teeth. These are fake.

Zashi: Omgggggg baaaaaabe

Zashi: Our little mafia princess is trying to scam the tooth fairy!!! I don't know if I should b proud but I am??

Shou: You can't withdraw more money.

Zashi: Y NOT??? They're very good fakes! This tooth fairy is very fooled!

Shou: You're welcome to do it when it's your turn to be the tooth fairy.

Aizawa busies himself with trying to pick out the real tooth from the fakes, and after he plucks it out he nearly drops it at the sound of his phone vibrating loudly against the desk. He makes sure neither ward wakes to it before he checks his phone.

Zashi: U sound v sure that we'll be there for the next tooth. Wat about it only being a month??? ;)

Aizawa turns his phone off, even if it's irrational. Even if he knows that the silence is only more telling.

He doesn't want to consider the logical differences between 'tooth fairy' and 'Dad' when he knows there are few of them.

Chapter End Notes

Class 1-A Chat Usernames:

Last seen being kidnapped by serial stomach puncher > SHINNYYY - Shinsou Hitoshi (27)
Sobbing in the disco - Ashido Mina
Cementoss x Gucci Collab > Midterms stay out of my lane - Kaminari Denki
Quietly Dying Inside - Shoji Mezo
Yeet me into death(tm) > Yeet Fail - Sero Hanta
Birds can't read - Tokoyami Fumikage
STFU ABOUT PIZZA > Midterms aren't as hard as MY ABS - Kirishima Eijirou
Kacchan I'm serious pls sleep > FUCK MIDTERMS - Bakugo Katsuki
FUTURE #2 > Yaoyorozu > Good Study Mom - Yaoyorozu Momo
FUTURE #DEAD > Stay Frosty My Friends - Todoroki Shoto
Don't disappoint your father > Disappointing ALL MIGHT GUYS HE'S NOT - Midoriya Izuku
TEACHER'S PET CAN'T SAVE YOU FROG FUCK - Asui Tsuyu
Les midterms me teurant - Aoyama Yuga
Floating to Failure - Uraraka Ochako
Plus Ultra Fail - Iida Tenya
Lofi hiphop beats to study and die to - Jirou Kyouka
Stress Bake BB - Sato Rikido

Blessings

Chapter Summary

Shinsou and Aizawa discover Eri's true intentions with her Tooth Fairy money. The reason behind Shoji's avoidance of Eri is revealed. Yamada and Shinsou discuss friendship and quirks. Eri conducts a blessing ritual for Class 1-A to give them strength for the coming week of Midterms, and a new visitor unsettles Shinsou.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Body dysmorphia

Previously on Wards of UA: Bakugo and, by accident, Shinsou were dosed with Benadryl-laced milk by Bakusquad which resulted in both falling asleep before the 'one of everything' pizza order was delivered. Bakugo has been mocking Aizawa for being one of the lowest paid heroes in the industry for a while. Eri was trying to lose more teeth so that she could get enough money from the Tooth Fairy to put a hit on Chisaki. Aizawa and Yamada know that Chisaki is dead, but won't tell Eri or Shinsou because The Miasma was probably behind it. Sato offered to bake Shinsou a 'study snack' like he did for Class A on the chat. Shinsou and Aizawa sparred after the meeting with Chisaki, to give Shinsou a sense of victory over Chisaki. Ashido held hands with Shinsou, and afterwards Shinsou described it as 'Training.' Bakugo tried to give Shinsou a therapy session. Eri has had meltdowns after seeing the scars on her arms and legs, thus why she wears long sleeves and leggings. Shinsou is triggered by having his hair pulled after being tortured by bleach-laced baths at the 8 Precepts. Chisaki forced Shinsou to dissociate by ordering him to bark repeatedly. During Shinsou's therapy session with Bakugo, Bakugo asked Shinsou about his childhood. Bakugo hates the ':--)' emoji, or any emoji that has a hyphenated nose. Shinsou's right hand has been uncoordinated and shaky since it was unmade by Chisaki. Ashido snitched on the rest of Bakusquad when Aizawa noticed that Shinsou had been drugged.

There's a knock on the door to the Safe Room. Aizawa knows that's never a good sign.

When he opens the door, it's only confirmed to him in the worst way. "Oi, fucking delivery for the other guy who got roofied."

Bakugo at least looks more well-rested, though Kirishima's wide-eyed terror is easy to see. Aizawa narrows his eyes at him, just to see the fear deepen, before he sighs. "This is not an emergency."

You have no reason to-”

“Ugo! Ugo!” Eri calls, bounding to the door with her hair only half brushed and a hair tie loosely held on that half. “I got money from the tooth fairy!”

She proudly holds up the 2000 yen note for Bakugo’s inspection, which he meets with a smirk aimed at Aizawa. “Tooth Fairy must be pretty fuckin’ broke now. It’s too bad this shit is for Shitsou.”

“It’s okay, Twenny can share!” Eri decides for Shinsou, who stumbles out of the bathroom with his purple hair tangled and messy. His eyes still seem unfocused until they narrow on Bakugo and Kirishima.

“Man, that’s a lot of money though,” Kirishima says, crouching down to Eri’s eye level, which conveniently allows him to move away from Aizawa’s line of sight, obscured by Bakugo.

“Whatcha gonna spend it on?”

“I don’t know, it’s not enough to put a hit on someone,” Eri answers, staring at the note as she tilts onto one foot. Aizawa feels unbalanced in a different way. “But maybe I can buy a lot of- Zawa, can I see Tokoyami? I won’t bother him if he’s studying, but I think he’s not.”

“That’s fine,” Aizawa answers, without considering the question at all. While Eri bounds away, he looks to Shinsou to see if this was a conversation that he missed out on, and Shinsou’s averted gaze and hand running through his hair is enough confirmation that it was.

But Shinsou catches his raised eyebrow, and lowers his hand. ‘ *C-H-I-S-A-K-I. Heard H-I-T. Didn’t know meaning. Didn’t explain.* ’

Aizawa nods, knowing that is going to be a difficult conversation to have, especially knowing that it could be far easier if he could trust that Eri wouldn’t tell Shinsou. “I don’t think I need to make myself clearer,” he says, turning to Kirishima’s shell-shocked expression and Bakugo’s darkened scowl.

“If *someone* could answer their fucking phone, this shit wouldn’t be necessary,” Bakugo says with a low voice, before he shoves three pizza boxes into Shinsou’s chest to take. “There’s one of everything, all labeled and shit. Happy fucking birthday.”

“Yeah dude, and Sato has like another box of stuff since you didn’t tell him what you wanted,” Kirishima adds, though he keeps himself far from the doorway and begins to wither under Aizawa’s focused stare. “And uh, sorry about the milk thing.”

Shinsou gives a pointed stare to the pizza boxes in his arms before looking at Kirishima, and though Aizawa knows that his hands could easily become unoccupied, he takes it as an excuse to force their exit. “If that is all, leave. Now.”

Bakugo hisses as he turns, but Kirishima takes the invitation enthusiastically. “Yeah, nice seeing you bro!”

“If you let that shit go stale, I’m beating the shit out of you,” Bakugo adds as his own farewell. Though Aizawa doesn’t miss how toothless that threat sounds.

Shinsou places the pizza on the cot without further interest, before glancing at Aizawa, his gaze quickly lowering. ‘ *I am sorry.* ’

“It’s fine,” Aizawa replies, lowering himself back into the chair with a quick glance to see that Eri

had made it to Tokoyami's door. "My students took it upon themselves to invite themselves here. I imagine it will happen again, though I would prefer that they didn't."

Aizawa would prefer if his students made the discomfort that came with being an uninvited presence in what was basically their home a bit easier to ignore. But if Eri's frequent visitors during the first two weeks was any indication, this would happen again.

And if his students were under the assumption that visiting Shinsou was a loophole around the rules that had finally been taken seriously, they were very wrong.

' Tried to keep her from it. C-H-I-S-A-K-I or H-A-R-I. ' Aizawa looks up, taking in Shinsou's face twisted in clear worry, his eyes glaring at the floor with his lips pulled into a grimace. *' During Chair. '*

Aizawa finds himself glancing away before he steadies himself. "It's not your fault. Those were circumstances out of your control. And I wouldn't want to imagine what it would have been like for Eri if you weren't there for her."

He doesn't want to, but he has. He's taken the photographs of the room that they occupied and imagined it even more barren. A bed that an unattended toddler would make into a nest. A child with too wide eyes, staring at the blankness of her surroundings for hours before the necessity of food brought company. Before another visit brought unimaginable pain.

He always stops his wondering when he remembers the bottle of bleach, how easily an unsupervised toddler could reach it. Or whether the toddler would already know its purpose.

Or if a child whose longest interactions with others was during torture would cleave onto those torturers out of necessity. A human's innate need to be with others, to be cared for, twisting a nightmare into a dream.

"Don't leave, 50."

He wonders how long Shinsou had known 50. He was nine years old when she died, but there were five years between that and Shinsou's disappearance, presumably spent at the Nomu Organization. Formative years that are left in darkness, where he imagines that whatever care that four year old was given, was lacking.

He's never considered it before, but Shinsou might be a form of what Eri would have grown into if she hadn't been rescued. Avoidant of touch that he doesn't understand, and the one that he does can be painful.

The reason he was able to touch Shinsou in a fight was because it was the only interaction he could understand. He didn't flinch because he expected it.

But Shinsou is trying to change himself. He could have easily broken away from Ashido's hand on his, but he didn't, despite the apparent discomfort. He knows enough about himself to know that he's different. *' Training. '*

Shinsou is sitting on the cot, glancing at the pizza boxes. His worries seem oddly soothed, and Aizawa ignores that he might have apologized for failing *him* in some way. That Eri overhearing a conversation about contracted murder was Shinsou's fault, and that Aizawa hadn't expected for Eri to have very different assumptions and knowledge about the world than any other five year old.

"You mentioned 'therapy' before you went to sleep last night," Aizawa says, more than a little curious what that could entail. Especially when it was followed up with a mention of the

investigation.

Shinsou explains, but Aizawa can't say that he's happy about that.

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Shoji recognizes the footsteps before the knock on the door comes, and tucks himself a bit closer to the corner of the wall before the door opens, staring at the math textbook as though he's completely engrossed in it when he's completely distracted now.

"Toko, I'm sorry I ate a lot of apples. But you can have this to buy more of them!"

Tokoyami pulls himself a little straighter, likely finding that little tooth whistle from the 'sorry' and 'this' to be unexpectedly adorable. "You're more than welcome to my apples, Eri. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but I believe that money was left for you to use. I wouldn't wish to incite the wrath of the tooth fairy by accepting it."

Though Shoji had purposefully kept himself out of Eri's line of sight with his position, he couldn't help but turn his face to the wall. Eri was trying to give away the money she received from the *Tooth Fairy*. "I don't know what to buy though...Toko, can I tell you a secret?"

Tokoyami nods, glancing at Shoji before he kneels down and cups a hand to his ear canal hidden beneath his feathers.

Shoji still hears the entire conversation, even if he doesn't want to. Not for the first time, he wishes that his hearing wasn't quite so sensitive, even when he wasn't using his quirk.

And he wishes that Tokoyami didn't shoot him a look like that. "I won't tell a soul. Shoji does have a fondness for aquatic creatures with multiple limbs, such as squids and octopi. Perhaps that could be an image you can use." Tokoyami chuckles under his breath before he cups a hand around his beak. "Could you tell me what my headband will look like?"

Eri's hair slaps against her shoulders when she shakes her head. "It's a surprise! And don't tell him!"

"I swear to keep your confidence, Eri," Tokoyami promises, punctuated with a nod. "And I'm looking forward to receiving your blessing before we all endeavor towards a trying week."

"Okay! Thanks, Toko!"

Tokoyami closes the door, and sighs. "Do I have to ask if you overheard, my sharp-eared friend?" He doesn't, and Shoji doesn't have to answer. "She's noticed your avoidance, and taken it exactly the way I told you she would. Perhaps this would be an opportunity to overcome your ill-suited complex."

Tokoyami says nothing else, returning to his textbook. He won't insist further, but Shoji knows that he wants to. He wants to convince Shoji, when he simply doesn't understand.

It wasn't a surprise when the interviewer for the management department told him that as a hero, he would do well with boys in the 9-13 age range. That his quirk had a 'gross-out' appeal that would make him very marketable in that demographic, especially if he took off his mask.

But Shoji has learned not to take off his mask. It's a bit deeper than the 'gross-out' appeal.

He doesn't have lips. His teeth and gums are visible at all times because of that, and his mouth

stretches too wide across his face. He doesn't even like looking at it, feels disconnected from the sight when he catches a glance in the mirror while brushing his teeth. Every other part of him is his, but not that one.

When he was a child, sometimes he would form an ear on his arms and try to twist it off. He wasn't really trying to succeed, he was testing how sensitive it was to pain, how deep the cartilage ran into his arms.

But sometimes, when he looks in the mirror, he wants to twist off his mouth.

Tokoyami doesn't understand that. Sometimes he complains that the tip of his beak gets too cold in the winter, or that the specialized soap that he buys for his feathers is out of stock, but Tokoyami has never seen his less-human features as something to hate.

Shoji hates his mouth. His arms are strong, his quirk doesn't gross him out. But his mouth is the worst part about him. It's barely a part of him in his mind when he's calm, when he can ignore it.

He's scared little girls that look a lot like Eri, before his parents started buying masks for him to wear at school. He remembers the horror, the disgust. His elementary school class made a game of daring each other to poke his teeth, since they were so open and vulnerable. His female classmates always squealed the loudest before they turned and ran.

He asked Kirishima once, and he brushed it off, saying that his teeth were manly. It was annoying to accidentally bite through his chopsticks when he was younger, but he got used to it.

Shoji tried to get used to his mouth once. He stared in the mirror intentionally, before he gave up and looked away. It still didn't feel like it was a part of him.

Shoji prefers wearing the mask. He's learned how to eat with it still on, to buy one that's loose enough to work his food under. There are nights that he doesn't take it off when he goes to sleep, because he forgets that he wears it. His mask is a part of him, more than his mouth is.

But Eri has reasons to hate masks.

Shoji wondered why she didn't smile, but a quick Google search gave him a better answer than Midoriya's nervous *"She doesn't remember how, since...you know. It wasn't a good place."*

They wore masks at that place. The raid brought media interest to how the 8 Precepts of Death operated before the fall, and swaths of gangsters who weren't as attuned to Overhaul's operation, who didn't know Eri existed much like the media, gave interviews. *'Everyone had to wear masks to stop polluting the air he breathed. It was kind of our thing, everyone got one when we joined.'*

Masks that hid smiles. Masks that were a symbol.

He doesn't want his mask to look like that. He doesn't want to be a piece of Eri's dark history that still lingers behind her. Even if he does.

He finds himself watching her, even when Tokoyami or Yaoyorozu don't invite him to movie nights or dorm activities, knowing that sometimes they have to. Eri is so different from his little sister on the surface, but her mumbled words and excited cheers are enough for him. Enough to remind him of home.

He keeps himself away from her, even when he steals those moments. He doesn't want to be the shadow of the Class 1-A dorm, but he is.

Eri thinks he doesn't like her, but she couldn't be more wrong.

*

Yamada feels blessed.

He probably shouldn't considering he hasn't slept in well over 24 hours, and had a rather exciting patrol that luckily had him walking away with only a few bruises. His radio show last night was a nightmare, and he should have thought better than to open up the phone lines for an advice panel when he didn't have nearly enough answers as to whether the mystery listener from last week liked Open Mic Night. He couldn't even blame Byte for that, knowing that she honestly should have gone home to nurse her concussion.

But Yamada was blessed, because he had two of the most amazing kids in the world to come home to.

Eri will definitely kill him with that cute little whistle. Even when he tries to expect it, it still catches him off guard enough to cover his face with his hands, knowing that he's blushing a storm under them. That much is too cute, but when Shouta reveals that the big box from Ms. Joke wasn't just for his birthday gift, he feels his heart stop.

Shouta walked out of the office with an *angel costume* in his hands, made exactly Eri's size. And she knew it for her immediately, and wanted to try it on.

Yamada gets the long sleeves and leggings out beforehand, knowing that even if there would be a time for that to be challenged, it wouldn't be anytime soon. But even that dark thought isn't enough to put a damper on the sight that he immediately immortalizes in a little modeling session.

Eri is the cutest little angel in the entire world, and he can remember that everytime he unlocks his phone now.

Then, when Eri asks for a braid to better suit her new outfit, Shinsou asks a question that he's absolutely fallen in love with seeing.

'Can you teach me?'

Yamada had been finishing up lunch when his husband and the wards got back on their little reprieve from the dorm shift, unaware that Shinsou had a project to find out what kind of pizza he liked. Shinsou hovered for a while, and Yamada wasn't sure whether he wanted to talk about the new friend situation or whether he wanted to have pizza more than crepes, but then he asked it.

'Can you teach me?'

Yamada would teach him anything, anything at all that Shinsou wanted to learn. Even if flipping crepes had a steep learning curve, Shinsou caught on to it quick, with only one mishap landing a half-made crepe on top of his purple hair.

He caught on to cooking a bit quicker than braiding, but to be fair, their cosmetology client wasn't in the best mood to be patient.

When Eri whined one too many times, and he saw the frustration in Shinsou's face, Yamada took over to finish up the plait with instructions for Shouta to take *all* the pictures his phone could store. And took a bit of a risk to offer his own hair for Shinsou's braiding lessons.

But even if Shinsou looked a bit uneasy at first, and it was even easier to feel it with the shaking of

his hands, Shinsou did it. And Yamada wanted to think it wasn't just a better braid that made those fingers a bit less shaky and more confident.

But as surprising as that was, he really didn't expect to see those signs from Shinsou. '*Can you?*'

Yamada didn't expect that when Shinsou held up one of the hair masks. Yamada was in the middle of explaining how long to wait for it to set in, how the properties of the mask would affect his hair, when he saw that sign.

He already knew he couldn't say no to Shinsou when he asked for something. He knew that he was the only one Shinsou asked questions to, and he knew that there was a reason for that. He knew he had to be the one to help Shinsou overcome it, and if little lessons and the occasional coffee was the price he had to pay, it was effortless to do it.

But he knew that Shinsou had reasons not to let his hair be touched. And if Yamada made him remember that, if his hands reminded Shinsou of what he had gone through, he wouldn't be able to stand it.

"Are you sure?" Yamada asks, still struggling to find the words to ask what he really means. He wants to, he desperately wants to, but knowing that even *Eri* had made Shinsou uncomfortable when she tried to give him a ponytail should be enough for him to say 'No.' Especially so soon after seeing Chisaki.

Shinsou nodded. '*Training.*' Then lost a little bit of that confidence, that determined stare falling to the ground. '*If okay.*'

Nothing in this world could make Yamada refuse him. "Yeah, no, it's okay! Just wanted to check before we have a little spa moment! Let's just..."

Yamada tests it with a towel grabbed from the nearest bathroom, draping it around Shinsou's shoulders before he puts a hand on top of it. And he breathes a sigh of relief when he doesn't even see a flinch.

"There we go! Now, just pick a seat and we can get to work!" Yamada bites his lip as he watches Shinsou sit down on the floor, just like *Eri* does when she wants to have her hair done. It's the best way to do it, but if he's going to touch Shinsou's hair, he doesn't want to be behind him. "How about we turn around, so we can still talk, yeah? It's not a spa day if we can't gossip."

And so he can see the exact moment when Shinsou dissociates, because Yamada *knows* he will. He knows that Shinsou sees this as 'Training,' so he knows that he wants to make sure he doesn't 'Lose' again. So that no one can ever do what Chisaki did to him in that interrogation room again.

Yamada takes his seat on the couch, and tries to cling onto a little bit of hope that this can actually be relaxing for one of them. Even if it isn't him. "So, stop me if it starts getting a little less relaxing," Yamada says, opening the top of the packet so he doesn't see what Shinsou thinks of that. "So, a little birdie told me your first friend sesh was a little exciting."

'*Poison milk. It's fine. Sorry. Didn't hear show.*' Yamada catches the first lock of hair, close to Shinsou's forehead, and slowly slides the gel over it between his fingers. Trying not to tug, trying to move as slowly as possible.

"Eh, it wasn't my best anyway. You don't have to tune in if you don't want to, I just, uh," He tries another lock, a little further back. "I'm a music nut, but I get it if it's not your thing."

'*I like music. Like show.*' Yamada can't help but smile when his chest warms with those words. '

Current Noise different. ’

“Ah, yeah,” Yamada says, betraying a bit more nervousness as he nods. “Yeah, Present Mic is kind of loud and obnoxious. I hype it up a little more for the listeners, since it’s kind of a brand. My hero managers have always loved it, and you can’t have a radio show without a radio personality.”

‘ *What do people like?* ’ Shinsou signs with a small frown. ‘ *Friends. I don’t know.* ’ Then he sees a little smirk with a huff. ‘ *Can’t be loud.* ’

Yamada still finds himself smiling at that joke, even if the reasons behind that topic are a little heavy. “I’m pretty sure your friends like you for you, little listener. But I definitely get it on wondering why.”

He sees Shinsou’s eyes widen before he realizes what he said, nearly smearing the gel on his own face when his hands jerk away in a panic.

“Not that- I mean- Ugh, my mouth, I swear!”

Yamada sighs before he takes a moment to *think* before he speaks.

“I worried about that too when I was your age. I didn’t really know what people liked about me, and I kind of...” He nearly smears the gel on the back of his neck before he catches himself. “I kind of made ‘Present Mic’ into a thing back then, because I didn’t think people liked me for ‘me.’ It was a little easier to play it up and play a part, instead of, you know. Being myself.”

He knew people liked the radio lingo, so he worked it into almost every conversation. He was a natural blonde, so he had to be a bit of an idiot. He knew people wanted him to be loud, so he got even louder.

And Shouta *hated* it, because he was the loudest with him. “And that wasn’t a great idea, because a lot of people just assumed that was how I was. They never really got to know me.”

Shirakumo did, just a few times. He was always along for the ride, for whatever the two biggest stooges in Class 2-A thought up that day. But Shirakumo also caught him in some quieter moods, and if that closed-mouth grin was any indication, Shirakumo had a quieter side to him too.

“And I think that there’s a lot to like about the real you, Shinsou,” Yamada says, threading a bigger section of hair between his fingers. “You’re a pretty amazing kid, and they see that. You’re sharp as a tack, and I can only hope that Bakugo learns enough sign to know half of what you tell him.”

He gets another huff that he’s decided is a laugh, while Shinsou rolls his eyes. ‘ *Learning. Slowly. Might be better if he doesn’t. It’s fun.* ’

Yamada finds himself checking whether Shinsou still seems alright before he moves to the other side of his head. “So, I guess Koda isn’t that fun to be around. Can’t pull anything over on that guy.”

Shinsou tilts his head to the side before he touches him, then shakes his head and moves back before Yamada can ask if he’s alright. ‘ *Cold. K-O-D-A fine.* ’ He takes a smaller section anyway, as gently as he can. ‘ *Quirk similar.* ’

Yamada nods, wondering if those two little signs could mean so much more for the teenager sitting in front of him. “Yeah, it’s pretty cool though! If Shou ever let me get a cat again, I’d definitely invite him over for extra credit. Make sure that Mr. Whiskers is happy with us.”

Shinsou's mouth barely twitches into a smile at the mention of a cat, and Yamada pulls his hand away.

"Doing alright?" Yamada asks, and Shinsou quickly signs that he's fine. Yamada knows he seems fine, he's been surprisingly relaxed through this entire process. It honestly feels like he's connecting with Shinsou better than he ever has before, to be let in to a place that he knows is so vulnerable.

And that's why he risks it.

"I, uh, hated my quirk once," Yamada says, so quietly that he barely hears himself, while he smears a bit more of the gel on his fingers before he rubs his thumb over it to warm it up. "And I stopped talking for a few months because of that."

Shinsou stiffens before he looks at him, his eyes too wide, and Yamada knows it's not from the hair treatment only because he's kept his hands to himself.

"It's, um, quirk rejection. Voice types get it a lot, but people with eye quirks like Shou can convince themselves that they're blind. Quirks can be powerful in a lot of ways, but they can also be a lot of trouble," Yamada doesn't know what to do with his hands, and risks picking at another lock on Shinsou's head, breathing a sigh of relief that he doesn't react like he expects, but instead *relaxes*. "I didn't want to have my quirk so bad that I couldn't even talk, and since my quirk is all vocal cords, which are pretty important for talking... Pretty much every time I'd open my mouth, I'd remember that and just...stop."

He'd freeze up, thinking that he'd slip. That he'd scream and not even hear it, his hearing aids wouldn't tell him the difference. That he wouldn't feel the difference either, wouldn't know until someone covered their ears but by then, it would be too late. He would have deafened them too.

"I tried talking to myself when I was alone, and it kind of helped. My voice sounded so weird to me at first, but I got used to it and... it helped." Yamada couldn't help but smile, remembering his mother and his mom bringing in all that recording equipment to start his podcast. "*You've got a voice made for radio, doll! Don'tcha keep that locked away in your room!*" "Does it kind of feel that way for you?"

Shinsou stares at his hands for a while, long enough that Yamada starts to pull away, before he signs. '*Like mask. Opens sometimes. I don't know why.*'

Yamada busies himself with smearing the rest of his mask on his hands, rubbing them afterwards to fight off the chill. Anything to keep him from remembering that picture, from looking at those scars. "Well, I'm glad it opens. And I hope it does it a lot more, because you," Yamada trails off, cheating a bit when he brushes both hands over Shinsou's hair and barely touches the back. "Have a voice for radio, kid!"

Shinsou rolls his eyes. '*Still do. Just play music.*'

Yamada can't help but roll his eyes back. "Trust me, if it was that easy, my job would be a breeze."

Yamada doesn't even notice it until Shinsou gets up to wash the hair mask off, only to return with a pointed glare. '*Purple Mic.*'

And true enough, Yamada had been sitting in the same room with Shinsou, trying not to die of cuteness overdose while they both tried to teach Eri how to whistle, for half an hour and hadn't realized it.

That his final touches on that treatment had left a bit of a *style* in place.

Shinsou sees it before Yamada even manages to pull out his phone, and nearly runs back to the bathroom before he can even snag *one* picture. “Wait, Shinsou, just one-”

It’s almost like he knew that Yamada needed a new lockscreen.

*

27 has been watching Eri work on her headbands for a while, unable to find the energy to work on any of the tests that he has in his bag. Including the one that his owner gave him, the one that he’s avoiding the most.

“It can be therapeutic to write out what you experienced. In your own time. You’re free to bring the laptop with you, to class or to the dorm.”

27 stares back at a blank screen when it looks like his owner is going to turn around, and types nonsense that he erases.

‘ *In your own time.* ’ 27 has never had his own time. He trained on The Miasma’s time, he went on jobs and was pulled back on Boss’ time. He operated on Chisaki’s time, trying to keep track of it with meals that he sometimes didn’t eat, with visits from Hari that were hard to predict. He tried to feel every second while he was under Hari’s quirk, tried to know what an hour felt like by feeling it so that he could remember it.

He doesn’t want to have his own time. If it’s therapy, it’s related to training, and he wants to be done with it quickly. He wants to have control over himself with it.

But every time he tries, when he thinks about where to begin, the words catch in the palms of his hands like they do in his mouth. He doesn’t know where to start, what experiences he needs to type to make him better.

“Tell me about your childhood.” He doesn’t remember enough of it. He doesn’t know if what he remembers is real, if it’s even useful. If he types out a lie and claims it as his own, if that will make him slip even more often.

“Twenny, can you make Ugo’s headband?” Eri asks, kicking her feet above her, her tiny golden halo slipping off again. “I don’t know what he likes.”

27 can’t help a vicious smirk when he sets the laptop aside, lowering himself to the floor with her. He takes a black crayon and finds the perfect space for it. “He definitely likes this face.”

27 makes the line before he realizes that he wasn’t trying to make it straight. It just came out straight.

He holds the crayon up, closer to him so he can look at his hand. He doesn’t feel it shaking, but he feels it, and he doesn’t see it shaking even when he adjusts his grip. “Eri, do you...” 27 clenches his teeth, and picks up a headband that’s left blank. “I can have this.”

Eri nods, and he tests it. The words come too easy, they flow out of him in a way that makes him doubt that it was ever difficult at all. ‘Shinsou Hitoshi.’ The name he has here, with all of its tiny strokes, stares back at him.

Shinsou Hitoshi had a perfectly normal hand. He was never Unmade, that word means nothing to him. He’s never even met Chisaki.

Eri cocks her head at him, and he remembers that she's never noticed. She doesn't understand why he's smiling. It doesn't matter, now that she never has to know.

"I can make his headband for you," 27 offers, and can't help the grin that pulls differently when she nods, though he tries to cover it with his hand.

He has a lot of blank space to fill, and it comes even easier to fill it.

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Bakugo nearly explodes the headband when Eri presents it to him, but his owner turns his quirk on him to stop it. That only pulls the grin wider on 27's face, and Bakugo looks like he wants to explode that too.

27 stands behind Eri throughout this little ceremony, ready to catch her if she falls off the back of the sofa she's standing on. The heroes are particularly enthralled by her outfit, and several beg for pictures with nearly the same enthusiasm that Yamada had. 27 doesn't see the difference between this costume and any other outfit that she's worn, but it seems to make the heroes realize how adorable Eri innately is.

He can't say he hates it.

Provost Piston maintains an orderly line in alphabetical order by pacing up and down, scolding anyone who tries to cut closer to the front, but jumps into place readily to accept his headband with a sharp bow. "I will do my best, Eri!"

Sparky ties it on immediately, and pumps his arms a few times. "YES! Midterms can't hurt me now!"

Once Sticky receives his headband, held between his hands while he vocalizes an odd tune, his owner does hurt them. "Kaminari, Kirishima, and Sero. Copy this four times over by hand. Ashido, copy it twice."

All four of them look in horror as his owner drops a thick, heavy book on the coffee table. 27 spares a glance at the title, 'The Penal Code of Japan.'

"It would be beneficial for you to each have a copy, for this exercise and for your own benefit," his owner says, glaring at each of them. "You will be expelled if you fail to complete this before the end of the year."

27 turns back to see the Masked One standing in front of Eri, his gaze averted though it's not to watch the bizarrely kind punishment being doled out. Eri shifts her feet, and 27 steps closer with his arms ready to catch her, but she steadies herself. "Um, Plus Ultra, Mr. Shoji! I hope you like it."

The Masked One opens his hands for her gift, staring at it for too long afterwards. "Thank you, Eri."

The sound of the front door opening and new voices seems to startle Eri, who wobbles forward before 27 can reach out to catch her. He feels himself going numb with the sight of her falling, with her going limp and hitting the floor and being hurt *on his watch*, but he sees The Masked One catch her, putting his too many arms to good use.

"Are you alright, Eri?" The Masked One asks, sounding a little worried as he rights her to standing, hands lingering around her arms longer than 27 wants them to.

Eri nods, then turns and bounds off the couch to greet the new visitor that they were already warned about.

“Eri! You look so cute!” Izuku gushes, dropping to his knees for a hug that Eri enthusiastically gives him. “Mom, this is Eri, and Shinsou is over there, and you know everyone else-”

27 knew he was allowed to leave, and he wants to as soon as he sees her. It doesn’t make sense, but as soon as he realizes that the heroes have been distracted, cheering the new visitor’s name, he wants to run. He wants to take advantage and slip away.

That’s what a mother looked like.

Mrs. Midoriya

Chapter Summary

27 has never seen a mother before, and he needs to know how it's different. Aizawa tries to prepare for the fallout of Chisaki's death in terms of the investigation, but thankfully the keylogger on Shinsou's laptop finally makes itself useful.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Food issues

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou's right hand has been shaking when he tries to use it, but that stopped recently, because his hand tremor is the result of trauma after it was unmade by Chisaki in front of Eri. Shinsou had a severe panic attack and dissociative spell after Yamada told him that his mother knew French to explain why Shinsou also knew a few words from that language. Aizawa told Shinsou that it can be therapeutic to write about his experiences, but had not-entirely pure intentions about that by prompting him to use the laptop with the keylogger on it. Shinsou said 'Don't leave, 50' while he was asleep, and Yamada overheard it. Chisaki asked Shinsou what his number was, and Shinsou answered that it was 2495. Shinsou knows that Ashido knew him when they were four years old, before Shinsou was sold to The Miasma. Eri made headbands for Class 1-A with their favorite things on them, except for Bakugo's, which Shinsou made and decorated with the ':---)' emoji that Bakugo hates. Shinsou knows that he used his quirk on Ashido when they were children, and has been concerned that his quirk can cause Mental Quirk Abuse. Todoroki shared his father's credit card information on the Class 1-A chat to order pizza, but invited anyone who saw it to #treat #yourself.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

27 doesn't remember enough of his mother to imitate her, and in some ways, he needs to. Not the parts that he knows are real, not her cold and distant stare or the memory of her getting out of the car and leaving him. There are things he needs to do, things he needs to give Eri.

He needs to learn how to be a good mother, and Mrs. Midoriya is apparently a good one.

She knows every student, asks direct questions about how they are, what they're doing in their studies and their personal life. Mothers know their children, and at least he knows Eri. He knows her better than anyone else.

Mothers scold and swat children like Bakugo, especially when they're insistent about helping after being told not to. Mothers tell their children to relax while they work, and children know to expect good food in return. A meal made by a mother is different from any other, if the excited grins he sees are any indication. It's powerful.

He doesn't remember what his mother cooked for him, if she cooked for him at all. Logically, she

had to. But maybe she did it less after he got his quirk.

He doesn't cook for Eri, but he wants to. And he tries to find a place to stand that allows him to watch Mrs. Midoriya without hovering, because he doesn't want to be scolded like Bakugo. He wants to see if she does something different, if there is a difference in the way she cooks and Yamada cooks.

But every time she looks at him, in just that glance she finds the difference between him and the hero students. She looks at the scars before she turns away.

Icyhot looks at him, but he doesn't know what he sees. Ashi hovers beside him sometimes, just threading her fingers between his before she pulls away, all the while talking to someone else. His owner keeps looking at him, and every look is a reminder that he can leave. It's starting to feel like he wants him to leave.

But he won't. He has to do this for Eri.

"Hey, Shinsou!" Izuku says, Eri trailing at his heels. She's taking advantage of Izuku's presence in this room to latch onto him, knowing that he won't be able to leave for several hours. "My mom is making pork cutlet bowls. Have you had that before?"

27 shakes his head, ignoring that he has the phone. He doesn't want to talk, he doesn't want to be distracted.

The heroes are *distracting*. "It's really good! It's my favorite, but it's also a really good study meal." There's a pause, as though 27 should say something. He doesn't know what to say, and doesn't want to say it either. Mrs. Midoriya is putting the meat into a sauce pan with hot oil, something that he doesn't see Yamada do. It might be the difference between a mother's cooking and Yamada's. "Do you want to learn how to make it?"

27 spares a glance at Izuku, and has to remind himself that Izuku doesn't have a mind reading quirk. He realizes that he must have been obvious with his staring, even when he tried to glance away. He risks it with a nod, wondering if Izuku would find amusement in his interest. If he would laugh and say that he can't, and that his owner would find that as a reason to make him return to the Safe Room.

"Mom! Shinsou wants to learn how to make pork cutlet- Hey, Koda, is it okay if-" Izuku seems to be torn in too many directions at once, but they come together without his clear intentions. The Fluent One places his rabbit in Floaty's lap, who seems pleased with the action, and Mrs. Midoriya turns with wide eyes before she smiles.

He hates that smile. It's fake. "It's nice to meet you, Shinsou! Izuku told me a little bit about you." She looks at the scars, he *hates* it. "So! Pork cutlet bowls are a little bit of work, but the first part is easy. Just make some rice, and then the sauce can be pre-made but I always add a little-"

"Are you Izuku's real mom?" Eri asks, staring up at Mrs. Midoriya from behind 27's leg. 27 feels the irrational impulse to use his quirk to stop her before he bites down on it, before he hopes she just doesn't say it. "Or a TV mom?"

27 breathes a little easier, knowing how easy that is to misinterpret. Even if he's never heard her say 'TV mom,' he imagines that he already knows what she means. That he's a TV mom, not a real one. Not one that gives their child to their mob boss father, or sells them for 112,000 yen.

He imagines that Mrs. Midoriya is a real mom, she couldn't be anything else when Izuku

resembles her so strongly. But she's a different real mom. She's a *real* mom.

One that's so real that she doesn't understand the difference, struggling to break into a smile. "Yes, I'm Izuku's real mom. I definitely remember becoming his mom, and I'm sure if he got switched out at the hospital, it's a little too late to switch him back."

He sees Eri's mouth open before he puts a hand on her head, shaking his. She twists her mouth in a pout, but agrees before he has to sign 'Danger' at her. He doesn't want the Fluent One to see it. ' *Sauce secret.* '

"Shinsou wants to know if there's a secret ingredient in the sauce," the Fluent One translates, which makes Mrs. Midoriya break into a real smile, a proud one. There is. "Or if the sauce recipe is a secret?"

' *First.* ' 27 corrects. He doesn't care if Mrs. Midoriya doesn't want to give that information away, he needs to get it, and he refuses to give her an easy out.

"Yes, there is," Mrs. Midoriya says, hiding her mouth with the side of her head conspiratorially. "Don't tell Izuku, but I put a little more black pepper than the recipe calls for. He used to hate it on scrambled eggs, but it gives it a better flavor."

Bakugo stretches an arm over the counter to grab at the pepper, before Mrs. Midoriya swats at him, though she doesn't make contact. "Oi, I'm just adding seasoning-"

"Katsuki, sit down and relax! You have a hard week ahead of you," Mrs. Midoriya scolds, and 27 has never scolded Eri the right way. Even if she's never as obstinate as Bakugo, he's never told her to relax. He's never told her what to expect in the future, not when he couldn't know it himself.

Mrs. Midoriya tells him about all the parts that he missed in her cooking process, and many that he just observed. Other than frying, which is a normal cooking technique, there's nothing special. There's nothing secret about it.

She arranges the food like Yamada, taking care that the egg is on top of a nest of breaded pork strips. That there's not too much sauce, not too little. It almost looks the same for every bowl, but when he counts, he realizes there's too many of them. He realizes that one is smaller than the others.

She hands one to him.

He doesn't want it. He saw how much work went into it, he knows that these are for the hero students. They have midterms and he doesn't, he has nothing expected of him beyond the investigation and she doesn't know about that. He doesn't need a mother's cooking, he hasn't since he was 4 years old.

He places the bowl on the counter, refusing to be mute about this. ' *Not student. Sorry.* '

Mrs. Midoriya isn't allowed to protest. "Oi, eat Auntie's cooking and don't fucking whine about it!" Bakugo demands, pressing the bowl into his chest with the expectation that his hands will take it. "You don't eat for shit anyway, and this shit will stick better than whatever *they're not* feeding you."

Bakugo draws his owner's attention, and 27 hopes that his owner will tell him not to eat it. That he's not allowed. But he just nods, offers nothing else to interpret from that, and takes the bowl that Mrs. Midoriya has set out for him, watching Eri carry hers to the dining table.

He doesn't *want* it.

But he does what's expected of him. He sits next to Eri, which puts him beside the Fluent One. There's a short speech about midterms that his owner gives, how they need to give it their all, and Mrs. Midoriya chimes in by saying she believes in them, that they should eat and gather their strength. The heroes cheer and eat eagerly, enthusiastically, and Eri does too.

Eri thinks it's tasty. A mother's cooking is tasty.

He doesn't want to remember if it is. But he has to.

The shaking is back, so he switches his hand and hopes that no one notices. He wishes that he didn't notice either, that it didn't happen. He stares at the food that looks dangerous in a new way, in a worse way. He wishes that it was poisoned, but he knows that Mrs. Midoriya doesn't know to do that. Probably doesn't know how.

He only takes a bit of rice, but the sauce is unavoidable. He knows that's the most powerful part, where most of the mother's influence is because that's what she changed the most from the recipe.

He can't swallow it, and that makes it worse, the flavor sits on his tongue and soaks in. It's warm, too warm, he's stealing this. He's stealing this memory and taking as his own, when it's Izuku's. Izuku remembers this flavor, he ate it as a child, and he *didn't*.

His mother didn't cook for him. She didn't. He doesn't know this flavor, and he has no right to know it. He only needs to know how to make it, he doesn't need to eat it himself. He doesn't need to *cry*.

He forces himself to swallow, forces himself to stare at the table and not the food beside it. He tries to convince himself that it's not there, it's not his and there's no expectation for him to eat it. He can't leave, the heroes will notice, they won't allow it, they'll *see* it if they look.

He stares, long enough that he thinks they might leave soon, they might finish their meal and hopefully be distracted enough not to notice that he doesn't eat his. He doesn't know how to leave, he doesn't know how to escape. He wants to close his eyes and let someone else deal with this, but he can't. He's trapped in an impossible situation and he can't even close his eyes or they'll see it.

There's something small and thin pressing gently on his shoulder, and he turns to see his owner's white scarf pulling back to fall behind his chair. His owner's hands are in his lap, but his eyes are on the food in front of him. '*You can leave,*' he sign whispers, and 27 has never been more grateful.

He does so, as quietly as he can, lifting the chair so that it doesn't make a sound. He keeps his eyes on the ground, even if he knows better, he ignores the training that Bug gave him to make him fit for bodyguard jobs. He just doesn't want to know if they see, what they see, what they'll do when they see that he hasn't eaten any of it.

The silence of the stairway shakes him, it loosens something that needed to stay in place. He clenches his teeth, he tightens his hold on the hand rail and tries to climb the stairs anyway. Even if they're blurry.

It was warm, too warm. It had a flavor that he remembered, that he shouldn't. He stole it, he's stolen too much already but that was the worst thing he's stolen.

He tries to make a mask with his hand, but he doesn't remember it right. He can't make it right either, with his hand too warm and too small.

He can only remember being too small, and trying not to make a sound while he cries.

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Midoriya is the only one that asks, and for that, Aizawa is grateful. He's more grateful that he does it at the door, after the rest of Class 1-A has already said their goodbyes.

"Is Shinsou okay?"

Aizawa told him that he's fine, and left it at that. The thought of a half-lie that Shinsou doesn't like social situations like that rose in him, but he was honestly too exhausted to offer it. While he walks Mrs. Midoriya to the front gate, a necessity due to security regulations for people completely unlike her, he imagines that he needs to come up with new lies.

"Izuku told me that Eri and Shinsou came from a difficult situation," Mrs. Midoriya says, pulling her scarf a bit tighter but her eyes focused ahead. "I'm sorry if I aggravated that in some way."

For anyone else, he might have kept silent, but Mrs. Midoriya had made herself into a bit of a dorm mother from a distance. She sends care packages on a monthly basis, and he knows that she has given her phone number to every student in the class.

He knows that several of his students had reached out to her with issues that they didn't bring to him, and he doesn't want this to be one of them.

"I doubt it was an aggravation," Aizawa says, tucking his chin into the folds of his capture scarf. "A new experience for Eri, but it might have been familiar to Shinsou. Neither would be harmful to them in the long run."

He had no idea what kind of family would take the two wards in. He doesn't like thinking about it, but he imagines that they would be separated when that time came. Eri would find someone else to call 'Mom,' apart from Shinsou, and if her wide-eyed curiosity was any indication, she could adapt to it easily.

But Shinsou remembered his mother. What he remembered was likely painful, if his reaction to learning that she knew French was any indication. If he were placed in a home that had a female guardian who expected to eventually fill that role, he imagines that it would be a difficult process for him to accept that.

Aizawa knows almost nothing about Shinsou Ui, but it's clear to see that she left her own scars on Shinsou. And he hopes to learn more about her soon, now that Interpol has picked up a trail. It couldn't have come at a better time, with Chisaki dead and The Commission likely wringing their hands to find a new source of information, seeming to give up on gaining it from Shinsou honestly.

He hopes that the keylogger gives him something to justify using it in a way he's half-disgusted by. Something he has to remind himself is the rational course of action, a helpful one for Shinsou.

He waits at the gate after he and Mrs. Midoriya exchange farewells, to make sure that she gets into her car safely. The dorm is calmer than he expected, with several students still in the common area to watch a movie. When he notices that Eri is among them, glued to Midoriya's side, he realizes that he can text Toshinori and tell him that he can afford to be an hour or two late to his shift.

He should have expected that Shinsou would still be in the Safe Room, but the possibility completely slipped his mind. Shinsou was lying on his side on the cot, staring at the blank screen of the laptop, but sits up as soon as he realizes the door was opened. His eyes are widened for a moment, and it's enough to see that they're still bloodshot and irritated. Much like Aizawa

expected them to be.

It doesn't make it any easier to anticipate it. Aizawa nods and closes the door behind him, unwilling to try to address it. He won't pick at a vulnerability that Shinsou can't hide, especially when he has nothing to soothe it with. No words that could bring any comfort to him.

He sends a text to Toshinori and then he sees it. *' Pick a number. '*

"Why?" Aizawa asks, before he can convince himself not to. He knows that he needs this information, that if he convinces Shinsou to also describe the person that they could get somewhere on the investigation. But he also knows that this is a trade, and that he's never done anything worth the exchange for it.

' Didn't eat. Le... ' Shinsou half-signs it, but Aizawa knows what he means. Before he can try to convince Shinsou that he was always allowed to, that he shouldn't feel pressured to repay that, Shinsou signs again. *' I want to. '*

"You don't have to answer either," Aizawa says, wavering before he says it. He needs this information too much to deny it, especially when it was volunteered. "50, or 2495."

He knows almost nothing about 50, only her autopsy report and those words that Shinsou muttered in his sleep. He knows it wouldn't be useful to the investigation to know about her, that Shinsou has no reason to fight it. That it might even be kinder for him to remember that than the number that Chisaki mentioned.

He wants Shinsou to explain that number, now that Chisaki can't answer for him. Whether Shinsou was lying about the jobs he performed for the Nomu Organization, whether that startlingly high number was related to a crime that he was used to perform. Rationally, he knows that it couldn't be murder, but something irrational in his mind wonders.

Shinsou takes a long time to decide, and Aizawa expects him to. He nearly repeats himself that Shinsou can choose to end this trade, or that he can choose another number. *' 2495. C-H-I-S-A-K-I game. Fights won. '*

2495 fights. *Won.*

Aizawa knows that Shinsou has been in more fights than he should have, that he's experienced enough violence in his short life to rival some pro heroes. But to have a number for it, to have a number that he knows is only a *fraction* of the whole, is overwhelming.

He knows that Shinsou lost far more often than he won.

' Rewards stopped after 2000. C-H-I-S-A-K-I angry. Didn't take last two. '

"Rewards?" Aizawa forces himself to ask. He glances away from Shinsou's hands instinctively, he already knows he doesn't want to know the answer. He knows that he probably already knows it.

' 49 for food. 100 for new book. 200 for C-O-M-B-I-N-I. 500 for outside. 1000 for room. 2000 and C-H-I-S-A-K-I for mask off. '

Aizawa takes a breath to steady himself before he slips. Before he tells Shinsou that the sick bastard who made a game out of forcing a starved boy into a fighting pit was dead, that he bled out in a stairwell either alone and terrified, or mocked and taunted. As much as he imagines that Shinsou could find some relief in that, to know that he had beaten Chisaki by outliving him, he knows that the reality would come to him swiftly.

The Nomu Organization could silence anyone, even someone at a checkpoint outside of Tartarus. That made the walls of UA just a bit shorter, even if the heroes inside were no less ready to defend him.

“You don’t owe me anything, Shinsou,” Aizawa says, even if he has to weigh the likelihood of Shinsou Ui’s capture and the keylogger’s usefulness to do it. He only wishes that this was easier, that this investigation could be a typical one. “Whatever you tell me can be on your own time. If it’s not, I’ll let you know. But I’d rather fight with you than against you.”

He imagines that’s a new concept for Shinsou. That every fight he’s fought has been alone. That the teenager looking at him with wide eyes, still red from crying, has been fighting alone all of his life, and fighting too long like that.

Aizawa refuses to let that happen again.

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Eri falls asleep on his owner on the couch after they return to their dorm, and they put her in her own room for the night. Yamada looked like he wanted to ask if that would affect 27’s ability to sleep, but he would have lied if he asked.

He did sleep, to his own surprise, but he wishes that he didn’t.

He dreamed he was sitting at that table again, with that same bowl in front of him. No one else was sitting with him, and only Mrs. Midoriya was there, smiling that fake smile. Telling him to eat that fake food with it.

But when he tried, it disappeared, and he looked up to see it in her hands. She set it down in front of him again.

Again. Again. *Again*. Every time he tried to do what the dream told him to, he couldn’t. Even when the dream told him to want it, to get angry that he couldn’t have it, he couldn’t.

Mrs. Midoriya’s smile grew less fake, it grew twisted and dark before it changed again, but worse. She stole the hair that she shouldn’t have, she grew taller than she should be. Her hands were scarred the last time she set the bowl down, and he wouldn’t let himself look up from it. He wouldn’t even raise his chopsticks to try to eat from it.

Even if he didn’t look up, he knew who it was. And when he did, when he looked up and desperately wanted to see her, to know if he remembered her right.

He woke up.

And he knew why he couldn’t eat the food in that dream. He knew the person who never gave it to him, knew the reason why she didn’t.

He won’t sleep until he knows how bad it was. If his mother was even alive now, or if his quirk had killed her even after she escaped it. If he knew, he wouldn’t have dreams about food she never made him. Even when he slept, he’d never forget the reason why.

27 stares at his phone for too long, the laptop’s screen even brighter. He won’t sleep, not again, but he doesn’t know if that means the hero that he wants to contact is still awake.

SHINNYYY: @Ashido, are you awake

Squids: She was in a food coma downstairs last time I checked

Fromages: You should rest as well, mon petit violette! The hour is late!

Green bunnies TT_TT: I'll be awake for a while, if you wanted to talk. Or use our chat or

BIG PINK FLOWERS IM CRYN: She's up, I just saw her and let her know!

HORN BBs 4 LYFE: SHINNY!!! I miss u already move 2 the dorm so we can hang all the time plssssss

SHINNYYY: Can you make a chat with me

HORN BBs 4 LYFE: YESSSS BFF CHAT OTWWWW

FUCK YOU SHITSOU: He won't FUCKING USE IT YOU CHEAPASS ACID WASH

SHINNYYY: :---)

FUCK YOU SHITSOU: i will FUCKING MURDER YOU FUCK FACE DON'T FUCKING TALK SHIT WITH THAT DISGUSTING ASS EMOJI FUCKi

Sailor Moon and this otaku trash approves: shinsou. PLEASE.

As soon as he gets the message about the new chat, he taps on it, and sets his name to the one he knows she expects.

Ashi: bb u ok? I was kinda worried but didnt wanna make a deal out of it

Shinny: Fine. I didn't want to sound weird.

Shinny: I don't remember my mother's name.

Ashi: That's ok, tho. U were really young.

Shinny: Can you tell me her name

Ashi: Shinsou Ui. Maybe it's ok if you dont remember? She didnt really seem nice and maybe its just better that way. U kno?

Shinny: It's fine. And I'm sorry.

Ashi: It's ok Shinny!!!! Dont b sorry!!! Lit is gonna KILL ME 2morrow and I should probs study but mayyyybe just watch som herotube instead? Lol

Shinny: If you have disorganized thinking, delusional thoughts, suicidal ideation, self harm, or shaking in your hands or feet, I'm sorry. I didn't know, I'm never going to use my quirk again. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry

Ashi: shinny i

Ashi: i dont

Ashi: i dont have that and dont think that about ur quirk! Ur quirk is so cool and

Ashi: i really want 2 give u a hug rn pls dont b sad !!!

Shinny: I'm not sad. I'm fine. I'm glad you don't have that.

Shinny: I'm really glad.

'I really hope my mom doesn't either.'

27 erases that message before he can forget himself, and gets to work.

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Shouta's phone chimes, and he immediately grabs it, leaning out of his embrace as he does. He knows just by the way that Shouta's eyebrows are drawn together and he brushes his hair out of his face that it's a work message. Which means it's related to Shinsou.

Yamada sighs. "What does Naomasa want?"

"It's the keylogger," Shouta replies, his eyes darting across the screen as he reads, then tilts the screen and leans closer so that Yamada can read it too.

Shinsou was searching for his mother.

Yamada feels the guilt swelling inside him. He had the option not to go on that call, to stay home with the wards so that they wouldn't be there for Mrs. Midoriya's visit. He *knew*, he knew it would drag something painful out of Shinsou.

He hopes that he never meets Shinsou Ui. He knows it's too much to hope he never learns what she did to Shinsou, he knows that it's part of his job to find out, but he doesn't trust himself to be in the same room with her. Not after what he knows she did, and even worse if she did half of what he suspects.

Shouta thinks the Nomu Organization was the first to use a muzzle, but he's being a bit too kind to think that. Though they both know a bit too well what can happen when a parent wants to control their child's quirk, Yamada is more familiar with a child-sized muzzle. He knows how easy they are to find, that even now there are kiosks in the mall that have brightly colored muzzles decorated with flowers and cartoon characters. For *tantrums*, they say, as though that makes it any better.

Yamada pulls out his phone, because they can only see what Shinsou types, but not what he sees. And he's been looking at the results for 'Shinsou Ui' for a while now. When he googles the same term, there's a few Facebook profiles that pop up, but he imagines that's not what catches his eye.

There's a French news article about her disappearance, a plea from Interpol for any information related to her whereabouts. Her passport photo is clearer than the street camera shot, but her hair is much shorter for her passport. That's the only thing he can really see about the picture, and with how short the article is and how unlikely Shinsou would know how to translate the page, he goes back and looks for another link Shinsou might have found.

He hopes it's not this one. The news article about Shinsou's disappearance.

It was a big story in that small town. After the image of the missing child flier, the article repeats the description of Shinsou's attire the day he went missing. The author uses the Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats lunchbox to jump off into a more personal telling of the story, stating that Shinsou was a fan of the show according to his mother.

His elementary school teacher says he was a very bright, but shy child, and is dearly missed by his classmates. That she encourages children to stick to groups when they venture out of the house, and be aware of stranger danger. The principal talks about new policies to keep latchkey kids from walking home alone and the police chief talks about new curfews and community search efforts.

Shinsou's mother pleads for her son to come home. That she misses him, misses hearing his *voice* most of all, and Yamada nearly cracks the screen reading that. She tells the reporter that Shinsou is the only family that she has now that her husband has passed, and she would do anything to have him returned safely. The journalist notes that she was distraught, as any mother should be, and lists all the ways to give information over to the authorities.

Yamada wonders how much of that is remorse, and how much for show when Shinsou searches something else. 'How to find someone.' Period and all. Even in the comfort of his room, in what he thinks is complete privacy, the kid avoids asking a question.

Yamada taps the first result that comes up, and follows what Shinsou is doing. Name 'Shinsou, Ui,' hair color 'Purple,' eye color 'Purple.' He imagines that he selected 'Female,' but there are several more dialogue boxes that need to be filled out before the search can go through. He doesn't seem to know her age, or quirk. If this website was legitimate, the quirk would be one of the most important criteria for the search, sometimes more important than the full name.

He starts to think that Shinsou has given up, before he types again. 'Green.' Green eyes?

'Gray.' 50.

Yamada deletes Shinsou Ui's information, putting in 50's. He knows it's her, because who else would it be? Who else but the woman that Shinsou had muttered about in his sleep that first night, pleading "*Don't leave, 50*," before he jolted, startling Eri and Yamada both.

50 was estimated to be in her early thirties when she died, but Shinsou corrects that to '26' He doesn't know her name, unsurprisingly, but he knows her quirk. 'Shadow Projection.' Area of effect '10 meters.'

Yamada hits the search button, and probably sees the same thing Shinsou does, a pay wall. But while Yamada knows that's a good sign the site isn't a legitimate one, Shinsou doesn't. The poor kid hardly knows how to use half the apps on his phone, there's no way he could know the nuances of internet research.

But then, he finds himself surprised.

'Todoroki Enji, 12224332495 12/19 983'

Yamada takes a moment to gawk, to wonder *how on Earth* Shinsou stole the credit card information of the *Number One Hero*, before he notices that Shouta takes a screenshot.

"We need to do Christmas shopping before Naomasa reports that," Yamada mutters, already seeing a solid gold Sailor Moon statue and a personal cat cafe in his wards' futures. But when he types in those credit card details, unwilling to risk his own on such a shady site, he sees another paywall, confirming that this was *not* going to give Shinsou the answers he wanted.

"I can connect to the database through the laptop," Shouta says, already rising to make his way over there, sleep and everything else falling to the wayside now that they finally have a lead. It'll be hard work to keep him from harassing 50's living relatives in the wee hours of the morning at this rate.

They both make their way to their office as quietly as they can. Shouta can be silent when he wants to be, and despite every effort he's made to share that skill with Yamada, he'll just never be great at it.

But there's no sign that either ward is disturbed, and that's good enough. Yamada waits anxiously behind Shouta as they watch the computer start up, Shouta's own nerves betraying him with his finger tapping on the desk while they wait for the database to return a result.

The first attempt returns nothing, but Shouta deletes the age and uses just her hair color, eye color, quirk description and height for the next one. 50's autopsy report remains open on the desk, and Yamada can't help but stare at the picture.

Autopsy reports are nothing like funeral portraits, there's no attempt to hide the blue tint of her skin or the bruising around her eyes. For too long, this was 50's only memento mori, as she waited to be mourned, waiting for the 8 digit number that marked her file to be replaced by her name. They're lucky that green hair is rare, and so is her quirk. Only 13 results pop up, but it's clear to see who 50 is.

Furokage Mizuki.

"It's nice to meet you, 50," Yamada mutters, leaning his arms on the back of Shouta's chair as he takes a better look. The Nomu organization hadn't been kind to her, if not for that vibrant shade of sea foam green hair, he probably wouldn't have recognized her so easily.

Even though it's just a photograph taken for her ID, and she was probably told not to, there's a hint of a smile on her face. He thinks it would have been a kind one. She's young, probably late teens, hardly older than his students.

Shouta scrolls down, confirming what Yamada was already thinking. She went missing soon after this picture was taken. Only 19 years old. A college freshman at Todai, starting out her adult life with the same wide-eyed optimism that every kid deserves to fumble through.

Instead, she was taken by the Nomu Organization. Since her quirk wasn't compatible with what they've seen from the Nomus so far, much like Shinsou's, she was probably trained and utilized in their other criminal activities. She had met Shinsou that way, and must have been someone important to him if he remembered her seven years after she died.

He hopes he's not wrong about what he thinks of her smile, he hopes that there was *someone* out there who had been kind to the kid.

50's body had been recovered from a drug bust gone wrong seven years ago. Only one year after Furokage Mizuki had been presumed dead, her file moving to the cold cases, the investigating officer now left blank. Her family never knew, never had the opportunity to mourn.

But they were alive. Two parents and a younger brother, not just alive and well, but in the next prefecture.

And they might know how she had gotten into the hands of the Nomu Organization.

*

27 won't sleep. Won't let himself. *Missing*, he knew what that meant. Even if he tried to convince himself otherwise.

His mother lived longer than he expected. Especially now that he knows that what he did to her set

in. It took. The sickness that he worked into her mind through that abuse set in.

She wanted him to come home, because she was delusional at the time. She was insane, he had made her *insane*. She said that he wanted to hear his voice, and he knows that's not her. She didn't want to hear him speak, she learned not to trust it. He had to be quiet.

He wonders if she would be happy if she knew that he was. He learned to be quiet.

He felt numb while he let himself cry. He knew. He *knew* what he did, and now he knew it in a way he couldn't ignore. He could never use his quirk again, could never do that to someone else. 50 told him not to-

He holds his breath until he can control it, until he can make the gasp silent. He can be silent, he *will* be silent. They don't need to use another mask.

He'll never use his quirk again.

Chapter End Notes

Class 1-A Chat Usernames:

SHINNYYYYY > Shinsou Hitoshi (27)

Squids > Shoji Mezo

Fromages > Aoyama Yuga

Green Bunnies TT_TT > Midoriya Izuku

BIG PINK FLOWERS IM CRYN > Uraraka Ochako

HORN BBs 4 LYFE > Ashido Mina

FUCK YOU SHITSOU > Bakugo Katsuki

Sailor Moon and this otaku trash approves > Sero Hanta

Offerings

Chapter Summary

Midterm week begins at UA, and 27 has to deal with some very odd rituals that take place during this week. Some of these rituals are more enjoyable than others.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None!

Previously on Wards of UA: The mask that Shinsou wore at the 8 Precepts would automatically lock at night and open in the morning, and Shinsou had to wake up for the click when it opened. Yamada said he was buying a tooth box for Eri after she lost her first tooth. When Shinsou met Ms. Joke, she gave him a shirt that Shinsou put in his stash. Bakugo hates the ":---)" emoji. Shinsou received a giant Gengar plushie from Mirio. Shinsou stayed home from school Wednesday and Thursday, then only went to homeroom on Friday, which Monoma noticed.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

27 hears a knock on the door. He knows it's too early for Yamada, knows that Yamada honestly doesn't have to do this. They could just give him an alarm clock, and it would be a kinder one than the 8 Precepts mask. At least they know they don't need to give him a mask.

He remembers the rule about clapping after Yamada takes too long to open the door, and does it too quickly. Too quickly for him to remember that he should be in bed, he shouldn't be staring at his laptop and the laptop should be closed, but Yamada just smiles at him when he opens the door. It might be allowed.

"Hey, I had a feeling you might be up, little listener," Yamada says, not yet in his hero costume. 27 can't understand why he changes into it so early when his sleepwear looks so much more comfortable. "So, I was doing a little online shopping, and I wanted to see if I could get you in on the action. And I wanted to see what you think about this."

It's a box.

An *incredibly creepy* box.

There's a child's face drawn on the top of the lid, and the inside has holes for teeth to be placed in, labeled and organized to keep track of which tooth was lost from what location. That much is fine, it's a little clever, but the two holes in the middle are *disturbing*.

There's a place for hair, which shouldn't be disturbing, but 27 has read enough plays where trading locks of hair was some important gesture, enough to be disturbed that it could be stolen from an unsuspecting child. But the *umbilical cord* was also meant to be kept. Kept in that box. *Human tissue* kept in a *box*.

27's horror must have been obvious, because Yamada quietly laughs.

"That's exactly the same face Shou made," Yamada shakes his head. "I mean, the umbilical cord thing is a little weird, but we don't have it anyway. We could just cross it out and put something else there, like a little trinket or- Oh, they have little kits to make handprints! I almost forgot about that."

Yamada starts searching for those kits, and 27 can't help the smile, despite the bitterness in his chest. Her hands used to be smaller, and he wishes that he could have kept proof of that. But he knows that they'll grow bigger, and he wants to have some way to remember how small they are now.

When Yamada adds a kit to his cart, 27 sees that he's picked out several items related to growing children. A milestone book, completely different from the margins of his books that he used to use. A measuring stick with a stand and a cartoon flower at the top, a far brighter image than the numbers from the reports that he had to copy, typing so fast that he often forgot to remember them. A scrapbook with the title 'The Sweetest Girl in My World.'

27 has cried too much, and asked too much from Yamada already. But he wants to help him fill out that blank scrapbook so much that he can't consider the possibility that he's unwanted from that. He's too selfish, it should be enough to know that Yamada is convinced, that he would make this effort. That he would be such a good father for Eri.

"Do you like it? I know I might be going a little overboard, and I'm probably overstepping, maybe I'm just going nuts so just tell me if-"

'*Like*,' 27 signs, even if he has to run a hand through his hair and turn away for a moment, he doesn't allow himself enough pause to let his fingers find his nape. '*Thank you.*'

He sees that honest twitch at the corner of Yamada's mouth, that tell that means he's genuine and surprised. That he's reassured in some way that he didn't expect. "Thanks, Shinsou. I-you know. I wanted you to weigh in on it too." Yamada huffs a laugh. "*Definitely* another tooth box, though. Two strikes, so it's out."

27 shakes his head. '*Picture. Less creepy.*'

Yamada's mouth twists at that, his head tips back while he stares at the ceiling. "Shinsou. This is why I need you, I didn't even think- that would be absolutely *perfect*, we're definitely doing that."

Yamada goes back to the creepy box and puts it into his cart, and hesitates with his thumb circling in the air before he confirms the purchase. 27 feels himself relax when he does, knowing that this gesture is completed. This overwhelming step was taken, and he feels too grateful to be able to witness it.

"Alright, so. Let's get you set up on here. Is it okay if I use your laptop for a minute?" 27 nods, and Yamada goes to a website and starts filling out a username and password. "I doubt that you're going to go hog-wild, so I'll let you do the shopping. But pick out anything you like, anything that catches your fancy. You can pick out some decorations, or some new clothes, or...."

27 has no idea what Yamada is doing, what he's telling him to do. There's a *car* for sale on this website, the sheer numbers of *numbers* below the picture is frightening. He wants 27 to do this on his own, he trusts that 27 won't be reckless, but 27 has no idea what reckless is. This has to be a test, and he doesn't want it to be, he *knows* that he'll fail. They want him to fail, to get too much and have to pay it back with information about The Miasma.

“Or, how about I give you a budget?” Yamada says sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “I-yeah, I’d be pretty scared too if someone just gave me their credit card with no rules to go with it. Let’s start out with 10,000 yen, it’s okay if you go under or if you want to go over, and you can talk to me first if that’s easier. I can’t imagine I’d say no, even if you just wanted to get a box of knock off Present Mic merch.”

‘ *Already have.* ’ 27 signs, trying to tell Yamada that he doesn’t want *anything* , but Yamada just raises an eyebrow at him.

“You *do*? How di- *Joke*. Of *course* she did, I should have figured,” Yamada shakes his head.

“Please tell me it’s not ‘Now Music.’ I know that’s your favorite but I’m *completely* okay with that just being your little thing.”

‘ *E-X-I-S-T-I-N-G Amplifier,* ’ 27 signs, with a half-grin he can’t quite hide. ‘ *I like it.* ’

Yamada rolls his eyes before he sighs. “I can’t *believe* I’m saying this... but you can wear it. Or have it out, I don’t- *Whatever* it is, if you like it, you don’t have to hide it.” Yamada taps him with his elbow, so gently that he barely even feels it. “But *maybe* you can wear my real merch too? Rep my show a little bit? Convince me that you don’t *absolutely hate* Present Mic, because he’s kind of me, you know? I’m a little attached to me.”

27 shakes his head, feels too light for some reason. Too comfortable, even when he knows better in the back of his mind. ‘ *Like you better.* ’

He doesn’t look, he doesn’t want to know if Yamada thinks that’s ridiculous, or if he’s insulted by it. If he’s angry that 27 is acting too familiar with him. But he hears a sniff before Yamada puts a hand on his shoulder, and 27 tries to ignore how warm and large it is. “Thanks, Shinsou. I, uh. I think that makes you one of my best fans.”

27 turns to look, to try and piece out what Yamada means by that, but Yamada just straightens with a pat on his shoulder before he pulls his hand away.

“So, yeah! Pick out some neat stuff, mess around on it for a bit. There’s a lot of cool things online, and... I can’t wait to see what you like.” Yamada says, his voice getting a little strained for some odd reason. “Other than *me* , I guess.”

27 doesn’t know if what he said was wrong, he can’t ask Yamada if it was. If he should have signed that, if he should even feel that way. That he *likes* Yamada, likes that he’s easy to read. That he teaches him things, and smiles so much. Talks to him.

27 turns back to the laptop, trying to distract himself with the task at hand. 10,000 yen, he can remember that number. He can make sure to stay under it, and he can ask Yamada to review his items before they’re purchased.

He stares for too long and has no idea what he *wants* , what he’s supposed to want. He hasn’t even read most of the books on his shelf, he has more soaps than he would ever need in his life. He has clothes, he has food, he even has a bed that’s comfortable to sleep on. He has a phone and a laptop, things that he’s never even imagined *wanting* , nevermind *having* .

He knows there’s nothing he could get for Eri that she could possibly want. She wants for absolutely *nothing* here, and between the hero students and Mirio and Yamada, she’ll never want for anything a day in her life.

And that’s all he’s ever wanted.

He thinks about wearing the shirt, digging it out from the box that Yamada gave him stored underneath his bed, before he decides against it. He lets Eri pick his clothes and comb his hair, before he gives her a braid that doesn't look terrible. He eats his breakfast and takes his supplement before he tells Yamada what he wants, and for once, he's not surprised that he gives it to him.

"Don't tell snitch me out to Recovery Girl," Yamada whispers, and 27 doesn't even try to hide his smile behind the coffee mug.

*

Aizawa can't say he's surprised, but he still finds himself a bit shocked.

They can't even use the door that leads to the front of the classroom, because it's blocked by a *mountain* of offerings. Coloring books, stickers, children's games, candy, stuffed animals - and he shouldn't be surprised that Eri already has most of them, but he is. He has absolutely no idea what they should do with it, with any of it, but when he opens the other door to try to ignore that problem, he's faced with another.

Two more mountains, carefully arranged on the corresponding desks. And those eager, grinning faces don't look ashamed of it at all.

Shinsou looks confused, but Eri looks worryingly unconcerned. Nemuri might have had a point that eventually, Eri might get a little too used to being pampered and showered with gifts.

But if her eager attempts to smile at and thank every single member of Class 1-A are any indication, he doesn't have to worry about that anytime soon.

Not that he thinks he could put a stop to it, even if he tried.

Shinsou still looks wary as he approaches his desk, eventually sitting down and taking a very familiar strategy, right out of Aizawa's own handbook. He stares straight ahead and ignores it, but unfortunately, it won't work well for him.

"Shinny!" Ashido calls, sprinting to Shinsou's desk to offer her hand, which Shinsou surprisingly takes. "Bakugo made the troll doll, so you need to curse him on his midterms."

"He already fucking did," Bakugo hisses, but still bristles when Shinsou pulls his phone out, inspired.

"*Colon da-ash da-ash da-ash-*"

When Jirou starts beatboxing and Kaminari starts chanting "Dab," Aizawa picks up the lectern and drops it with a loud *thunk*. He takes a moment to brace his elbows on top of the lectern, his fingers steepled with the tips pressed to the bridge of his nose, and *breathes*. Before he expels *every last one of them*.

He remembers himself when he glances at his wards, Eri finishing up her show of appreciation to Yaoyorozu completely nonplussed. But the guilt that pulls when he sees Shinsou's wide-eyed terror makes him quickly sign, '*Not you.*'

They'll have plenty of time for a proper conversation after this.

"Midterms," Aizawa reminds, and blames the pause he takes entirely on reading every scrap of information available to him about the Furokages instead of sleeping last night. "I shouldn't have to

remind you, but today you will take your Literature exam. If that's news to you, please show yourself out."

Hizashi didn't make a strong enough brew this morning *on purpose* .

"Tomorrow is Art History, Wednesday is Math, Thursday is Hero Ethics, Friday is English. Saturday is your Heroics Midterm," Aizawa makes a point to look at every single one of his students before he speaks again. "I *suggest* that every free moment that you have apart from your other studies be dedicated to training. Take care that you are uninjured, well-rested, and *ready* for each one of your tests, and especially for Heroics."

If Kan shows him up after last year, Aizawa will resign. He won't face the consequences, he will run like a coward, and no one, not even Principal Nezu himself, will convince him otherwise.

"Now, are there any questions?" There *better not be*.

Uraraka raises her hand. He runs through all the reasons that he can't expel her, of which he finds there are many, before he nods. "Aizawa-sensei, do you have plans to take Eri to Shichi-Go-San?"

21 expectant stares bore into him, and though they shouldn't, they make him feel *smaller* . He hadn't even remembered it. "That's irrelevant to your studies."

Several pairs of eyes narrow at him. *They know* . He shouldn't care if they know, they have no right to comment on his ability to be a caretaker or guardian for Eri, and they honestly had *far* greater concerns to worry about. If the weekend at the dorm has proven anything, it's that his students aren't taking their Midterms seriously, *at all*.

But he can fix that. Efficiently, and rationally, all in one fell swoop. "None of you will lay eyes on the pictures unless you pass your fundamental Midterms with an 80% average, and pass your Heroics Midterm with exceptional marks."

He sees the flicker of fear and despair, before it soars into a fighting spirit. The room erupts in cheers and chants of the school's motto. Satisfied, he nods at his wards, reminding Shinsou that both homeroom and school was going to be a short venture today. Shinsou takes a long pause to stare at the gifts on his desk, before he starts placing them in his bag one by one, and Eri follows suit much less carefully.

"Cementoss will be here shortly to begin your exam," Aizawa says, noting that the robot deployed to supervise the students for a short and necessary break was having issues with the blocked door. "Do your best."

He shuts the door behind his wards and sees that there were actually *several* robots deployed to the door situation, and all but one of them was gathering up the offerings in their arms. Now faced with the reality that Principal Nezu *knew* , and that he would have access to his wards in just a few minutes, Aizawa takes a steadying breath, and prepares himself.

' I am sorry. Distraction. Sorry. '

Aizawa turns his head, barely catching Shinsou's signing out of the corner of his eye. "No, it wasn't your fault. I'm the one who should apologize, I overreacted a bit." He can hear Nemuri's voice in his ear, *They'll find reasons to explain your behavior if you don't offer them yourself*. "I didn't sleep well last night, and I'm more than a little concerned about how my students will perform this week. What you did was fine, but how they reacted..."

Was *fine*. They were children who were having a bit of fun with a new friend, and he overreacted

in that regard as well.

“Zawa just has to be kinda mean sometimes, ‘cause he’s a teacher,” Eri says, an explanation that on its face is correct, but he can’t help but feel a sting hearing those words from Eri. “It’s hard being a teacher, and Class A makes it harder sometimes.”

He knows that he’s probably said those exact words to Eri before, or at least said them around her, but at the moment he doesn’t feel like they’re accurate at all. “My behavior was very uncalled for, and I’m sorry that you had to see that. That’s neither the person that I want to be, nor the teacher that I should be. Lashing out in irritation like that is very juvenile.”

When he turns his head, Shinsou looks visibly confused, his eyebrows knitted together. When he catches his stare, he looks straight ahead of him, but signs, ‘ *Not bad. I’m. Fine.* ’

It’s the hesitation that makes Aizawa want to retreat to the office or the station as soon as they return to the dorm. He knows he’s not in a good mood, that he’s being unreasonably irritable, and he knows better than to let Shinsou see that side of him. While Eri seemed to be oblivious to his less than becoming antics, Shinsou learned to pick up on them. Shinsou learned to read a threat before it came to fruition.

He’s going to go to sleep as soon as they return, and force himself to wake up before he rebounds from exhaustion to grogginess, because Shinsou does not deserve to see threats from him. Not when he’s lived in fear long enough, and not when he’s barely proven himself to be different from Chisaki.

When he notices that they’re among the last to file in to the gathering, the entire staff of UA circled around Principal Nezu in a predetermined hallway, he notices that Principal Nezu’s gaze falls to his wards before he gives a cold, barely perceptible smile. *He knows.*

“We find ourselves together again, with a trying week ahead of us,” Principal Nezu says, and when Nemuri hands him his pre-filled sake cup, he wants to ask for another. “As trying as it might be for our students, we all know what to expect as seasoned members of staff. Well, most of us.”

Toshinori doesn’t look nearly as frightened as he should be, but he would learn. The Spring Midterms were a cake walk with the first years, but after they had gotten a bit of confidence after proving themselves thus far, this week would be *very* different. There might be a scientific explanation, colder temperatures and impending holidays combining to make the students act more rambunctiously than they normally did.

“I believe that each and every one of you will rise to the occasion regardless, and should you falter,” Principal Nezu’s eyes seem to deaden more every year before he says it. “Remember our motto. Go Beyond. Plus Ultra.”

It’s easy to know who was evaluating their retirement fund, and who was anticipating a drop in their roster in the answering cheer. Aizawa forces himself to meet Kan’s eyes before he says it, knowing that will give him the energy he needs to mask it. “Plus Ultra.”

The sake tastes especially bitter this year, and he wonders if that’s a sign of Principal Nezu’s feelings towards being upstaged by the wards in regards to the offerings. As he expected, his boss gives him no indication whether that’s the case, and his focused stare means that the escape he wanted to take after handing off the cup is no longer a viable one.

Aizawa distracts himself with another pointed glare to Kan, who answers with a smug grin. He *won’t* win again, not this year. Not with his students.

“It’s nice to see that flame hasn’t died out just yet,” Principal Nezu comments, hands clasped behind his back as the rest of the staff either take their positions for the first year’s exams, or retreat to the dorms until their designated block. “I noticed that you hadn’t submitted a time-off request, but seeing as it’s such a rare occurrence, I made sure that it wouldn’t be an issue for tomorrow.”

He knew . Principal Nezu didn’t have to say anything, but those eyes told him that *he knew*. He knew that he had forgotten about it completely.

“Oh? What’s happening tomorrow?” Hizashi asks, and he hopes that Principal Nezu will make an assumption that serves him well.

He doesn’t. Aizawa sees his *ear flick* , and he’s only heard about that from former members of staff. Aizawa thinks that he might be joining them soon. “I see.”

Very soon.

“November 15th, a particular holiday falls on that day,” Principal Nezu says as though he’s musing about it, as though he doesn’t know *exactly* what he’s doing. “Shichi-Go-San, I believe?”

Aizawa looks at his husband, and sees him freeze. He can practically hear the oncoming panic, the phone calls he’ll make and the frustrated whining of *Why didn’t YOU remember, Shou?! We have to-*

“I suppose it’s a happy coincidence that a number of child-size kimonos were incorrectly addressed to me, and are currently being delivered to your dorm along with the gifts that I noticed this morning,” Principal Nezu says with that cold chuckle. “Quite an astounding sight.”

Aizawa is aware that this could be another one of his boss’ machinations, a psychological test of will and a maze that Principal Nezu makes sure he gets lost in. But he’s too deliriously exhausted and appreciative to offer anything but gratitude. “Thank you for that. I’m deeply grateful.”

Hizashi turns to gape at him, and he can see the panic rising in his eyes. They *should* have known, they should have been prepared, and he knows that this is a more painful reminder for Hizashi than for him. And it still stings.

Principal Nezu tilts to the side to offer a wave to the wards, who have kept to the wall to stay away from the odd gathering. Eri waves back and starts to step forward before Shinsou’s hand on her head stops her, but he also waves back. Principal Nezu straightens and fixes Aizawa with a cold stare. “I know you have other obligations, but would you mind stepping into my office for a moment?”

It takes all of Aizawa’s resolve not to look away, to nod rather than swallow. Principal Nezu knows *far* too much. “Hizashi?”

Hizashi nearly rolls his eyes before he forgets himself, running a hand over his hair. “Yeah, just-you know. Don’t give the boss any trouble.”

He knows that Hizashi wants to get started on the tizzy that he’s probably already worked himself into, and as hesitant as Aizawa was to bear witness to it, he couldn’t say he was relieved now.

He followed Principal Nezu, and knew the silence was only more telling of the threat to come.

*

Yamada and the wards made their way home with one less member to the expected party, and Yamada couldn't help but be distracted by all the preparations he should have made *weeks* ago. He thought he marked it on his calendar as soon as they got what little paperwork there was from Eri's wardship, an estimated age that doesn't have a birth certificate to prove it, but there honestly didn't have to be one. Yamada didn't care if Eri was technically 31 years old, they *had* to go to Shichi-Go-San, and they *had* to do it right.

‘ *Principal Rat Bear. Boss.* ’

Yamada found himself frowning to himself, noticing that Shinsou was back to asking a question without asking it. And that little furrow between his eyebrows was a bit worrying as well. “Oh yeah, Principal Nezu is me and Shou's boss for our jobs here at UA. He's not the only boss we have, or I have, I guess. Shou gets to kind of do his own thing as an underground hero, while I get to make sure my station manager and hero manager don't gang up on me.”

Both are absolute *pains* in his ass most of the time, but he's going to call down a few favors to see if he can swing some weight around, flash a little celebrity to make sure everything goes smoothly.

It's honestly a miracle that Principal Nezu was taking care of one of the most important aspects, but photographers were usually booked months in advance. Then there was a dinner to plan, and he hated to imagine making it himself. Something this big deserved a nice dinner at a four star restaurant at least. That meant making sure that Shouta's suit was cleaned, and they honestly needed to pick up a new set of traditional clothes for themselves, and he *knows* Shouta will fight him every step of the way but he just doesn't *understand* how big this is.

‘ *A-I-Z-A-W-A superior or you.* ’

Yamada took a second to think about what Shinsou was asking, finding himself a little puzzled by the line of questioning. That worried furrow was gone, but now Shinsou's eyes were just a bit wider, his eyebrows just a little higher, curious about the answer. “Well, we work in different departments, but we're basically the same. I'm in charge of English for the Heroics courses, and I do the first year Gen-Ed as a favor that honestly I should have called quits on years ago. Shou is in charge of Hero Ethics and he's a homeroom teacher too, which means he guides a group of little herolets through their first year. Homeroom teachers get a little more slack on some things, but it's not like he's more important than me because of that.”

He sees that flash of a furrow again, Shinsou staring at his hands as though he doesn't know how exactly to ask what he's oddly been avoiding asking.

“This morning's meeting was a little weird, I guess, but it's a little bit of a tradition that got started-”

‘ *Not weird. S-A-K-A-Z-U-K-I. I know.* ’ Shinsou looks just a bit more reassured, but Yamada is decidedly *not*.

He feels his mouth drop open as he tries to find a way to argue against that, while still processing the fact that *Shinsou thought the UA staff were a mafia*. “Uh, no, no that- I guess it *looked* like that, but it's really not, it's just a dumb- teachers need to drink, alright? The students are going to drive us completely bonkers before the end of this week, so we just get together for a little toast and liquid courage. It's- it's *really* not that.”

Shinsou nods, looking ahead. ‘ *Did wrong, anyway.* ’

Yamada finds himself nodding a little too much in response, tucking his hands in his pockets.

“Yeah, I mean. Principal Nezu is our boss, but not our *boss- boss*. Like that.... Did you think that Shou would be my superior or...?”

Shinsou tilts his head, considering, and Yamada finds himself grateful for the pause. That there even *was* a pause, because far too often people take Shou’s outwardly calm demeanor to mean that he’s a bit more put together than Yamada. ‘ *At first. You’re superior hero. A-I-Z-A-W-A superior investigation. Equal under rat bear.* ’

As much as Yamada was tempted to say his little listener had finally come around to Present Mic, he imagined that the difference in name recognition made Shinsou think that Present Mic was just a better hero than Eraserhead. And Shouta’s lack of patrols probably compounded that.

But as much as he wanted to argue that *he* was supposed to be the superior in the investigation, he knew it was useless. Shouta decided, and Yamada warily agreed, that Shouta should be the face of that until Shinsou got a little more comfortable. Right now, he only had Yamada to trust, and Yamada wouldn’t risk leaving Shinsou without an anchor.

“Yeah, that’s kind of how it is. But no mafia business, right? Definitely none of that,” Yamada says, trying to laugh it off while he tries not to wonder *how long* Shinsou had been under the impression that the staff of UA were just another mafia. He knows Shouta wears long-sleeves almost constantly, enough to give the impression that he might have tattoos, but who could ever believe that *Yamada* could pull it off?

Yamada thought that the robots must be taking their time to bring all the wards’ offerings when he notices the door isn’t blocked, but when he opens it, Eri lets out a gasp.

Apparently, robots can open doors. *Locked* doors.

The barren living room that’s been bugging him for weeks definitely doesn’t look empty now. There’s a pyramid of three neatly packaged boxes, each almost as tall as Eri, and Yamada wonders exactly how many kimonos Principal Nezu thought were necessary. As much as he wants to be horrified that they could dress every single girl in Mustafu for Shichi-Go-San, he’s far more relieved that one of them could possibly be the *one*. The perfect outfit for Eri to wear for her first Shichi-Go-San festival.

There are also several mounds of gifts, neatly organized by type. The stuffed animals frankly dwarf all the others, then there’s a stack of coloring books taller than Eri, then candy and toys and boxed games. Shinsou’s pile doesn’t seem to be organized, and it would look even smaller if it was, but Shinsou doesn’t even seem to notice that it’s there. He just smiles as Eri stretches her arms out and looks like she wants to jump right into her little mountain of plushies, ignoring that the hoodies that Yamada can see definitely wouldn’t fit Eri.

“Well, it looks like you guys have a lot to go through here,” Yamada says, his hand already itching towards his phone. “I’ll be in my room if you need me, but I definitely don’t think you’ll be bored for a while.”

He does get his phone out just in time to recognize that crouch, and snaps several pictures of Eri jumping right into the mountain of plushies, giggling all the while. And he’s not at all surprised that he finally gets a picture of Shinsou smiling like he means it.

*

UA definitely wasn’t *anything* like the mafia.

27 found himself counting, but for a different reason, and he kept smiling to himself while he did. 43 stuffed animals of various sizes, some half as big as the Gengar, some as small as Eri's hand. 143 books - children's books, coloring books, and sticker books. Enough bags of candy and candy apples to rot out every last one of Eri's teeth, and enough toys and games to make up for the years she didn't have any.

Eri was ecstatic, rolling around on her plushies and running her hands across all of the books and toys, and he couldn't scold her for it at all. Even when her voice started getting louder and probably disturbed Yamada's phone calls, he just didn't have the heart to stop her.

But Eri's wide eyes turned to panic when she turned to look at him. "Twenny, I can't make headbands for all the heroes! You have to help me!"

He still couldn't stop smiling, running a hand over her head. "It's fine, Eri. The heroes want a picture anyway. I can take it and send it to them now, if you want."

Eri nodded, determined to pay the heroes back as soon as possible. She plead for him to wait while she picked out a stuffed animal to pose with, and ran back with one of the largest unicorns held tight in her arms.

27 pulled up the same app that he noticed Yamada using, and angled the phone so that it looked like it would take a good picture. He didn't even have to tell Eri to smile, she was used to these modeling sessions, and took several pictures to make sure they could pick the best one.

But when he pulled up the one he liked the most, Eri frowned. "I'm not smiling right."

27 wrapped an arm around her, already knowing that this was an insecurity for Eri. "A lot of people smile like that, Eri. See?" 27 gives her a toothy grin, his lips pulled back but not up. It would be a grimace if not for the happiness clear in her eyes, and he didn't doubt that she could see it in his, too. "You can tell that I'm smiling."

Eri pulled her lips to one side, probably thinking about pouting, before she nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's okay. If the heroes can tell too."

"They can," 27 says, and pulls up LNE. He found a few new things he can do with his phone while he was avoiding the chats, while he was trying to distract himself from crying or sleeping.

He scrolls through the Class 1-A chat to find a point where Bakugo's username isn't visible, and points out to Eri that they've all changed their usernames to the pictures that she drew on their headbands. She presses her hands to her blushing cheeks, and finds herself distracted enough to drop her unicorn plushie, which inspires her to return to the pile of plushies to make sure they're all named and hugged afterwards.

Before he can send the picture, the door behind him opens, and he turns to see his owner returning. That pinched glare and frown seems to be worse than this morning. Before 27 can think of a way to hide Eri's gifts, to make sure they're not taken from her, he hears the bedroom door open and Yamada's voice carry down the hall, getting louder as he walks closer.

"-Tear it up, I *hope* you do it. You said it yourself, I got a bump in rank with half of my regular patrols, so do *you* think I'll have any problems getting another manager? ...Oh, of *course* that's what you meant, and I completely agree, and if I hear anything but a 'Yes' in the next five seconds, I'm going down to your office to tear up my contract *for* you.... That's all I needed, enjoy the sponsorship money," Yamada growls in English after he hangs up. "' Prick.' "

Yamada's eyes focus on his owner, who seems to curl himself forward out of exhaustion. "Hizashi. Don't tell me that was-"

"I broke top 100, it's fine," Yamada says, with a hand wave and a grin that becomes strained, his green eyes sparkling with a nervous energy he's seemed to carry all morning since that odd meeting. "So, I'm pulling some serious weight on the photography business, my station manager will either kill me or I'll kill him, I haven't decided yet, but that *should* take care of dinner plans, which leaves all of the clothing operations to my dear, sweet, *ever so forgetful*."

"Hizashi," his owner sighs, and for some reason almost staggers. He's been acting like he's exhausted all day, but 27 knows that he shouldn't be. It doesn't serve a purpose to show irritation with a weakness like that. "I understand that this is important to you, and it's important to me too. I'm more than willing to help, but I need to sleep. Then I'll help you."

Yamada stares for a moment, that manic energy draining out of him, before he sighs. "Yeah, I know, I know. We should have been *way* more prepared, and I'm working myself up too much, but take yourself a little nappy-poo. We'll touch base after that."

His owner doesn't even glare at the insult, making his way to his bedroom with only a brush of his hand over Eri's head. It definitely seemed like he was tired.

It made sense that he would be. His owner didn't seem to sleep while they were at the students' dorm, and only took a nap when they returned to this one. If he hadn't slept well last night, that meant that he hadn't fully rested in 3 days. 27 knows exactly what that can do to a person, even if he's never seen it worn so plainly on someone else.

He hopes that Aizawa recovers after some sleep. As irritating as it was to be around a man with so few tells, it was unsettling to see him so oddly vulnerable.

"I'm not sure what we should do with all of this," Yamada mutters, looking again at Eri's gifts. "Did you have a chance to go through your new stuff, Shinsou?"

27 follows the direction that Yamada is pointing into to a pile that he assumed was for gifts that needed to be cursed, with how ill-fitting they were to Eri's tastes. But they must be for him.

He has no idea *why* he was given these things. He doesn't even know most of the students at the school, and he was already unsettled by the things on his desk from Class 1-A. He doesn't need anything, he doesn't want anything, and he has no idea what any of these things intend to buy for the students. He has no idea what they want from him.

They couldn't all know about The Miasma. His owner seemed to want to keep the investigation secure, and it wouldn't make sense to enlist students that he couldn't keep a close eye on. They could be informants for The Miasma. There could be a message within those gifts to tell him that his luck was running short. That it would be better to slip outside the walls of this compound rather than force The Miasma to infiltrate it, because even if death came to him either way, one would be more pleasant than the other.

"It's kind of another one of those weird things that happen at UA," Yamada says, crouching to sit next to the pile. "Usually, the students leave little gifts for Principal Nezu for good luck on their tests, but since you and Eri are becoming little mascots for the hero course, they must have changed their plans. Of course, Eri has a running start on winning the hearts of our little herolets, but it looks like some thought went into these."

Yamada picks up a headband with purple cat ears on it and goes still. 27 sees him turning to look at

him, and he recognizes that look in his eye. Even if he doesn't know what anyone else wants, he knows what Yamada wants right now. '*Eri only.*' Even if that angers Yamada, he *refuses* to have a picture taken with him wearing that. He can die with pride.

Yamada pouts, his shoulders dropping in defeat, but he tucks the headband into the pile of toys for Eri with a pleased grin. "Let's see, let's see. Hoodies, definitely your style. I see some cute little cat keyrings-"

27 tries not to roll his eyes while he joins Yamada. Apparently, this was important to him, even if 27 couldn't care less. Unless there was some threat hidden in this pile, some message that Yamada hopefully wouldn't find, he would rather ignore that the students did this to him. He had no idea how to respond to it, what they wanted from it.

There are a few hoodies, and gloves. There's a box with a note in a messy scrawl that Yamada places to the side, nudging it behind himself, and explains that it should be looked at later. There are several cat keychains or cat themed notebooks and pens, and though he tries not to give any indication of it, they are cute. But underneath one of the hoodies, he finds what he was looking for.

A threat. An incredibly odd one.

Yamada seems likewise confused. "Huh. That's, uh...."

It was a set of sleeves and leggings that supposedly had pain-relieving qualities, through some odd use of copper threading and an essential oil kit. It was odd, so odd that he doubted that The Miasma was behind it. It must be from a student, but he had no idea which one. Or why there was only one. '*I'm being threatened.*'

Yamada looks shocked, waving his hands to argue against the reality of it. "No, no, no! I don't think that's what's going on, let me..." Yamada trailed off, taking the box into his hand as he looked it over, and when he flipped it over, he found the note.

'Someone such as I has no need for superstitions, but they make this far easier to get to you. I've noticed that you haven't attended school for a few days, and though Kendo is lacking in a great many redeeming qualities, she is somewhat knowledgeable about homeotherapy and pain relief.'

Several lines of black paint were underneath that message, as though scratching out whatever words were decided against wouldn't be enough to hide them, before the identity of this person was revealed. 'Monoma Neito.'

'*Crazy English guy threatening me,*' 27 signed, hoping that Yamada knew the reason. He hadn't hurt his hand too badly when he tried to stop the Quirk Thief from touching him, but if he knew what he was trying to do at the time, he would have given him a reason to threaten him. A *very* good reason.

"Uh, no, I think Monoma... he's trying to help, but he's...." Yamada pulled a grimace, shaking his hand back and forth in '*So-so.*' But that really didn't explain anything. "He's trying! He wants to be friends with you, but he's.... *Really* bad with people. And it comes off as a little-"

'*Threatening.*' 27 didn't understand why Yamada was trying to convince him that the Crazy Quirk Thief wanted to be friends with him, but he knew it wasn't the case. He must have some idea of what his quirk was, and wanted to steal it. Possibly to use it to kill members of Class 1-A, and frame 27 for it.

Despite himself, 27 was a bit impressed by that strategy. "I know he's not, he's just... *so bad* at

this,” Yamada said, wincing before he sighed, placing the box back down before he picked up the other one that he had set aside. “Okay, so Hatsume Mei is a *very* smart girl, but she’s just a little cuckoo in the cranium. Don’t judge her, just accept it. And please don’t use this before I try it out.”

The top of this box also had a note. ‘**CHERISH MY BABY!!!** He’s very young and easily startled, but he’s very smart! He can translate multiple sign languages and speak through the speakers attached to the choker! **PLEASE LOVE HIM AS MUCH AS I DO!!!!**’

27 found himself curious and more than a little disturbed by the implication that there was a baby in this box, before he opened it to find a mess of wiring with thin pieces of metal attached. “That’s...promising,” Yamada said, though he looked more disturbed than 27 felt just a moment ago. “Lot of electrical stuff... *easily startled* ... I’m wondering if I should ask Powerloader to take a look at how well she covered the wiring, that kind of sounds like there’s a live one in there.”

As if on cue, Yamada’s nervous poke was answered by a sputter of sparks.

“Okay, let’s hold off on that one! That was a very thoughtful idea, though!” Yamada says, folding the flaps over before he shoves the box next to the couch, close to the wall.

Yamada instructs them to take inventory of their new possessions, and organize them in their rooms. He also offers to set some aside to be donated if they have no use for them, but those comments seem to be directed more towards Eri than 27. Though 27 wants to argue against the idea, when he sees how little space there is in Eri’s room for all of her new gifts, and that she already has a great deal of them, he relents and goes to his room to sort through his items.

Yamada won’t let him touch the box from the Crazy Baby Lady, though.

10 cat keychains, now placed beside the lucky cat statues. Three new notebooks on top of the stack that he doesn’t use, that he can at least enjoy looking at. Five new pens, and he can’t help but smile at the one that has a figure of a cat at the end. The clothing is sorted away, and the box from the Quirk Bandit sits on top of his bookshelf. He can see it as soon as he wakes up in the morning, and remember to answer to it the next time he sees him.

The troll doll is the first thing he grabs from his bag, and puts in a place of honor, centered in front of the cat figures. The doll’s purple hair was gelled to resemble his, the skin painted white and dark circles added beneath the eyes. The scars were missing, but it was clear that Bakugo took his time to alter the doll to resemble him, which was amusing to imagine.

There are a few books from the hero students. A couple are just pictures of cats, meant to be either funny or inspiring. One is a book of jokes in JSL, and another is a guide to meditation and yoga. There are several cards with notes to use the card to buy food from different restaurants, on the student’s recommendation. Ashi wants him to get an incredibly detailed order from a Boba shop, and he makes sure that one is on top of the stack that he hides in his desk drawer. He’s not sure if he will get an opportunity to use any of them, but if he does, that’s the one he wants to use first.

There’s a lot of assorted candy packages that he’ll probably never eat, and a pair of noise cancelling headphones that seems like an attack on Yamada disguised as a gift. Then there’s a stack of papers stapled together that he didn’t look at before putting in his bag, and after he reads the note, he has no idea what he wants to do with it.

‘My mom sent me some of her favorite recipes! And if you need any help, she said you can text her anytime!’

He only glances at the first page, but sees that the instructions seem easy to follow. He already

knows that he doesn't want to eat any of the food that would be made from it, but he wants to try it. To see if Eri would like these recipes too. If he can even make a mother's cooking just by following these recipes.

If he deserves to try, after what he did.

He puts them in the desk drawer, and refuses to think about it. He won't let this bone-deep ache take hold over him, he won't be able to mask it from Eri if he does.

He remembers what he promised her, and sits down to pull out his phone, noticing that a few of the students were already celebrating finishing their first test. He imagines that they'll be even happier after he sends this.

Lucky bastard: *Tap to download 22KB file*

Lucky bastard: Eri says thank you for her presents.

BIG PINK FLOWERS IM CRYN: i'm cryingggggggg Eri is so cute?!?!?! I CAN'T

Teacups: Please tell her it was no trouble! I hope she likes the science kit!

Manly Arm Flexes: HER TOOTH GAP MAKES IT CUTER!!!!

Manly Arm Flexes: I feel the MANLIEST that I've ever felt in my life, don't call me out guys

Cookies: Aw! She's so sweet! Did she know I like cookies the most or was it a lucky guess?

Lucky bastard: @Stress Bake she knew. @Genesis I will

Umbrellas: She knew that rainy days were my favorite too. TT_TT I was expecting frogs.

MY BUNNIES: Eri did a great job drawing my rabbits! She even got Mitzy's nose freckles right!

Green tea: I was expecting monkeys, but I really can't say how much I appreciate not getting that. It still would have been cute! But I can't believe she noticed how much I love green tea.

Bubble Gum: SHE KNOWS TOO MUCH lolol, Eri is soooo CUUUUTTE!!!

Soba(both): Eri likes Soba. Now you have to like him too.

Wizard Hats: Eri is very observant regarding our tastes, and it is very appreciated by all of us!

Music Notes: She really is, though. It's kind of like having a fan, but better.

Potato Chips im called out changed Music Notes' name to Music Notes (and Yaomomo ;))

Potato Chips im called out: Suuuuuuper observant riiiiiewabr ea

Music Notes (and Yaomomo ;)) changed their name to Music Notes

Music Notes: Hey send us the pics of Eri at Shichi-Go-San if Aizawa-sensei is counting on Kaminari to be alive by the end of the week.

Sailor Moon and this otaku trash approves: YOOOOOOO ABSOLUTELY PLEASE SHINSOU I HAVE NO HOPE

Lucky bastard: No. And you really should study. You don't want to fail him.

Potato Chips im called out: shinsou pls

BIG PINK FLOWERS IM CRYN: Shinsou pleaaaaaasee even if we do it we have to wait almost a week!!!! It's not fair!

Lucky bastard: I've been through things. I've witnessed things. But what he has planned for you? Horrifies me.

Sailor Moon and this otaku trash approves: shinsou please say sike

Sailor Moon and this otaku trash approves: shinsou please don't let this be your thing

Potato Chips im called out: im scared

Wizard Hats: We should all endeavor to prove ourselves this week regardless of the rewards or punishments! 80% is attainable, but if we fall short, I'm sure that we will be able to rise to the occasion for our finals. With what I'm sure will be a very stern reminder from Aizawa-sensei of our shortcomings. But nothing to worry about.

Wizard Hats: Right?

Lucky bastard: Worry. Worry a lot.

Lucky bastard: It'll be very boring if some of you don't make it.

Lucky bastard: Good luck.

27 couldn't help but smirk when he noticed that his phone didn't have nearly as many chat notifications as it usually did afterwards. He knew that he couldn't inspire them to perform the same way that Eri could.

But if his owner wanted them to succeed so bad, he could ensure it in a different way.

Chapter End Notes

Class 1-A Chat Usernames:

Lucky Bastard - Shinsou Hitoshi (27)

BIG PINK FLOWERS IM CRYN - Uraraka Ochako

Teacups - Yaoyorozu Momo

Manly Arm Flexes - Kirishima Eijirou

Cookies - Sato Rikido

Umbrellas - Asui Tsuyu

MY BUNNIES - Koda Kouji

Green Tea - Ojirou Mashirao

Bubble Gum - Hagakure Tooru

Soba (both) - Todoroki Shoto

Wizard Hats - Iida Tenya

Music Notes - Jirou Kyouka

Potato chips im called out - Kaminari Denki

Sailor Moon and this otaku trash approves - Sero Hanta

Sakazuki

Chapter Summary

Yamada finds out about a certain teapot game that the wards used to play while they lived at the 8 Precepts, and about something that Aizawa has been hiding from him. Shinsou and Eri find out about Shichi-Go-San, and a mean-spirited game that Eri doesn't want to play gets 'upcycled' for Aizawa and Yamada's uses.

Chapter Notes

Wow! I have several reasons to post a second chapter this weekend! 12K hits, over 1000 comments, breaking 300k words published! It's amazing to watch how this fic has grown and how the audience for it continues to amaze me!

Trigger Warnings: Mention of Bug and Bug's quirk.

Previously on Wards of UA: Class 1-A gave Shinsou a slice of pretty much every pizza known to man on Saturday. Shinsou can control Eri with his quirk without asking her a question, and last night decided that he would never use his quirk again. Aizawa received a box from Ms. Joke with his birthday present inside, and an angel costume for Eri.

Yamada takes advantage of Class 1-A's interest in knowing what pizza Shinsou likes and heats the leftovers up for lunch, taking care that every little plastic flag with a label on it doesn't wind up melting in the oven. And while he intended to make a few more phone calls and go through the boxes in the hopes of finding something better than Shouta's best yukata for Shinsou, he finds himself distracted.

"Chewy," Shinsou says, setting aside his slice of five cheese pizza to translate what he signs to Eri. "I don't know. If I like."

Eri copies him before she takes another bite of the sausage slice, which Shinsou didn't even have the chance to test before she claimed it. And despite Yamada's attempts to make sure Class 1-A's little experiment didn't go awry, Shinsou protested that he knew he didn't like it.

So far, Shinsou was ambivalent to most of the toppings, but he liked mushrooms and olives. He disliked pineapple and peas, and Yamada claimed the pineapple but shuddered when he remembered that Shouta would actually *enjoy* the peas. That topping had to be started as a gag, but Shouta swore that it was enjoyable. Like fish eggs on sushi, and Yamada shuddered again just remembering that description, knowing that was *absolutely* a real topping somewhere.

Shinsou eyed the bacon ranch buffalo chicken specialty slice warily before he took a bite, staring for a while afterwards to try to pick out all the different flavors. "Spicy. Tangy. Weird. A lot. But I

like.”

Eri seemed to be getting a little bored of this game, frowning a bit while she chewed as she copied his signs. Yamada wasn't sure if he should like this game either.

Of course, he wanted Eri to learn JSL and he knew she wanted to learn too. And it was pretty adorable to watch Shinsou teach her. But Yamada also noticed that he wasn't really teaching her. He translated everything he said, but he didn't make sure that Eri copied the sign correctly.

He was just making sure that Eri understood the sign, and that was what worried Yamada.

He didn't know if Shinsou just wanted to make sure Eri didn't feel left out of any conversations, or if he was worried that his selective mutism might stop being so selective. Yamada couldn't imagine anything crueler than Shinsou not being able to talk to Eri, to lose his voice so completely like that. To lose more than his voice, honestly.

Yamada didn't know if maybe the gifts were bothering Shinsou more than he knew they did, that maybe that initial anxiety was swelling into something monstrous beneath the surface. But before he can ask, careful not to use any sign that Eri knows, Shinsou stifles another yawn, and this time, it's more noticeable than the others.

“You need a nap, Twenny?” Eri asks, and she seems a little enthusiastic about the prospect of it herself. While Yamada knows their growing little girl enjoys napping nearly as much as Shouta, he imagines that she might have missed out on sleeping next to Shinsou after waking up in her own bed this morning.

Shinsou shakes his head. “Tired. But can't sleep.” He glances at Yamada before he adds, “But will tonight.”

Before Yamada can reassure Shinsou that insomnia was a very common thing in their home, and that he shouldn't feel like he'll be in trouble for it, Eri pipes up again. “We can play Sakazuki! But we can play it-”

“No,” Shinsou sharply says, flinching at his own tone before he curls a hand behind his neck. “It's fine, I'll sleep tonight. It's fine.”

Eri doesn't look convinced, and whatever game they had named after a mafia ritual sounds like the funnest game in the world to her now. She kicks her legs and pouts at Shinsou, the one person who was trying to deny her of that joy. “*Please*, I wanna play it so-”

“I know this is really important to you, Eri,” Shinsou says, and Yamada can't help but raise an eyebrow. “But I don't want to play that game. We have a lot of other games that we can play, and I'm happy to do that with you.”

Shinsou. *Copied* Shouta. True, that was the point of modeling behavior. They changed the way they argue while they're around the wards to help the wards learn to communicate their needs more easily, and healthily. But Shinsou didn't just repeat what Shouta said, his voice seemed to get just a bit deeper, with just the slightest rasp. Just a slight difference, but it was noticeable. It was *imitation*.

And Yamada *so hoped* that Shinsou gets it down to an artform, and that by the time that Shinsou is comfortable around Shouta and overcomes what he knows is a temporary condition, that Shinsou uses it *constantly*. He can't even imagine the kind of sasses Shinsou can engineer with that, and he knows that Shouta would be too secretly flattered to stop him.

“But we can play it so you fall asleep!” Eri says, and Yamada can’t even enjoy the little whistle from her saying ‘sleep.’ Because now he’s very concerned about what ‘falling asleep’ while playing a game based off of trading alcohol really entails. “And I’ll-”

“*Eri*, ” Shinsou snaps, raising his hands before he folds them, his fingers threaded too tightly together as he tries to reign himself in.

“Eri, Shinsou doesn’t want to play that game,” Yamada says, watching the tension coil tighter in Shinsou’s clenched jaw and raised shoulders. “Why don’t we find a different game to play, out of that big stack you just got? I’m sure we’ll find something even more fun.”

Eri shakes her head. “It’s not that kind of game, Yama. It’s a teapot game where you-”

“You’re not playing it,” Shinsou says sternly, crossing his arms as he glares away from Eri. “You’re never playing that game again. Even if Yamada lets you, I won’t.”

Eri takes offense to that, turning to pout at Shinsou with her own glare. “Twenny, you’re being a mean mom! You can’t do that!”

“Because I’m not your real mom,” Shinsou argues back. “But you have to listen to me anyway. And I’m telling you that you’re never playing that game again.”

As much as Yamada wanted to sit back and appreciate Shinsou refusing Eri, something that he’s honestly seemed incapable of doing, this little argument was getting a little too twisted for that. “Eri, I’ve got a fun little project for us to start on, so why don’t we do that instead? Does that sound good?”

Eri opened her mouth, probably ready to tell Yamada that definitely did *not* sound good, but the sound of the bedroom door opening down the hall drew her to sprint towards it. “Zawa, Yama and Twenny are being mean! I wanna play Sakaz-”

Even if Eri was out of Yamada’s sight, Shinsou’s full body flinch and wide eyes told him what happened. His hands moved to cup around his mouth, and Yamada watched the tears start to gather before the panic set in. “Hey, Shinsou, it’s alright. You’re not in trouble. You’re fine. Do you need help or-”

Just the sight of Shouta walking in, calm as ever and ready to help Shinsou break the control if he needed it, seemed to startle Shinsou out of it. Eri paced back down the hall at a quick step, and Shinsou covered his face with his hands. “Twenny, you’re really scared,” Eri whined, her worries becoming apparent on her face when she noticed that Shinsou was visibly upset. “Twenny, it’s okay!”

Yamada pulled a grimace at Shouta, signing while both wards were distracted. ‘*Separate. Bad argument.*’ Shouta nodded, and Yamada already knew which position he’d take. “Shinsou, does your head hurt right now?”

Shinsou nodded, barely, and pressed his palms harder against his eyes. If Yamada didn’t know any better, he would chock it all up to a migraine, but he had already seen the tears, and noticed that Shinsou was holding his breath.

“Okay, let’s get you to your room to lie down for a bit, I’ll get some medicine for that. We’ll be right as rain in just a bit, alright,” Yamada said, as quietly as he could while he moved to grab the painkillers from the cabinet. It was a bit easier for Shouta to wrangle Eri into her own room, telling her that Yamada could take care of it, but a bit harder to convince Shinsou to get up and walk with

him down the hall.

And as he suspected, his eyes were watery and irritated in the brief flash he saw before Shinsou ducked his head further and turned away.

Yamada closed the door behind him, handing Shinsou his glass of water. “Shou gets migraines a lot, I know they’re one of the worst pains in the world. Do you want me to turn all the lights off, or-”

Shinsou shook his head a bit too vigorously, wincing after he did. Yamada still turned them down a few notches, making sure that the lights hanging on the wall were on, then handed Shinsou two pills.

“Make sure to drink all that water, it’ll help. And, you know, it’s really okay,” Yamada said, torn between trying to get Shinsou to look at him and looking away so the kid wouldn’t feel so vulnerable. “Slips happen, and it’s fine. We’re not angry. You were getting upset, and I should have put a stop to it sooner-”

‘ Stupid. ’ Shinsou signed, betraying the tears with a sniff. *‘ Stupid. Game fine. Wouldn’t be same. Different here. Stupid. ’*

Yamada took a seat in the chair, waiting for Shinsou to take the medicine and drink quite a bit of that water, wiping the tears from his eyes afterwards. “It’s not stupid. It’s fine if you don’t want to be reminded of that. And it’s fine for Eri to be fine with it. But she can’t make you do something that you’re not okay with, even if it’s Eri.”

Shinsou ran a hand through his hair, eyes still mostly closed and directed to the floor. *‘ C-H-I-S-A-K-I game. Worst one. I don’t know why. Not. Bad. ’* Shinsou hesitates, folding his hands for a moment before he signs again. *‘ D-R-U-G-G-E-D milk. Made Eri sleep. Gave. Promised things. Each round. I don’t know. Why. ’*

Shinsou’s hands started shaking again, and he folded them tighter. Yamada tried not to imagine why, imagine how sadistic that little game was beneath the surface.

It was cold comfort to know that Shinsou *didn’t* know why it bothered him, that he didn’t know what Chisaki was trying to do. Forcing Eri to fall asleep while he promised things to her, likely veiled hopes of escape. All while she got more sluggish and tired, ending in sleep but likely a drugged sleep that was meant to call up another image.

Yamada had always known that if Shinsou had ever watched Eri die before she was resuscitated, he wouldn’t be the young man sitting in front of him. Shinsou might have chips, but he never shattered, and Yamada knew that there couldn’t be anything more devastating than seeing Eri’s body devoid of life. Even Yamada feels sick to think about it, but for Shinsou, he wouldn’t have been able to go on.

He would have buried it so deep inside himself that he forgot, repressing that image until he could go on living. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t.

“You wanted to protect her,” Yamada says, trying to at least soothe that trembling. Wanting to make sure Shinsou wouldn’t keep wondering, wouldn’t start digging now. “You wanted to get her out, and that *sick* bastard couldn’t have been any more twisted for making you do that.”

Yamada hopes Chisaki was afraid. That he had enough time to know fear, to know the cruelty of death before it took him. He hopes it *hurt* .

“Eri probably just liked listening to your promises. She didn’t know what it was doing to you. We...don’t have to let her know. She listens to Shou more than me, and if he says no, that’s the end of it. You can tell her on your own time, but,” Yamada can’t help that little grin, knowing how hard it was for Shinsou to do in the first place. “I’m proud of you for sticking up for yourself, you know? You’re allowed to say no, and to say what you want to do. To tell us what you want.”

He hears another barely audible sniff before Shinsou glances up, just a twitch of that little smirk betrays it. ‘ *Can’t. I’m mute.* ’

Yamada rolls his eyes at that old gag. “Yeah, yeah. You know what I mean.” He shakes his head as he gets up, and fights the urge to put his hand on Shinsou’s head, to try to reassure the kid a little more that he wasn’t in trouble. “Try to get a little sleep, because that’ll help too. And let me know if you need anything, alright?”

He gets a nod, still small but without the wince afterwards, and Yamada closes the door behind him after he leaves. Shouta gives him a look after he leaves Eri’s room, and they both meet in the office to talk.

But when Yamada notices the box from Ms. Joke is still in the corner, and he notices that it’s not empty, he realizes that they have *a lot* to talk about.

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To his credit, Hizashi waited far longer than Principal Nezu did to bring it up. The conversations with their wards came first, reading each other in on what they learned. Aizawa thought that could be the end of it, that the wards came first in this regard as well, and that they shouldn’t take too long away from them, but then Hizashi mentioned using one of his yukatas for Shinsou to wear tomorrow.

“Hizashi,” Aizawa said, and he hated to be the one to say it. “Shinsou can’t go off campus without an escort, and that’s only to the station. He can’t go to a public place like-”

“He’s not *not* going, Shou,” Hizashi countered, eyes blazing while he crossed his arms. “This is an important day for Eri, and he deserves to be there. Probably more than we do, to be honest. And don’t worry about the safety issue,” Hizashi said, reaching down and tossing a face mask at Aizawa’s chest. “He can wear a disguise, right? *That* should do the trick right there! Wouldn’t it, Shou?”

Hizashi waited longer, but he conveyed a far deeper disappointment than even Principal Nezu could manage.

Principal Nezu clasped his hands behind his back, staring out the window for show. “Even though Shinsou isn’t a ward in the care of UA directly, I couldn’t help but be disturbed that a recommendation from Recovery Girl still hasn’t been attended to. It’s quite worrying, Aizawa.”

Aizawa knew exactly which one he meant. “We’ve taken other precautions-”

“But we both know that every precaution needs to be taken,” Principal Nezu says, turning to face Aizawa. “Allow me to be blunt, but you don’t want to give Shinsou a face mask because he wore a different mask before. And you’re concerned with the similarities.”

He was. Giving Shinsou a mask was one thing, a similarity he couldn’t stomach, a comparison he refused to offer, even if it couldn’t be more different. And there was Eri’s feelings to consider as well, how well she would react to seeing Shinsou’s face hidden again. “He’s stopped missing it, it

seems. I don't want to set back his progress."

Principal Nezu took his time to reach his chair, and take a seat, settling his elbows on top of his desk before he deigned to answer that. "Would it shock you to know that I have a dog kennel in my home, when I don't own a dog?"

It did. It read deeper than shock, and Aizawa knew that it was visible. He only hoped that Principal Nezu didn't see what it really was. Horror.

"There are things we take with us. Like a collar embedded in the skin," Principal Nezu said, once again pulling on an even more horrifying image. "It's not progress if it only looks that way, and you know that. And I hope you'll take action to correct it."

Aizawa still didn't want to. It was too fresh, and this Sakazuki game had only made those wounds fresher. Chisaki was *dead*, and that bastard was still haunting them. Something as small as Shinsou yawning called out such a dark moment from their wards' pasts, and he knew the masks would be bigger.

Shinsou had stopped picking at scarves and collars of his shirts. Eri was clearly warming up to Shoji. They were moving on, and they didn't need a push backwards.

"Seriously, Shou, I really don't get this," Hizashi says, throwing a hand between the boxes and the mask he tossed at Aizawa. "You're *hiding* a present for Shinsou. Eri gets a little angel costume and Shinsou can't even have some face masks. I get that things are rough between you two, but, come on."

Aizawa shook his head, unwilling to believe that Hizashi would take it that way. "That has nothing to do with it. How do you think Eri will react?"

"*Eri*," Hizashi repeats, his hands falling to his sides. "We're not playing favorites here, Shou. Eri is your ward and Shinsou is mine, but they're both of our responsibilities."

And they shouldn't be. There was a reason that two wards shouldn't be living together. Wardships required a hero to care for a ward in whatever place they found them. They guided them to a better one, more often than not, and that required focus and patience.

Both wards needed their full and undivided attention, but giving something that might be helpful to Shinsou might also be harmful for Eri.

"He wouldn't wear it," Aizawa says, and clings to the image of Shinsou's panicked looks in Eri's direction while his fingers toyed with a scarf. "He knows what it would remind her of."

Hizashi shakes his head, but says nothing, knowing that he's right. As much as he had a right to argue that it was wrong to hide this from Shinsou, and Aizawa honestly couldn't argue against that, he knew the reality of the situation.

And Aizawa knew that it was still wrong. "When it's not as fresh, we can come back to this. But not now, not after Chisaki."

Hizashi stares at the box, and he knows that he still wants to argue. But he doesn't, he doesn't have the words to argue when he knows the truth of the matter. When they both know that there are wounds that they need to ignore for the time being. "Are you going to be there tomorrow, or are the Furokages eager to talk?"

Aizawa honestly doesn't know what he would have chosen, and finds himself relieved that it's not

an option. “Naomasa reached out, but they didn’t respond. He’s working with the local police, someone will approach them tomorrow. It might be better to see a uniform than just a phone call.”

Hizashi nods, “Good. Because we’re *all* going, and we’re going to celebrate the darling little girl who is the joy of all of our lives, and we’re going to put aside all that nasty business for *one* day and just be... you know! Two pro heroes and two wards, out and about and having a fun time, right Shou?”

Aizawa ignores the sinking feeling in his gut. He knows Hizashi better than his weapons, and he knows how to read him better than any book. He knows what he was about to say, and knows that he’s trying to hide it after the fact.

But Aizawa ignores it.

“Shinsou does need a disguise of some sort. Naomasa will *attempt* to kill me if he finds out about this, as though having two pro heroes as escorts isn’t enough for a festival full of children. Hardly the best location for an assassination attempt,” Aizawa knows that he could handle whoever the Nomu Organization sends after Shinsou, and that he would *enjoy* it. He would never stoop to using Shinsou as bait, but capturing a live operative from that organization, catching a member who might know more due to the fact that Shinsou had been separated from it for four years would end the investigation much swifter.

Shinsou could find some semblance of peace after that, and maybe start to believe that he was safe.

“I have a few wigs-”

“I *know*,” Hizashi says with that shit eating grin, as though they haven’t had this conversation a million times before. It’s *tactical*, and instrumental on too many sting operations to consider not utilizing.

“Nemuri might have makeup. I imagine that the scars would be rather telling for the people who put them there,” Aizawa says, and again finds himself hoping that he has the opportunity to face down the Nomu Organization sooner rather than later. Despite what The Commission believed, his own fight with a Nomu hardly crosses his mind as motivation. Anymore.

“Too bad you don’t,” Hizashi teases, and Aizawa narrows his eyes. “Knowing her though, it’ll be a complete...surprise....” Hizashi’s green eyes widened, jaw dropping open a bit. “I haven’t told them. *All day*, I didn’t tell them-Shou! Come on!”

Aizawa imagined that Hizashi’s antics would cool or simply boil beneath the surface when they exited only to find that their wards were still cooling down from their argument, but he’s surprised to see Shinsou and Eri in the living room, picking through a few of her boxed games.

Eri had been more concerned than tearful when he spoke to her, explaining that she can sometimes feel what Shinsou feels while under his control. In the ‘Safe Place.’ And though he imagined that his request for her to remain in her own room until Shinsou was recovered would be ignored, he didn’t expect to see Shinsou recover so quickly.

“Zawa, Yama! We’re not keeping these games,” Eri decided, shaking her head vigorously. “They’re mean, and I don’t wanna be mean to Twenny.”

Hizashi shot him a look, first admiring how kindhearted Eri was to refuse to play a mean-spirited game, which then sharpened to imply that he had *no* such qualms concerning Aizawa. “That’s sweet, Eri! We’ll make sure those games go to evil little children who like playing mean games,

but first, we wanted to talk about what's going on tomorrow.”

When Aizawa spotted the first game on the stack, taking a seat on the floor with his wards and his husband, and he knew *exactly* what evil child was going to stow it away in their closet.

“So, tomorrow is Shichi-Go-San, and there's a really fun festival that you can only go to if you're 3, 5, or 7 years old,” Hizashi says, his grin spreading as the realization becomes clear in each of their wards faces. “And since it's your first time going, we're going to work hard to make sure that it's the best day ever! There's going to be candy, and cute clothes- and that's what those boxes are for, we're going to be modeling for hours to find the right one- and you take a very important picture to remember it-”

Eri nodded vigorously, her fists knotted in determination in front of her chest. “Zawa said the heroes get to look at it if they do really good, so it's gotta be a really good picture, Yama!”

Hizashi raised an eyebrow at him, probably a bit insulted that he would use a part of a very special day for Eri as motivation for his class, but carried on. “Actually, this picture is *so* important that I'm not equipped to take it. It's gotta be *perfect*, which means bringing in a real professional to capture how cute my little bean is. It'll be the perfect thing to remind us how cute and perfect you are now, so that we can remember that seven years from now.”

Aizawa overlooks that implication, that agreement to take caution clearly fell on deaf ears. He finds himself more worried about a different implication, one that he doesn't want to imagine. A little girl who grew up with more teenagers than agemates would find herself very equipped for all the antics that teenage hormones would inspire her to perform. And Hizashi *knew that*.

“It's a very old tradition to go to a shrine on Shichi-Go-San, to celebrate a child's growth and well-being,” Aizawa adds, finding himself smiling. “And it couldn't have fallen at a better time.”

That first tooth. Eri's first Shichi-Go-San festival. Even though 5 wasn't an important age for girls, she had missed going to celebrate her 3 year old Shichi-Go-San, and Hizashi was determined to make up for that. And Aizawa found he had little protest, even for something so completely illogical.

While Eri seemed distracted by the boxes in the corner, likely excited about the modeling session more than the candy that she already had too much of, Shinsou seemed to be distracted by something else. He glanced at Eri with a bitter smile, before he looked at Hizashi. ‘ *Thank you. I want copy of picture. If okay.* ’

“Of course! Shou has a few traditional clothes in his closet for your own modeling session, I'm probably just a bit too tall for you to wear mine. Honestly, we should have gotten everything set up a while ago so you could have your own set-”

‘ *Investi...* ’ Shinsou stopped midsign, curling a hand around the back of his neck. But Aizawa didn't miss that his fingers brushed against a scar on his chin on the way there. ‘ *It's fine.* ’

It wasn't any comfort to know that Aizawa was right, and any teasing that their ward was more responsible than their appointed caretaker seemed hollow before he considered it. He could see that Shinsou was concerned, and likely for the same reason that Aizawa was. And that he likely felt that worry more keenly, all too aware that even guarded facilities weren't safe havens for him.

“Hizashi and I will be with you at all times,” Aizawa said, already making plans to hide his gear in his clothing, to look unguarded in the photographs but completely at the ready to defend his wards if necessary. “Naomasa's insistence on a police escort to the station is frankly unnecessary with

two pro heroes like ourselves.”

“We’ve worked together a lot, too. Had quite a few team ups,” Hizashi says, nudging Aizawa’s shoulder with an elbow that digs a little too deep. “Shou knocks them down and I blow them away, we’ve pretty much got it down to an artform. And, you know. You really should be there. It’s a family thing, there’s a picture for that and everything. And I just really don’t see you not being there, kiddo.”

Hizashi probably shouldn’t leave his words so vague, to leave an implication that this ‘Mom’ relationship should be encouraged. Aizawa has never tried to convince himself that Eri and Shinsou’s bond isn’t somewhat familial in nature, perhaps even deeper than that, but making it seem as though a teenager should be a parent to a child now that both were free from that twisted situation was irresponsible.

But it earns them a watery smile. Shinsou’s breath hitches after the sigh, smiling to himself in such an unguarded way that Aizawa finds himself shocked to see it. The teenager recovers himself quickly, his face blank but eyes still hopeful, still full of happiness. ‘*Thank you.*’

Aizawa finds that all his lingering concerns are swept away, even if he knows it’s irrational to ignore the threat of the situation.

He’s just never seen Shinsou look so happy.

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4 hours. Hizashi ran out of storage on his phone and had to put everything on hold until he backed it up to his personal cloud before he could continue the modeling session. Eri stopped trying to smile after the second hour, but she still posed for every single picture.

The kimonos were *expensive*. Aizawa found himself incredibly concerned with how soft the silk of the first one was, how incredibly detailed the patterns were. A startling number of them were hand dyed rather than manufactured, and Aizawa wondered how even UA’s budget could have covered that.

There are two boxes for Eri, but the third is for Shinsou. Aizawa tries to encourage him to select which outfit to wear himself, but after two hours of consideration, he slips behind his back and asks for Hizashi’s opinion. And Aizawa tries to be proud of that little ‘betrayal’ more than the much larger one from his husband.

Once the selections are made, and Eri seems to be so exhausted from her 4 hour shoot that she can’t even attempt to match Hizashi’s excitement over ‘*The One*,’ they settle in for a quiet dinner. Aizawa isn’t sure who will fall asleep first, their exhausted 5 year old model, the sleep deprived teenager, or himself, still not fully recovered from three nights without sleep though more functional.

That *damned loudmouth blonde* he married completely ignores that. “You know, this game isn’t too mean,” Hizashi says, his eyes cutting to Aizawa to promise that it *will be*. “I think maybe me and Shou should show you how it’s done, just to test it out a bit!”

Eri didn’t have to nod to seal his fate, but she did. And now they had to play with an audience.

And Aizawa refused to lose in front of Eri.

“So, since it’s a competitive game, I think we should make it a little more interesting,” Hizashi says with that same cruel smirk he’s worn since opening up the game and finding the whipped

cream. “If I win, you have to let me do whatever I want to your hair tomorrow.”

Aizawa knows that they’d never make it to the festival in time, that every *single* hair would have to be carefully arranged into at least four styles before Hizashi would be satisfied. “When I win, I get to do whatever I want to yours.”

Hizashi’s brief flash of horror draws a grin, before they both settle their chins on top of the stands and place their hands on the pedals. Eri counts them down, and then they’re off.

Hizashi is frantically trying to find a rhythm, and Aizawa knows that will be his undoing. There’s no rhythm, just desperation, letting the adrenaline take hold but managing it to make sure his mind doesn’t become too clouded. The fake hand loaded with whipped cream drifts ever closer to Hizashi’s side as he begins to whine.

“Go Zawa! Go Zawa!” Eri cheers, which draws a louder whine from Hizashi.

“No! Go Yama! Shinsou, help me with this!” Hizashi begs, but his pleading meets a cruel smirk.

‘ *Can’t. I’m mute.* ’

There’s a click when the hand falls into place, and though Hizashi jerks back, he still gets the bulk of the whipped cream on his face. Aizawa grins victoriously, watching Hizashi bow his head with his elbows braced on the counter, utterly defeated.

They play a few more rounds, trading chores done around the house and at UA. Aizawa wins more often than not, but when he has to both update Hizashi’s gradebook after the midterms and take care of the grocery shopping for a month, he performs a tactical retreat. “It’s late, and we have a busy day tomorrow.”

Hizashi begs for one more round, but a surprising challenge comes forth. ‘ *I win. You wear E-X-I-S-T-I-N-G A-M-P-L-I-F-I-E-R shirt. To school.* ’

Shinsou doesn’t smirk, but his eyes betray mischief, and Hizashi can’t help but rise to the challenge. “Oh, but *when I* win, you have to wear my merch! I’ll sign it and everything, so everyone knows you’re just Present Mic’s biggest fan!”

Aizawa watches, but can’t help but want Shinsou to beat his husband for several reasons. To encourage how antagonizing that little challenge was, to hope that the anxiety of that hand moving closer to Shinsou’s face wouldn’t be overwhelming.

And to see Hizashi wear his own knock off merch with a scowl, suffering more with every student who notices, though he’d never back out of an agreement with Shinsou.

“Go Twenny! Go Twenny!” Eri cheers, finding the energy to jump in excitement, though she tosses in another ‘Go Yama’ when Hizashi pouts.

But that pout does him no favors, and Hizashi squeals when he notices it. “No, no, no, no! Shinsou, don’t do-”

Splat.

Hizashi had tried to pull away, tried to keep even more whipped cream from finding itself in his hair, but it was no use. The arc was *perfect*, covering the glasses that Hizashi didn’t take off to further antagonize Shinsou about the impending victory. When Hizashi flicked the whipped cream off like a windshield wiper, that victorious little smirk broke into a snorting laugh.

One that Hizashi simply wasn't in the mood to tolerate. "Oh? Is that funny, huh?" Hizashi asked, gathering a bit of whipped cream from his cheek onto a finger. "Hey, Shinsou, buddy, *friend*, I think you've got something right-

Shinsou bolts, but the still lingering smile soothes Aizawa's worries. And Hizashi's game of chase is short lived when Shinsou gathers Eri in his arms, her own outstretched to protect him. "Yama, that's not fair! Twenny won, so he doesn't get whipped cream on his face!"

"Yeah, Hizashi, you're being a very sore *loser*," Aizawa says, drawing out that last word to remind him how *very bad* his husband is at this game. "You'll have to go to time out if you don't-

Hizashi grins at the feat, flicking that bit of whipped cream onto Aizawa's face from a meter away. "Oh, you're right, that was very immature of me. I think I'll feel better after a good night's sleep."

Aizawa works his hand, covered in the remnants of whipped cream from the game, just a little more into the hair at the back of his husband's hair. "I think that's a good idea. You should probably take a shower first, I think some of the whipped cream got into your hair."

Hizashi's withering glare makes Aizawa forget himself a bit, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. He usually wasn't so demonstrative when they were around others, and not knowing how Eri would take that kind of affection meant that they were a bit more restrained than usual.

But Hizashi gives him a forgiving smile, before he grabs Aizawa's chin and smears whipped cream onto his cheek with his own. "Yep, you've got the right idea! Let's get to bed, kiddos! We've got a fun packed day ahead of us tomorrow!"

The wards look no worse for the wear to see that kiss, and the bedtime rituals go undisturbed. Eri trailing a blanket behind her as she makes her way to Shinsou's room is unsurprising, and Aizawa wouldn't fight it if he wanted to.

Both of the wards needed to sleep well before tomorrow, and they still knew peace to be something that they found in each other's company.

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27 doesn't truly sleep, he couldn't even if he tried.

"It's a family thing."

"I just don't really see you not being there, kiddo."

Too much had changed in those words, and 27 hated that he had allowed himself to be distracted when they were said. That he didn't catch all of it, all of Yamada's tells, any of his owner's. He had no idea what that *meant*.

Family. Eri *was* family to him. She was family by that now-severed oath he swore to Chisaki, but she was family in a different way. A way he had been blind to, even though he was called her mother. Even though he tried to be a mother to her, had always tried, even in that room, he never let himself think of what that meant.

Family. He had a family. It was Eri.

He smiles every time he thinks of it that way. He has no idea what family is supposed to mean, what it means in this new place. The 8 Precepts were a different family, 127 called The Miasma a

family, but family is meant to be something else. It's meant to be warm. It's meant to make someone smile.

He's never had a family like that. He doesn't remember everything, but he knows that his mother wasn't warm. That she made him cry instead of smile. That he made her feel nothing when he was slowly killing her, thoughtlessly working that abuse into her mind because his *head itched*.

He doesn't know if he deserves to be Eri's family, but he is. He can't fight that. He can only try to be better, to deserve it.

He takes a picture of her while she sleeps, only lit by the string of lights on his wall. He knows the stillness could call up the image, that he can use it for training. He can play Sakazuki with her if she wants to, and even if it reminds him of it, he'll be able to do it.

He knows it would be different here. The milk wouldn't be drugged. Maybe even the promises would be kept.

"I'll give you a beautiful pink dress, and it will be soft." She had several now.

"We'll go to a park that's full of flowers, and swing on the swingset." She's probably done that already, while he wasn't there.

"As long as we're good, Chisaki will allow us to be happy. To do things that make us happier."

Chisaki liked that one. As much as he stewed over some other lines, as many tests that 27 had to fail and suffer the consequences of after Eri passed out, he liked that one.

He would stand in the corner, silent, and would glare when 27 tried to read his reaction. It was the worst game, it was impossible. Chisaki told him to tell her stories, to promise her things, and he knew that those stories weren't supposed to be believed. They weren't supposed to be promised.

It was impossible. To tell Eri that they would escape when Chisaki was standing right there. He shook nearly every time, tried in vain to hide his stutter. That numb horror unlike any other as he watched Eri start to grow weak under the drug's influence, it helped hide it. Hide that half the things he promised were meant to be kept, even if he wasn't there to see them.

27 preferred to be Unmade. He'd rather let Bug devour him whole, to have Cherry and Blossom in his stomach again, even longer. He didn't know *why*, not when that game was all mind games and he shouldn't let those hurt him, but he hated even thinking of that game.

Yamada said it was fine. Bakugo said avoidance works.

27 doesn't know why they said those things, why they don't take the broken pieces and laugh. Why they would want to put them back together, but they do.

27 avoids. He doesn't look at Eri when she sleeps, when he can't help but remember. He tries not to sleep himself, but he does.

He doesn't remember the nightmare, even if he knows who was in it. He's just grateful that his panic is silent, that she taught him to be silent. That even if she was dead, she could still haunt him kindly.

Even if she wasn't kind.

He didn't give her a reason to be anyway. He shouldn't feel like there's an ache to think of that. He

shouldn't compare Mrs. Midoriya to her, he knows he's different from Izuku. He's different from Eri. There are people who deserve warm mothers, and he isn't one of them.

He doesn't know what Yamada and Aizawa think he deserves, but he's grateful. Even if he feels crazy for thinking of it, for taking those words that way before he catches himself. He's *not* Eri, they took Eri in for a purpose that she's well suited for. She's a child who deserves to be happy, she's young enough to forget when she wasn't.

He's here for the investigation. That's all. Whatever happens at the end, he won't stay here. He was crazy to think that he could in the first place. He's a *criminal*, and they're heroes. They only overlook that because they need information.

But 27 gets crazy when he doesn't sleep, and he thinks things that are bizarre.

Shichi-Go-San

Chapter Summary

Aizawa, Yamada, Shinsou, and Eri go to Shichi-Go-San, a festival held to honor young children who are 3, 5, or 7 years old. After the festival ends, Eri is able to take home some new friends, and Aizawa receives a disturbing call from Naomasa.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: None!

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa told his class that none of them will see Eri's Shichi-Go-San portrait unless they pass all of their fundamental midterms with at least an 80% average. Bakugo gave Shinsou a purple haired troll doll for his 'Midterm Offering' for good luck. Ashido knew Shinsou before he was sold, when they were both four years old, and has a video of Shinsou holding his cat plushie Mocha. Aizawa explained that he doesn't want his students to know that he's married to Yamada, because there were some incidents of students taking that inappropriately. Ashido, and the rest of 1-A, refers to the organization that the investigation is focused on (The Miasma) as 'Villain school,' after Shinsou described it that way. Shinsou thinks that Yaoyorozu thinks that he's stupid, because Eri pointed out that he didn't know how to do basic division during homeroom a week ago. Shinsou's hair was bleached after Hari had tortured him by dunking him into a bathtub laced with the chemical while Shinsou was at the 8 Precepts of Death. The Furokages are 50's immediate family members, who Aizawa was able to identify by using the keylogger on Shinsou's laptop.

Hizashi has successfully worked himself up into one of the greatest panics Aizawa has ever seen. His hero manager is unresponsive to his calls, his hair is ‘ *The oiliest thing ever, Shou! Why did you do this to me, I don't have time to fix it!* ’, and he's not satisfied with any of their outfits. While Hizashi is occupied, Aizawa makes sure his wards are awake and fed, and occupied while he waits for Hizashi to realize that they're not going to be at the festival as early as they planned.

When he hears the knock, Aizawa answers the door prepared to glare down any of Nemuri's teasing, but instead finds himself glaring for a different reason. “ *Study.* ”

He doesn't spare a glance to Yaoyorozu, but Ashido withers before she hides behind her classmate. Yaoyorozu gives him a nervous smile, trying to ignore Ashido sinking lower and lower behind her. “I apologize for the intrusion, but Midnight-sensei asked us to come. She's... occupied... with the Art History Midterms...”

Aizawa doesn't know what feels worse, *completely forgetting* that Nemuri had to supervise her midterms or having to be reminded by his own student. A student clearly struggling to convey that reminder politely. “She asked both of you?” Aizawa asks, not shocked at all that Yaoyorozu finished her exam in two hours, but more than a little suspicious of the C- student cowering behind

her.

“I can’t leave her,” Ashido protests, wrapping her arms around Yaoyorozu’s waist and arms. “She’s my study buddy! We’re basically handcuffed until I breathe enough YaoMomo air to improve my brain cells!”

Yaoyorozu tries to raise a hand to dispel that, jolting as she’s hugged even tighter. “Class 1-A has devised a new study system. Those of us with high marks are spending every available moment with those that may struggle in certain subjects. I believe it’s having a positive effect on Ashido. I quizzed her after the exam based on what I remembered from it and I’m sure that her exam will place her above the 80% threshold.”

When Ashido loosens her hold to grin at him, two fingers held up for the school’s signature or a peace sign, he narrows his eyes. “I’m impressed. By that system, and your cunning,” That grin and hand both deflate as she realizes the ruse has been discovered. “I can’t imagine I could keep you from seeing Eri, Yaoyorozu. And I’m sure that Shinsou will be glad to see you, Ashido.”

He earns a very weak pout, but he’s not lying about being impressed. It seems using Eri as motivation for his students has proven to be exceptionally effective, finally driving home that a bit of forethought could reap better rewards than a bold and outright attack.

And Ashido *needs* to understand that before the Heroics Midterm, which is why he doesn’t try to stop her from looking when he hears Eri’s voice. “Momo! Ashi!”

The kimono isn’t folded properly, and her hair hasn’t been attended to at all. The knot at the back is simply a knot, but Aizawa imagines that Shinsou couldn’t do much better after Eri demanded to be dressed in her new clothes.

It’s still very flattering for Eri. The deep red of her shoulder and right sleeve fades gradually to white, with a hand-painted cherry branch blossoming from the left hem to her chest. The sleeves have embroidered storks, and the sash is white with red and black cherry blossom emblems in a traditional pattern, but the maroon cord meant to go around it missing along with the sandals that still need to be tested.

Eri only holds out her arms and twirls, but that’s enough to draw a squeal from Ashido. “Eri! You’re an adorable little princess!” Ashido shouts as she jumps, before she crouches into a kneel, her voice dropping as well. “I pledge my life and my sword to you, by way of the samurai.”

Yaoyorozu stifles a giggle at Ashido’s *incredibly odd* perception of samurai code, and gives Eri a smile. “You do look like a traditional princess, Eri. It’s very cute.”

Eri’s eyes brighten at that. “Princesses have hairpins! Zawa, can Momo help me put a pin in my hair? Is that okay?”

Aizawa smiles and nods, knowing Hizashi might be initially miffed, but today wasn’t supposed to be about him. If Eri wanted one of her favorite hero students to do her hair, that was going to happen. “If that’s what Yaoyorozu wants to do-”

“Yes!” Yaoyorozu agrees, betraying another crack in her usually calm demeanor before she catches herself. “I mean, I’d be happy to help, Eri.”

Shinsou emerges from the hallway after Eri all but drags Yaoyorozu down it, making Aizawa suspicious that he was there the entire time, but avoiding the impromptu visit from the students. The way that Ashido nearly tackles him into a hug before she remembers herself makes Aizawa

concerned it could be due to her, but Shinsou seems unconcerned by the odd handshake she offers instead.

He's not sure why that got started, but as long as Shinsou was comfortable with it, he wouldn't say anything. "Ashido and Yaoyorozu were asked to come in Midnight's place. If you'd rather have Hizashi try, we can wait until he's ready."

Shinsou shakes his head, staring at his occupied hand while Ashido seems oblivious, swinging it back and forth. When Shinsou looks up and glances down the hall, Aizawa nods, once again giving permission to something that didn't require it.

He knew it would be a process. And he knew that at times, familiar reassurance was a better option than a challenge. Shinsou was making progress in other areas, quite boldly if last night's game with Hizashi was any indication, and if reassurance was the foundation that allowed him to do it, Aizawa would give it.

But Aizawa finds himself doubting that Hizashi ever had to do that, and hates the reason for the difference all the more for it.

*

"Aw! All these cute little cats!" Ashi gushes, tapping one of the cat statues' waving paw with her finger, before she plucks the purple haired doll up by its hair. "You still need to curse him. Like, right before his math midterm, because Bakugo just *thinks* he's gonna ace it, but if I slip him just a *little* bit of Benadryl-"

27 shakes his head, unwilling to let a hero become a criminal for his sake. "It's fine."

27 said it just to test it, to make sure the mask was really open. And it was. Those words came out effortlessly.

He doesn't know why. If Ashido asks, he doesn't have a single reason to give her, but luckily she doesn't. She just smiles to herself, before she puts the doll back in its place. Her eyes catch on Mocha, still lying on the bed, but she doesn't mention him, and he's grateful.

"So, 'Hizashi', huh?" Ashido says, her eyebrows dancing suggestively as she leans to the side. "I mean, I guess they must be *close*, living together with two kids, Aizawa-sensei calling him his first name-"

"They're married," 27 says, utterly confused by how Ashido seems to be implying it rather than saying it outright. It shouldn't really be news to her, she's been at this place far longer than he has and there's no reason-

He forgot the reason. He remembers it when Ashido freezes, but his owner didn't want his students to know that. He guards their relationship, their closeness, because it's distracting to the students. And 27 shouldn't distract them, not during Midterms.

"Don't-"

"*Oh my god*," Ashido groans, hiding her face behind her hands. "Oh my god, I thought- Ms. Joke *said!* The forbidden, star crossed lovers separated by different schools! It was so tragic, but not as tragic as All Might's love story! Falling for a younger man, at the twilight of his career- '*A STAR IS BORN!*'"

27 doesn't know what that English phrase is supposed to mean, but Ashido looks at him with such

a desperate expression before she reaches out, almost grabbing his shoulders before she pulls her hands back in a huff.

“*I can't*-ugh, I can't *believe* it! But I have to! I have intel direct from the source! Aizawa-sensei and Mic-sensei...” Ashido trails off, collapsing on his desk chair. “I guess! I guess it works! It's just... they're so *different*, I thought Aizawa-sensei barely even *liked* Present Mic.”

“Yamada is different,” 27 says with a shrug. Ashido stares at him intently, narrowing her eyes after a while as a plea for more information, but 27 doesn't have it. He doesn't know how to put it into words, just that it *is*. That Yamada is different from Present Mic, and it's entirely intentional.

Ashido sighs and hangs her head, but as usual, her pouting doesn't last long. “So! Are we gonna do Eri's make-up? Midnight told YaoMomo to bring her stuff, but I have some really cute setting powder that works as a blush, since, you know,” Ashido trails off, pointing at her own pink face before she presses her hands to her cheeks. “Eri is just *so cute*! She's gonna be so cute, all dolled up for her first Shichi-Go-San! How do you even *stand* how cute she is?!”

27 shrugs, but he tries to fight a smile. “I'm used to it.” But while Ashido is distracted by her cooing, he remembers that the makeup isn't for Eri. They must not have been told the full plan. “And I need a disguise, so the makeup is for me.”

Rather than being slightly uncomfortable with that, like Yamada and his owner seemed to be, Ashido looks even more excited. “Really?! Man, the guys are always such *wusses* about makeup, Even Mr. Manly himself only lets me do face masks. Kaminari only let me do it that one time-Oh, this is going to be so much *fun*! I'm gonna make you look gorgeous, Shinny!”

With that, Ashido barrels out of the room, nearly knocking into Yamada before he jumps back. Yamada still has that unnerving strain in his smile, that same nervous energy he had this morning when he chugged a cup of coffee and quickly ran back to his room to get ready. At least he looks mostly ready now, dressed in the style of clothes that the festival requires even if his hair is still flat and slightly wet. “Looks like Alien Queen was called in at the last minute! Having fun though, little listener?”

The mask shut. 27 opens his mouth out of habit, and feels the words catch there. He looks away, wondering if Yamada would find some offense to it, if he heard those words come so easily with Ashido but not to him.

“It's okay, you know,” Yamada says, softer and more like himself. “I'm really happy for you.”

When 27 looks up, trying to catch whether Yamada means that, whether it's really not an insult or if his words are just words meant to disguise it, Ashido sprints back inside. “Okay, so YaoMomo doesn't have *nearly* enough cool tones, but this eyeshadow should really make your eyes pop! And this concealer- *oh I can't believe I'm actually holding this*. It's. *So*. Good.”

27 eyes the enormous bag and collection of items fisted in each of Ashido's hands, and Yamada laughs nervously from the doorway. “Well, I guess I should pull out Sho- uh, Eraserhead's wig collection to make sure everything pops, then! Just a little commercial break and we'll be back in no time!”

Ashido's tense smile and wide eyes builds up into a muted scream after Yamada leaves, and though she snaps back into her usual personality after he hands off a box full of wigs, she quickly closes the door behind him. “Oh god, it's real, I really can't- Shinny, I *can't*. ”

27 just shakes his head, her hysteria seems oddly misplaced. “It's not that weird.”

Ashido just rolls her eyes before she sits on the bed in front of him, picking at her tools before she sighs. “Like, yeah, it’s not *weird* , it’s just.... I literally had no idea.” Her eyes linger on the box of wigs for a while, before she catches herself and claps her hands. “Right! Makeover time! What look are you going for? Maybe bring out your eyes, bring more attention to your jawline-”

“Less,” 27 says, too quickly before he catches himself, pressing a fingertip to one of the twin scars on his jaw, where the underside of the mask would hold his jaw shut. “The...scars. I could be recognized.”

Memory and Bug only took the mask off once, but they wouldn’t have to remember where exactly those wounds were. It was easy to tell what made those scars. When he looked at them, he could see exactly which piece of metal dug into them. Could almost feel it there, sometimes.

Ashido’s enthusiasm has withered again, and this time it seems to be for a deeper reason. She picks at her tools, biting her lip, before she looks up and notices that he’s seen it. He doesn’t know what to say, to try and reassure her, but he hates that he does this. That he always seems to make her sad when she’s usually so happy.

But she looks at him and grins, even if it’s forced. “It’s fine! It’s just, I’m an airhead, so I kind of... forgot about that stuff. With the villain school, but.” She picks up that stick that she had stared at so reverently before, her hands almost seeming to shake before she holds it out for him. “This will peel those bad boys right off! We’ll get you looking like the pretty little Shinny you are on the inside!”

He can’t help but raise an eyebrow at that. The ‘Shinny’ he was on the inside couldn’t look different from how 27 looked. The scars, the circles under his eyes - that’s how 27 looked. He’s always looked that way underneath the mask.

But the ‘Shinny’ that Ashido saw was that boy that went missing 12 years ago. That boy that looks so different from himself that he doesn’t know if it really could be him. There were similarities, and they were uncanny. The hair, the eyes, the mother.

It would just be easier if he wasn’t that boy. If he could just stop wondering what that boy did, what he felt. If he could have behaved, if he could have been normal.

If he wouldn’t have been sold if he had just been quiet.

Ashido’s fingertip directs him to lift his head and turn towards her, and he looks to see that concentration she wears, tongue poking out and everything. “Must be hard to make me pretty,” 27 says, just to break that ridiculous concentration, and he does.

Ashido pulls away, rolling her eyes while she laughs under her breath. “*Shinny* , you’re like, stupidly pretty. Like, even the eye circles. I have to hide mine so I don’t look like a crazy person, but yours just make me want to tuck you into a little blanket burrito and make you take a nap. And your *hair* , I am so insanely jealous about how soft it is! I’m not leaving until I know your secrets.”

“Hair masks,” 27 answers, and doesn’t consider making that information into a trade.

He’s too curious to know if he would look as normal without the scars.

*

Yaoyorozu finds it hard to get Eri to sit still long enough to finish the intricate braid, and once again wishes that she had a little more experience with young children because of it.

With the pin secured in place, Yaoyorozu checks the braid one more time before deciding that it's perfect. Not a single strand out of place, the braid coiling around in a circle at the back of Eri's head, only a trailing whisp at the corner of her forehead is left out stylistically. Eri turns around, smiling just so with her gap tooth, and Yaoyorozu can't help it.

Eri looks *adorable*. There's a specific reason why humans tend to think of 'squishing' things that are aesthetically appealing in that way, but Yaoyorozu can't remember it at all right now. She takes care to keep her hands to herself, her smile reassuring and calm, but inside she's *screaming* to grab Eri in a tight embrace and shake her back and forth until *something* happens to stop her.

Ashido says 'until she pops,' and Yaoyorozu thinks that's a very apt turn of phrase.

"Do I look as pretty as you are, Momo?" Eri asks, her fingers pressed to her cheeks in a pose and Yaoyorozu wants to *pop them* specifically, but she doesn't. She remains calm.

"You look very beautiful, Eri. And I'm flattered that you think I'm pretty as well, but you're much cuter than I was at your age," Yaoyorozu says, trying in vain to not remember her own Shichi-Go-San portrait. "Do you want to show Aiz-"

"Twenny!" Eri says, eyes widening as though she had just remembered that Shinsou existed. "Momo, can you *please* be friends with Twenny? He needs girl friends and he needs friends that are smart. Ashi is really nice, and Ugo is kinda smart, but if you were friends with Twenny you could come over all the time and I'd be super happy! My quirk would work right in no time!"

Yaoyorozu tries to be the calm figure for Eri, to be reassuring even when it seemed that the excitement of the day was getting to her. "If Shinsou would like to be friends with me, I'd be happy to be friends with him. It just takes time for those relationships to grow."

Eri frowns a bit, a bit too disappointed for Yaoyorozu to overlook that their usual science study days have been a bit lacking between Shinsou arriving to UA and Midterms.

"But after this week, we'll be able to spend more time together. I know we haven't had a good experiment session for a while, but I have several ideas for one. And if Shinsou would like to join us, I've been trying to learn sign language to make it easier for him."

Yaoyorozu signs 'Good Morning,' one of the few signs she's actually confident enough to show Shinsou, and Eri's eyes widen again. "You should show him! Come on!"

Yaoyorozu tries not to laugh, dragged by the hand by a 5 year old who's far more excited to show off Yaoyorozu's attempts to learn JSL than her own incredibly adorable outfit. But when Eri opens the door and drags Yaoyorozu inside, she knows that she's probably invisible to Shinsou right now.

"Twenny! Momo did my hair to look like a princess! Does it look cute?" Eri says, spinning around once in a practiced manner, arms outstretched. While Ashido squeals, clutching the wig in her hand a bit too hard, Shinsou smiles before he ducks his head.

He wipes an eye with the back of his hand quickly before he turns back, but the emotion is still audible in the way his voice breaks. "Yea- Yeah, you really look beautiful, Eri."

Ashido seems to melt at that too, covering her eyes with her forearm. "*Shinny*, don't make me cry! I'm going to *cry*."

Shinsou huffs a laugh, swallowing before he wipes at his tears again, and Eri notices. "No! Don't cry, Twenny! I don't want to make you cry!"

Eri puts her hands on his knees, pleading with him not to be upset, but he gives her a watery smile before he smooths over the whisp of hair framing her face. “It’s not that I’m sad, you’re just...” Shinsou tries to hide his tears again before he breathes out. “I’m really happy. I’m really happy that we get this.”

Yaoyorozu has to bite her own lip, to try to fight the tears, but Ashido has no such qualms. She scrubs both hands over her eyes to try to hide it, but the pained twist of her mouth makes it clear how bitter that reminder is.

They get this. Eri gets to go to Shichi-Go-San, Shinsou gets to go with her. Those little moments after the rescue, because of it, that Yaoyorozu never considered before meeting Eri.

Whether it was a fight, or relief after a disaster, whatever impact a hero made on a civilian wasn’t always known about. If Yaoyorozu had been a part of the raid, and if Eri didn’t become a ward of UA, she probably wouldn’t have thought twice about the impact that her work would have made on Eri’s life.

It was the small things that mattered the most. Being able to live a better life after tragedy. It was easy to forget that so many years held nothing but tragedy for Eri, but it was a driving force for Yaoyorozu, and for many of her classmates, to make up for them regardless. To give Eri a better life, so that she could forget those dark years too.

And Yaoyorozu notices that Ashido has been hard at work to strip away those dark years for Shinsou too. “Twenny, your face is different,” Eri gasps, poking at Shinsou’s cheek where the scars have been artfully concealed, as though they weren’t there at all.

“Yeah, I’ve been peeled,” Shinsou says, and Ashido snorts a watery laugh. “Looks better.”

Shinsou’s voice becomes more even when he says that, and Eri quirks her lips to the side. “I like both, if that’s okay. I like you with the marks, but you look pretty like this too.”

Shinsou smiles at her, tugging on the end of her free lock. “Yeah, that’s okay.”

“But, the look isn’t complete!” Ashido says, sniffing hard before she holds up a white wig, haphazardly styled to look a bit more like Shinsou’s current hairstyle. “We’re gonna put this bad boy on him so...” Ashido’s voice catches, and she turns her head away and blinks hard, clearing her throat. “So Shinsou really looks like your older brother, Eri!”

Yaoyorozu nearly turns away at that, considering the odds that she would be noticed if she slipped away to take a few minutes in the bathroom to collect herself. But Eri gasps and looks to her, before she looks back at Shinsou. “Momo can do your hair! You gotta have a ponytail to wear a wig, and Zawa lets Yama do it, but Momo can-”

Shinsou shakes his head, clearing his throat. “I’d like it if you did that, Eri. If that’s okay.”

Eri nods, nearly getting tangled in her kimono when she tries to get onto the bed before Shinsou lifts her easily. “Tell me if it gets kinda pinchy, though!”

“I will,” Shinsou says with a nod, before Eri takes a brush and hairband from Ashido and sets to work.

Eri is occupied for all of 10 seconds before she looks up at Yaoyorozu, beckoning her to come closer. Yaoyorozu does, but she imagines that’s not all of what Eri wants her to do, and she fumbles to know how to do it. “I’ve been learning a little bit of sign language from Koda, but I’m still learning, so I apologize if I get a sign wrong.”

‘ *Fine* ,’ Shinsou signs, a bit slower than he usually does, and sets his phone beside him, possibly to message her if it’s necessary for their conversation.

But Yaoyorozu honestly doesn’t know how to start one. She tends to talk about classes and homework assignments more often than not, to make sure her classmates aren’t silently struggling for help. With the other girls, she can talk about makeup or fashion trends.

With Shinsou, she doesn’t know a single thing to say that wouldn’t bring up something painful for him. Except one thing.

“Eri told me that you read a lot of books,” Yaoyorozu offers, catching Eri’s brightened smile and nod, though Shinsou seems to stiffen. “And that you guided her education.” Yaoyorozu tries to smile more to hide how much she hates that she brought that up, bringing up something painful when she was trying to avoid doing that. “She’s one of the most educated and inquisitive 5 year olds I’ve ever met, and I’m sure that you were a guiding force behind that.”

She knows that Shinsou seems more open when talking about Eri, at least based off of his messages in the group chat. She had hoped it would be the same in real life, in person, but based on the way that Shinsou glances away, his hands folding in on themselves, that seems to not be the case.

Ashido seems oblivious to Yaoyorozu’s struggle, still combing that wig into a wild shape even when Yaoyorozu tries to stare harder to try to get her attention.

‘ *You. Thank you.* ’ Shinsou signs, and though he still signs slowly, she doesn’t know what the other signs that follow mean.

Her confusion must have been more apparent than she wanted it to be, but rather than turning to the phone, he uses fingerspelling.

‘ *E-R-I H-A-T-E-D S-C-I-E-N-C-E. C-O-U-L-D-N-T L-E-A-R-N W-H-A-T S-H-E D-I-D-N-T S-E-E. S-H-E K-N-O-W-S A L-O-T B-E-C-A-U-S-E O-F you* ,’ Shinsou signs, a half smile on his lips while he looks at his hands, but when he looks back to Yaoyorozu, he smiles wider, more gratefully. ‘ *Thank you.* ’

Yaoyorozu finds that she can’t fight the tears anymore, especially in this. She smears her eyeliner when she catches the first that falls, and manages to choke out, “Thank you, Shinsou. Tha-at makes me r-really happy. I’m so-orry.”

She all but runs to the bathroom in the hallway, bracing her head with her elbows on the counter while she tries in vain to gather herself. She’s embarrassing herself in her own teacher’s home, crying in a bathroom when she should be helping, but she *can’t* .

She can’t believe she made a difference for Eri.

She’s wanted to, she’s always wanted to. She’s tried to be the steady reassurance, the outreached hand for everyone who needs it, and especially for Eri. Snacks and science lessons, tutoring for her classmates. She’s never wanted that kind of gratitude, that heartfelt smile that Shinsou gave her, but now that she has it.

It feels *nice*. It warms in her chest enough to make her ache, and it isn’t deserved, *at all* . She didn’t fight to free Eri, she hasn’t made nearly as much time as she’s wanted to for her. Too often she just brushes that pleading look from Eri aside, telling her that she’s busy, she’s studying, she’s so exhausted from training that she feels like she’ll collapse into a heap.

She just answers questions. She just guides Eri to know how to ask them. She wouldn't even call it tutoring, not with how unstructured it is, not with how little thought Yaoyorozu puts into it. She finds most of her child-friendly experiments online and copies them, and has never once thought that half-effort was meaningful.

It's so small, so small that it couldn't possibly *be* meaningful.

But it's the small things that make the difference. The way life goes on after the tragedy, that makes a hero's work worthwhile.

Yaoyorozu risks a look in the mirror after she steadies her breath, and frowns at what she sees, nearly stomping a foot in a way that would make her etiquette teacher bristle from miles away. Her makeup is *ruined*, her eyeliner can't possibly be salvaged when it's run completely down her face, but she sets to work with a bit of toilet paper to at least not appear too crazy.

Even if she feels crazy. She feels crazy and absolutely *giddy* to know that she's made a difference. Not heroic in the traditional sense, but heroic nonetheless.

She made a difference in someone's life. She fought the dark cloud hanging over someone in a different way, but in a useful way nonetheless. She undid Overhaul's work in a way that mattered a great deal to Eri, and to Shinsou, and when she looks in the mirror again, she swears to undo it even more.

She swears to be there in every way that Eri needs her, to remember that even their little science studies don't just bring out an interest in the subject for Eri. They rewrite her history, and Yaoyorozu can do that for her.

When she opens the door, Ashido and Eri are standing there, both concerned enough to make her laugh a bit in her own embarrassment. "Sorry, I just got a little emotional. Midterms and everything."

"It's okay, Momo! Twenny said he's sorry," Eri says, and Yaoyorozu can't find it in herself to keep from resting a hand on her head in reassurance.

"No, Shinsou said something that made me so happy I cried, so he shouldn't feel sorry for it," Yaoyorozu says, finding herself tearing up again at just the memory of it, but refusing to let the tears fall again. "I should probably apologize for running out like that-"

"Nah, I'll let him know, but we should blow this popsicle stand," Ashido says, a worrying strain in her smile before she takes Yaoyorozu by the arm and nearly drags her to the door. "Bye Eri! Have fun at Shichi-Go-San!"

"I hope you have a lovely time!" Yaoyorozu says, while Eri bids them farewell. When Ashido closes the door behind them, she finally breathes out, bracing her freehand on the door while the other holds Yaoyorozu's makeup caddy. "What's wrong?"

Ashido shakes her head before she pulls herself to standing. "Jeez, *a lot* ! So much! I just- they wouldn't have given us a sex wig if they didn't want us to use it, right?!"

Yaoyorozu can only *hope* that Ashido offers an explanation after she calms down.

Ashido takes another steadying breath, handing off the caddy just to shake out her hands, pulling a face of disgust. "Ugh, if I touched a sex wig I'm gonna need to wash my hands with my own *acid*, Momo! It's just- *EW*. *Why?!*"

“Ashido,” Yaoyorozu says, trying in vain not to betray the swirl of confusion and horror mixing inside her. “What are you talking about?”

Ashido sighs in exasperation, before she lifts her hand to count. “One, Mic-sensei and Aizawa-sensei are married. Two, that means they’re boning, and *EW!* I mean, okay, I get it, but it’s like... Not okay to think about that?! Like, I know them and I see them and it’s-”

“Not different from any other married couple,” Yaoyorozu reminds, though not as sternly as she should while her own mind is trying to process whether Ashido actually knows this to be fact or if this is another incorrect assumption of hers.

“Okay, *right*, it’s not because they’re gay or bi or, you know. It’s like finding out your parents have sex, right?!”

Yaoyorozu hopes that her own blank face doesn’t betray how much she agrees with Ashido. It would be hopelessly immature of her to think that way about her teachers, and somehow even worse due to her position as Vice President.

“Okay, so Mic-sensei gave us a box of wigs, and we picked that one, and I made it look cute and all, and I have a pic of Shinsou wearing it to prove it, but when Aizawa-sensei saw it I thought I was *going to die*. He looked like he was going to kill and then *eat us*,” Ashido says, counting down for ‘kill’ and ‘eat’ for unknown reasons. “But he said that Shinsou didn’t have to wear a wig, even though Mic-sensei said he did, so I think I picked a sex wig. And I was holding a sex wig in my hands. A sex wig that Aizawa-sensei and Mic- and just *EW!*”

Ashido shakes out her hands again, and Yaoyorozu struggles to find any other explanation. And hopes that there is one. “Or maybe Aizawa-sensei didn’t know that Mic-sensei wanted Shinsou to wear a wig? And he might have his own reasons for him not to?”

Ashido looks like she wants to protest, but a new look of horror crosses her face, before it falls. “Oh. It was white, so it... might have looked bleached.”

Yaoyorozu finds herself looking away from that, unsettled by the reminder. “That might have been the case. It’s good to know that Shinsou didn’t see it that way, but... You did a very good job styling it.”

Ashido offers her a grin that isn’t nearly as bright as it usually is, before she laces her arm around Yaoyorozu’s. “I mean, I was working with some really expensive stuff, so it was easy. And *oh man*, everyone is gonna be jealous that we saw Eri dolled up for Shichi-Go-San in the flesh! They have to make due with the picture, but we got the real deal, YaoMomo!”

Yaoyorozu finds herself smiling, even if it is a bit unfair. And she finds it even more unfair that Ashido can do that, to bring a smile to someone’s face even after such a dark reminder.

But even if she’s jealous, she knows that she can do the same for Eri, just differently.

*

Shinsou, as they expected, was visibly anxious at first. He nearly stumbled into Eri a few times, hovering close to her with his eyes constantly working the small crowd. They made sure to keep close as well, to pick a smaller shrine that would be even less populated than others when most families chose to celebrate on a weekend rather than a weekday.

Even when Shinsou did seem to relax, to take in the fact that the majority of the attendants were elementary school children, he kept close to Eri and close to Aizawa.

And Aizawa found himself wishing that he didn't.

He had no idea that they would pick that wig, that they would style it afterwards. It wasn't close, it shouldn't have been anything close, but the sight rattled him nonetheless. White hair, white pupils, the shape of that jaw. Even things that weren't present kept coming back to him, kept compounding a comparison he didn't want to make.

Hizashi seemed shocked when he asked, but confirmed it nonetheless. *"Before the hair dye, it was... it was a little hard to look at. It's a little uncanny."*

It *was* uncanny, and it shouldn't be. Shinsou shouldn't look anything like Shirakumo, Aizawa couldn't afford to look at him that way. It was unfair, it was unprofessional, it was *disturbing*.

Aizawa finds himself focusing on the differences instead, whenever he looks at Shinsou. The blank expression, the purple hair still tied back in a small ponytail. The scars hidden beneath makeup and beneath the black turtleneck he wears under the purple gradient kimono.

The purple cat ears.

Even if he knows it's just a headband, carefully and mostly obscured by the ponytail, it's...oddly well suited to his hair color. And as much as Shinsou looked like he wanted to complain when Hizashi proposed the idea, once he saw the headband in place, he seemed to lose that ability to fight. Especially when Eri screamed how cute it was at the top of her lungs, jumping with her enthusiasm.

Aizawa notices Shinsou's pointed stare at the vendor hosting a game of throwing darts at balloons, eyes narrowing when Eri says she wants to play that game. "He's cheating. It's not a fair game, Eri."

Aizawa finds himself knocked from his own thoughts by that statement. "How so?"

Shinsou glances at him, before he points at the vendor. ' *Quirk. I don't know what kind.* ' Shinsou pinches his forefinger to his thumb, then signs again. ' *Does that. D-A-R-T drops. Not natural.* '

Aizawa can't help but be impressed, nor can he help the vicious grin that pulls as an idea comes to mind. "Using his quirk illegally to scam children is textbook villainy. It would be a shame if two heroes happened to put a stop to it."

Hizashi rolls his eyes, but moves to tighten the half-bun Aizawa's hair is styled into regardless. "You know I can't hit those balloons even if you did get rid of his quirk. Unless I used mine, and then we'd have the police called out for a completely different act of villainy."

Shinsou points to his chin, and nearly matches Aizawa's sadistic smirk, before he tells Eri to start picking out prizes.

It works exceptionally well. Aizawa doesn't even feel the strain of using his quirk repeatedly, knowing that he only needs to cancel the quirk for a fraction of a second. Shinsou doesn't waste a single dart, and with the system that the vendor set in place to earn one more dart for every successful throw, they're able to earn the giant cat plushie with only 300 yen spent.

The vendor attempted to protest, to claim that Shinsou was using a quirk to win, but a flash of Hizashi's hero license made him pale long before the loud and well-deserved dressing down. The children who had been milling around the stall left only slightly before the vendor began disassembling his stall, grumbling all the while about lost revenue.

But while Eri and Hizashi step aside to pose inside a cartoon cut-out, Aizawa can't help but wonder how good Shinsou is at picking out quirks. It's an incredibly useful skill, and one that he wonders if Shinsou is better at than him. "What other quirks do you see?"

Shinsou scans the crowd again, before pointing at a family milling about close to the shrine's entrance. '*Father strength. Mother cat. Child tiger.*'

Aizawa finds himself in agreement. Strength enhancement more often than not led to a larger body frame and muscle mass, and beneath the suit, that man had both. The thin woman beside him moved with almost unnatural fluidity, but the obvious tell was the cat ears poking out of her loose bun. The child had smaller ears, and though she was young and her kimono was loose, there was no denying the broadness of her shoulders.

It was a disturbing twist on 'people watching,' but one that he didn't mind playing at all. While Hizashi seemed to huff every time Aizawa instigated the game, he stopped once Shinsou pointed out a man who by all accounts seemed to have no obvious quirk. '*I don't know. E-M-I-T-T-E-R probably.*'

Aizawa found himself at a loss as well, until he caught sight of the man's completely blackened eyes and had to look away. "Something to do with his eyes. It's almost certainly an emitter, but I wouldn't rule out transformation either."

He once captured an incredibly disturbing mugger who could project spear-like points from the tar-like substance in his eyes, and that fight was twice as harrowing as it should have been just from the color of it. He could almost hear his mother's scolding every time he focused his quirk on that villain.

Shinsou instigates a few more rounds, but more often than not is distracted when Eri pulls him towards a game or attraction. Aizawa still scans the crowds, still tracks a few challenging subjects to guess, until he realizes that the bags of chitose ame decorating Eri's arms are swelling in number at a disturbing pace.

He has a suspicion, but finds that he doesn't want to prove it, and simply makes a habit of putting money on the counter of every stall that sells that candy when they pass. It was probably Hizashi's fault for impressing upon Shinsou that the candy was meant to promise longevity, happiness, and health for the child that receives it.

Even if it is technically a petty crime, he's sure that it isn't targeting the other children at the shrine, as Shinsou has taken it upon himself to guide Eri away from them every time her eyes widen and stance changes. Shinsou explained it to Hizashi, who signed it to Aizawa after the first few near-misses, that Eri was incredibly fascinated by people or people-like objects that were her own size. She wanted to hug every one of them that she saw.

As much as it was a bitter reminder, of the raid in remembering that puppet that taunted them and the fact that Eri had never been able to socialize with children her own age, it was also a reminder to keep a close eye on her whenever she and Principal Nezu were in the same room. As much as his boss was incredibly generous in some areas, he knew that he was unlikely to be in that one.

Aizawa makes a note to make another call after he checks in with Naomasa, to see if he could call in a favor he honestly doesn't deserve to. And he wonders if it would have an effect on Shinsou as well.

Yamada was trying once again to get Eri to pick the last stall they would visit before going to the photographer, but it seemed that every time they did and started making their way back to the exit, her eyes would catch somewhere and he'd cave again. And make that offer again.

At least they were close enough to the exit that this one might actually be the last.

27 finds himself surprised by Eri's tugging on his sleeve, almost sure that she would have picked his owner to have the honor of playing the last game. "Twenny, we can catch a fish! Like a pokemon!"

27 finds himself smiling again, his cheeks sore with the effort of doing that nearly all day. "It's a little different," 27 says, eyes scanning the rule board to see if this was another stall where the fish were actually exchanged for prizes, but finds that both the board and the fish bowls for sale encourage keeping the fish as a pet. "If we catch it, that man wants us to keep it as a pet."

Yamada doesn't reject that responsibility, his hand falling on 27's shoulder slowly while he grins at Eri. "Well, you have proven that you're very responsible with Beanie. If you wanted to get a pet fish-

"Fishie!" Eri exclaims, already naming the prize that they haven't won. And that light dancing in her eyes, all of her plans already in the making to treasure this first pet, make it impossible to deny her.

He can't help the smile himself, even when it threatens to overwhelm him when he kneels down in front of the large basin with a flimsy paper net. He's cried from happiness too much, too easily, and it's embarrassing. But he's been entrusted with catching Eri's first pet.

A pet that they would never have at the 8 Precepts. A pet that he never had as a child. A pet that Eri deserves, to be happy and normal, and to have everything that a normal little girl wants.

He doesn't doubt that his owner and Yamada will give those things to her, not after today. They can deny her *nothing*, and he's so grateful for that, he nearly cries again.

But he steadies himself, keeping his attention divided between the others who are playing this game to try to find a strategy that works, and the fish that Eri selected. It's one of the wilder ones, its movement's quick, and its solid black coloring with only flecks of orange make it a prize for the other children.

27 lets the shadow cast in the water, careful not to wet the paper before its time. The game is challenging because of the flimsy material, because the timing has to be perfect. When the fish swims close enough, looks like it will slow, he dips the net in at an angle to scoop it up, and pulls it gently to the surface.

You need a good fishing arm.

27 watches numbly while the fish thrashes and breaks free, tearing a hole in the paper net. He barely hears Eri's disappointment, quickly soothed by the stall owner who offers her a pre-caught fish. It's the wrong color.

There's a game that they play at festivals. Usually in the summer, when everyone wears their yukata.

27 tries to hide it when he steps aside, letting his owner try his hand. His owner wins easily, taking two fish in one net in a feat that astounds even the stall owner.

I'm very good at that game, you know. It's very tricky, but I know all the tricks. I...I'll teach you. I'll teach you how to play, how to hold the net and move it. But you need a good arm for that. That's good, 27. We'll... we'll look ridiculous with all the fish we'll catch, all the colors of the festival. All those yukatas, the lights glowing at twilight. We'll see it all, you know. You'll see....

Yamada's hand is gentle on his shoulder, a barely-there touch that startles him enough to see that Eri wants to show her new pets to him, the bag resting in a fish bowl full of water. "Twenny! Zawa got me two fishies, so you can name the white one! What do you want to name him?"

"Te..." 27 swallows that name, even if he feels it should be given. That it could make it up to him in some way, playing that game without 10 by his side, without 10 teaching him how. "Fishio."

Eri beams at that, and hugs Fishie and Fishio to her chest tightly, making sure not to jostle them too much as they make their way back to the car. 27 finds himself unable to keep watch over their surroundings, even when they move from the relative safety of the festival to a quieter location, better suited for an attack.

27 was young, he was being a brat. 88 had been in a foul mood that day, but judging by the grin, felt better when he fell with his full weight on 27's outstretched arm, shattering it. 10 had spent too long trying to cajole him into letting him heal it, but 27 couldn't convince himself to, out of his mind with pain and convinced that this was the time that 10's touch would hurt him.

But instead of calling for Bug, 10 lied to him. He told him a story meant to soothe a child, even though he knew better than anyone that 27 was a Number, not a child. *"You need a good fishing arm."*

10 knew better than any Number that they wouldn't escape. That they wouldn't go to a festival. But it sounded nice at the time, just imagining the colors, the lights. Imagining what 10 would look like if he smiled like he meant it, if he was happy.

10 didn't go to a festival, but 27 did. 27 didn't escape, but.

It felt like he did.

*

"Well, it's not every day that I get to take pictures of a real life princess!" the bespectacled journalist says, reminding Aizawa that this 'freelance journalist' that visited the Class 1-A dorms was not at all the highly-sought after professional that Hizashi had been promised.

The thick smell of cigarette smoke in the cramped studio, hardly broken by all of the air fresheners at work, was another reminder of that.

While the man set to work adjusting his equipment, demonstrating and explaining every part for Eri's curiosity, Hizashi made another rejected call with a glare. His hero manager had clearly screwed them over on the photographer, but his radio station manager didn't seem to deign to fool them. While Aizawa was also in agreement that a 4 star restaurant wasn't at all suited to Eri's tastes, he would have appreciated being able to plan for dinner beforehand, knowing that Hizashi was going to be stewing about it all night.

When the photographer calls for Eri to take her place in front of the slate gray backdrop, the rest of them move behind the camera to keep out of the shot. But before the photographer finishes the countdown, she runs to Shinsou with her hands fisted in his robe. "Twenny, make sure I smile! I really have to take a good picture, so I need to smile right!"

Shinsou looks more disturbed by the implication of that than Aizawa is. Using Shinsou's quirk to make Eri smile for a picture. Aizawa doesn't have time to be disturbed to imagine the finished product, Eri's eyes blank and white and that smile hollow, before Shinsou nods shakily. "You will."

He shakes his head at Aizawa when Eri turns to get back into her place, but the determination set in his face means that he still has a plan to help Eri smile.

Aizawa is too focused on smiling for her, trying to encourage that twitching grin not quite as wide as it should be, to notice Shinsou's plan until it comes to fruition.

He ignores how badly Shinsou's hand shakes when it rests on his shoulder, the fear apparent in the strain of his smile when he glances at Shinsou. He ignores the implications of the gesture, the disturbing manipulation in which he is a pawn. How disturbing that it isn't entirely manipulation, that Shinsou thinks that a friendly gesture like that, despite how forced it is, would make Eri smile.

He ignores it, because it works.

Eri smiles widely, so happily, her missing tooth on full display with her red eyes nearly dancing with light. The photographer takes several pictures, and Hizashi takes several more on his phone, unwilling to wait for the photographs to develop.

It isn't until after their 'family shot,' Aizawa and Hizashi standing behind where Eri sits and Shinsou kneeling at her side, that they find half of those photographs are being developed from the journalist's chest. "I'll do a little color correction and editing on the final shots, but it looked like you guys were excited to see them."

There's more pictures in that stack than the photographer should have been able to take. Several of the pauses between sessions, where Hizashi knelt to encourage Eri or smooth over her kimono, where she ran to Shinsou for reassurance that the pictures were turning out well.

There's one of Shinsou taking his hand away after resting it on Aizawa's shoulder, and Aizawa finds himself surprised to see that the fear he saw wasn't always present. It isn't present at all in that shot.

Even though the bunny ears above his head are.

Aizawa keeps that one, despite Hizashi's protests that all of them need to go into the scrapbook. They can make a copy of it later, but Aizawa will keep it in the pocket sewn into his kimono, next to the capture scarf.

Despite whatever it means, despite knowing how fleeting that moment was, he wants to keep it.

*

Endeavor glares at his phone, ignoring Hawkes' loud chewing and rambling about the crispness of certain beer brands, willing an explanation to be delivered as promptly as it should be. He doesn't want to face the animal principal, not again, but this time it's for a different reason.

Me: SHOTO, ANSWER MY CALL. I WILL STOP PAYING FOR YOUR PHONE SERVICE IF IT IS NOT USED FOR ITS PURPOSE.

Me: EXPLAIN WHY THE EMERGENCY CREDIT CARD HAS REACHED ITS 2,000,000 YEN LIMIT IN THREE DAYS. HAS IT BEEN STOLEN?

Me: YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE ALLOWED IT TO BE STOLEN, OR AT LEAST REPORTED IT TO ME WHEN YOU NOTICED IT WAS MISSING.

Hawkes continues to irritate him, rambling on about the students at UA and even bragging about trying to steal Shoto for an internship that not even Endeavor was able to procure. Endeavor feels the rising urge to storm out from this waste of his time, but allows the young man in front of him one more chance to explain himself.

“Let’s get back to the main topic,” Endeavor growls, and once again has to convince himself that he has to *work* with this blaise, lazy hero glitizing for ‘selfies.’ “The modified human ‘Nomus.’ The League of Villains’ abomination.”

Endeavor wants to know whatever information Hawkes has, whatever use he can be made for. To destroy this threat that even All Might failed to, leaving the panic and fear and horror from the Nomus’ mere existence as Endeavor’s task.

Endeavor needs to know more about the Nomus to stop them, but the quickly approaching speck on the horizon intends to educate him in a different way.

*

Aizawa gets the call after he finally convinces Hizashi to settle for a nice family-style restaurant, but he ignores it. After they order, a far longer process for his wards and especially for Shinsou, he excuses himself to the bathroom, finding himself unnerved to see four missed calls.

“Did the Furokages talk?” Aizawa asks, caught between hope that they did and irritation that he wasn’t there to oversee it, that Naomasa wouldn’t have let him know that they had come to the station a day earlier than planned.

“*Have you seen the news?*” Naomasa asks, and Aizawa doesn’t like that small amount of panic threaded in the detective’s even voice. “*Endeavor was almost defeated by a Nomu. On live television.*”

Naomasa says more, but he doesn’t have to. Aizawa barely hears it under the swelling pressure, the boot he was waiting for dropping at last. Naomasa is in the middle of saying something, but Aizawa cuts him off. “Get the Furokages. We need them to talk.”

Todoroki lingers in the back of his mind, a decision already made to go to his dorm shift early to take over for Toshinori. But at the forefront is Shinsou, that trembling hand on his shoulder, that grateful yet watery smile, that smirk.

He knows Shinsou won’t talk, and he knows that he won’t force him. But he needs to protect him regardless.

50 Found

Chapter Summary

27 uncovers some secrets that his owner and Yamada have been hiding from him, and finds a new level of cruelty to his mutism. Aizawa meets with the Furokages and tries to follow that lead as far as it will go.

Chapter Notes

We're close to 13k hits... On Friday the 13th... Wonder what happens if we reach it? ;)

Trigger Warnings: Insensitive comments relevant to context (Yamada states that there's no reason for a parent to give up their child, but that isn't meant to be taken outside of the specific context it was spoken. There certainly are real-world situations where a child would benefit from proper removal from their biological parents), a lot of 50 content, Bug's quirk

Previously on Wards of UA: Yamada and Aizawa created a system for Shinsou to clap to allow them into his room, since he can't tell them verbally. Shinsou believes that his quirk gave his mother Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, and that because she is missing in France, she killed herself as a result of it. Shinsou went to school with Ashido before he was sold to The Miasma. Aizawa promised to work with Shinsou for the rest of the investigation and keep him informed if the circumstances changed so that more pressure is on the investigation. Chisaki is dead, but Shinsou does not know that. Shinsou's mother knows French, and taught Shinsou a few words before he was sold, which he remembers vaguely. Ms. Joke sent face masks for Shinsou in a box that had Aizawa's birthday present and an angel costume for Eri, but Aizawa didn't want to give the face masks to Shinsou as Shinsou had stopped picking at his clothes to imitate the mask he wore at the 8 Precepts. Shinsou refused to eat while he was living at the police station, to the point that he had to be force fed every three days. Aizawa mentally repeats his class roster when he needs to ground himself during moments of panic. When Yamada showed Shinsou a scrapbook page with Shirakumo and explained how he died, Shinsou signed 'I'm sorry for your loss,' and wondered what it would feel like if someone offered that sentiment to him when 50 died.

27 only risks it on the hope that Yamada won't tell his owner, because his owner isn't there like he should be and Yamada is angry about that. He waits until Eri is asleep, and doesn't have to wait long with how exhausted she is, before he gently pulls himself away from her to walk to his owner and Yamada's bedroom, waiting for a sign that Yamada might still be awake.

After he gets it, the sound of something being hung up by the sound of metal clicking against metal, he works up the courage to knock before he loses his nerve.

Yamada doesn't clap, has no need to, and simply opens the door with slightly widened eyes,

concern still apparent in his smile. “Hey, Shinsou. Can’t sleep?”

There must be a way to tell when he doesn’t. He’s never paid attention to it but perhaps the rings under his eyes become more pronounced. 27 shakes his head. ‘ *Nightmares. When I do. Can.* ’ Despite himself, despite the fact that this was his plan, that he accepted not only being denied, but being ridiculed, being punished for being weak and daring to ask for help, he has to force himself to complete the sign. ‘ *Can you help?* ’

Yamada smiles, that soft reassuring smile, before he touches his shoulder as part of his new habit. “Sure, of course I can. Let’s make some tea first, that might help out a bit. There’s some medicine that Shou takes, but since we don’t know what dose you should be on… Not the best idea. Sleep aids help too, though.”

Yamada rambles, but goes silent when he prepares the tea, when he gives a cup to 27 and then to himself. 27 breathes in the muted floral scent, somehow similar to the lavender scent for Mocha, before he recognizes it. Chamomile tea. It’s recommended for traumatized children, it’s soothing. It is, 27 notes as he drinks it.

Yamada takes a sip himself before he runs a hand through his hair, sighing. “It can sometimes help to talk about it too, but I understand if you don’t want to. Shou… never really does either.”

27 can’t quite help himself, not when he knows that this is the only thing that can pull Yamada from that quiet, sullen mood. ‘ *Can’t. I’m mute.* ’ He only gets an eyeroll before Yamada takes another sip, and 27 finds himself falling into a similar quiet.

It would help. The Internet said that it would. He just doesn’t know how to explain it, how much of it to bare. Not everything, even if Yamada knows that he killed his mother, he won’t say it himself. He won’t make it that real.

‘ *My mom,* ’ 27 signs, refusing to look up from the tea. Even if he’s blind to what Yamada thinks of that, what he knows, he doesn’t want to know anyway. ‘ *Rejecting me. I know why. I dream that. I don’t know. How to stop.* ’

He doesn’t know if he should. If his selfishness would kill the last piece of her remaining in this world, if the last shred of her was clinging to his dreams and reminding him of what he did. If that’s what he deserves, if it’s kinder that he never forgets that way.

But he wants to sleep. He wants to sleep next to Eri like he used to, to find comfort in her warmth so bone-deep that it soothes every wound and worry. He hates the cloudiness of his thoughts, the ache in his limbs, how tired he is that he forgets it, that it feels like he’s getting used to not sleeping.

Yamada is staring at his tea when 27 looks up, his mouth opens and closes before he speaks. “I know you might not want to talk about it,” Yamada says, his voice low and quiet for Eri’s benefit. “But why do you think she’s ‘rejecting’ you in that dream?”

‘ *Bad kid,* ’ 27 signs, even if those words can’t possibly sum up his crimes. ‘ *Wasn’t quiet. Used quirk. Should have learned not to talk. She would be happy now. She would.* ’

She would have kept him if he was mute, like he is now. If he could have been born with the mask. If his words could have caught before they were ever spoken, if she never heard his voice at all.

He could have been a happy, normal child. He could have had a goldfish, he could have gone to festivals like Shichi-Go-San. He could have gone to school with Ashido for years, could have been

a friend instead of the painful reminder that keeps taking her smile away.

Yamada clears his throat, his fingers catching on the corner of his eye before he picks up his mug of tea, though he doesn't drink it. "I, uh. I don't really think you were a bad kid, Shinsou. I really don't think you deserved that, I don't think there's anything that anyone could have done to..." Yamada takes a drink, blinking quickly when he sets it back down, before he looks 27 in the eye. 27 wants to look away from the irritation, the redness that he caused, but he won't. "I was born with my quirk, and when I was a baby, I used it for the first time. I let out a scream so loud that it blew out my parents' ear drums, and... They decided not to take me home from the hospital after that."

27 knew that happened. Children born with powerful quirks, abandoned because of them. The Miasma didn't want to waste the resources to care for an infant, but they kept informants in social services to pick out those who were older and more suited to training. He hated to think what would have happened if Yamada became one of them.

"It's pretty dumb, but I mean, I blamed myself for that for a long time. I knew that I couldn't have controlled it, I was an infant. I couldn't have controlled anything," Yamada says, shaking his head, seeming more shaken by his own words. "But I just kept thinking about how my life would have been different if that didn't happen. If my biological parents would have been different from my real ones. Honestly, I still thought about them before the wedding, wondering if they would even approve."

Yamada laughs, a bitter thing, as if he knows that if his parents didn't approve, they had no right to weigh in on it.

"Parents aren't supposed to abandon their kids. There's never a good reason to, and a kid especially couldn't give them a reason. I don't care if you used your quirk to rob a bank at the ripe old age of four, even if you committed the worst crime in history," Yamada trails off, shaking his head. "Shinsou, you deserved a mother who wouldn't give you away. And there's nothing that you could have done, no reason for her to have done that. There's nothing that you should feel guilty for, especially not for your quirk, or for talking. That's... that's so *normal* for a kid, it's not even funny."

Yamada's anger, so bizarre and misplaced, is clear in his tone and the way that his fingers tighten on the mug. 27 should take note of that, take caution for it, but the numb shock stops him from doing that. ' *Gave.* '

Yamada's eyes widen a bit, and he glances to the side before he looks back. "Eri...told Shou that. We had suspicions about something else. The police found the missing child report, and.... We weren't really sold on kidnapping."

Gave. Gave for free.

They thought that he was worthless.

This entire time, they thought his mother just *gave* him away. The usefulness of his quirk, the potential of his training, they thought all of that was equal to the relief that his mother felt to get rid of him. That she wanted to be rid of him so badly that she wouldn't try to leverage his value to get anything else out of it.

But he wasn't worthless. She had gotten something out of it. He didn't know how much, 1,120 goldfish and almost 400 darts couldn't tell him what he was really worth.

But he could know. It could soothe this odd irritation, this anger bubbling where it shouldn't, where it had no right to reside. They really thought that he was *worthless*?

“Shinsou, we don't have to talk about it-”

‘ *Sleep medicine* ,’ 27 signs, desperate to get away from this conversation, regretting that he ever instigated it. What was Yamada's plan, what did he see in him, *why* was he treating him like this when he thought that he was *worthless*?

Yamada gives him the medicine, encouraging him to finish his tea, and 27 does it quick enough to nearly scald his tongue. He washes the mug afterwards, copying what his owner does, anything to avoid looking at Yamada again and to slip out of his gaze without insult. *Worthless*.

He fights to keep it from his signing, to hold himself so tight that he doesn't look as enraged as he is. ‘ *Good night. Thank you.* ’

“Good night, Shinsou. If you want to talk,” Yamada pauses, but 27 doesn't look to see why, doesn't think he can look at him again without betraying it. “I'll be up for a while. Just so you know.”

27 nods, and makes his way to his room, barely able to make sure that Eri is still peacefully asleep, and remembers to turn his laptop away from her.

He finds what he's looking for quickly.

*

Aizawa returns home from the dorm to grab a change of clothes and a thermos of coffee, intent to track down the Furokages and drag them to the station himself if Naomasa has no luck. He knows they have no time, The Commission won't hold anything back now that the Number One hero has been hospitalized by a Nomu, on live television no less.

They probably have a day, two if they're lucky, before Mind Slice would be called in. And as much as he wants to believe that the Furokages can tell them something, a name or a description or a place that caused a young woman to slip into darkness, he knows not to trust in hope.

And he remembers to keep a promise.

When he opens the door to Shinsou's room, he's surprised to see the teenager rising groggily from sleeping at his desk, the laptop open and facing him. Hizashi told him that Shinsou had complained about nightmares last night, had discussed his mother briefly before requesting a sleep aid, shutting down that conversation before it could be made useful.

Aizawa can't quite blame the glare and slow clap on the grogginess from the medication, but he ignores it regardless. Casting a glance at Eri to find her stirring, not awake but not sleeping as deeply as he'd like, he turns to Shinsou. “Come to the kitchen. There's something we need to discuss.”

This time, there's no lightness to Shinsou's footsteps as he follows, and whether the effect of the medication is lingering or if he fought sleep enough to render it almost useless. Aizawa finds himself offering a cup of coffee regardless. He sits down with his own cup, trading a look with Hizashi to offer him the chance to escape this conversation, only for Hizashi to wordlessly deny it.

Aizawa waits until Shinsou takes a sip, his head still propped up by an elbow braced on the table, before he begins. “The Number One hero was attacked by a Nomu yesterday,” Aizawa says,

waiting for recognition in Shinsou's gaze before he realizes that the drug's effect must be heavy enough to prevent it. "The investigation has a higher priority because of it. I will be pursuing another lead today, but I'd like you to keep in mind that anything we can offer The Commission could be critical to preventing another tragedy. And I don't want something like Chisaki to happen again."

Shinsou stares into nothing, the clench of his jaw the only indication that Shinsou is listening. That whatever caused the teenager's foul mood couldn't have been more poorly timed. There's a flash of a frown and glare, before Shinsou signs, '*C-H-I-S-A-K-I again. I don't care.*'

Aizawa glances at Hizashi, to make sure that he won't say it, and sees that he clearly wants to. Aizawa sighs, hoping that with some sleep, Shinsou will be in a more cooperative mood if the Furokages are indeed useless. "Let Hizashi know if that changes."

There's another twitch of a frown, before Shinsou rises from the table, leaving the coffee hardly touched. Hizashi sighs, a bit lighter than the situation calls for. "Well, we finally have a teenager living with us."

Aizawa takes another drink, trying to settle the irrational irritation that rises at that. "He needs to--"

"I know, Shou," Hizashi snaps, before he settles his hands on Aizawa's shoulders, squeezing before he speaks again. "He's going through enough. Just... don't put more on him. More than he can handle."

Aizawa nods, and hopes to keep The Commission from giving Shinsou more than he could handle.

*

Yamada was trying to remember that this was a good thing. That Shinsou being a sullen teenager, locking himself in his room and only casting glares at any offer of food or fun, was a good thing.

It was just a little hard to remember that when Eri herself seemed a little sullen because of it.

Eri traces her finger around Fishio from the outside of the fish bowl and sighs again, despondent that Shinsou would rather sleep than feed their new pets. And she seemed as convinced as Yamada was that he was sleeping, looking down the hallway with her mind working to find a new plan of action after the first ten had failed.

Yamada slips into the office to grab Shouta's gradebook, sure that the excitement of sticker arrangement wouldn't fail him, but as soon as he locks the door he hears a knock on another.

And finds himself staring at the herolet that he half-blames for Shinsou's new attitude. "Oi, your unpaid math tutor needs to do some work on Shitsou. Let me in."

Yamada doesn't consider whether Shinsou is in a conversational mood before he decides to keep his arms bracing the doorway for a different reason. "It's nice of you to make the time, listener, but today isn't the best for that, so I think we'll get a raincheck. And don't you have some stu--"

"Ah, le brouyant!" Aoyama calls, waving his arm as he sprints towards them. "You musn't forget that not all of us have your priviledges, oui?"

The flinch and clenched jaw seemed to make it clear that Bakugo hadn't forgotten that at all, and that perhaps the reason for this impromptu math lesson wasn't entirely selfless.

Aoyama must be Bakugo's assigned 'study buddy' for Midterms, and Bakugo must be *so* enthused

about that, that he'd use his access to the staff dorm to try to escape him. And while Yamada was sure that Shinsou would enjoy having such a friendly and happy-go-lucky person like Aoyama in his life, his habit of dropping into French was a problem. Especially today of all days.

While Bakugo was glaring harder, the pleading clear to see behind the obvious threat, Aoyama was in fact the threat to Shinsou. And while Yamada *could* pull a page out of Shouta's book and threaten to expel both of them if they don't leave, there was a far more subtle and tasteful approach to this.

After all, there was something to be said for turning threats into opportunities.

"Well, I suppose if Aoyama agrees to keep you out of trouble, I can ask Shinsou if he's down for a little study sesh," Yamada says, feeling a bit sadistic to enjoy watching the life fade from Bakugo's eyes at the offer.

"Ah! Visiting le petit violette, oui?" Aoyama says, resting a hand on Bakugo's shoulder only for Bakugo to jerk himself away from it. "You two do seem very close, oui?"

Bakugo hisses at the wink and implication from it, hands curling at his sides in warning. "Fuck. *Off*. With that fucking 'oui' shit! Before I oui the fuck out of you until you're oui'ing dead!"

Aoyama's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, his smile pulling a bit higher. "Oui-"

"Twenny says he wants to!" Eri called, standing in the hallway after slipping away while Yamada was distracted. "And he said he'll help you with the scrapbook, Yama, 'cause he's feeling better now."

Shinsou himself comes into view before Yamada could begin to take back that offer. But while the circles under his eyes are still darker than usual, the glare is replaced with something almost fearful in regret. ' *Sorry. I don't know why. I am sorry.* '

"It's alright Shinsou," Yamada reassures, and finds himself even less willing to let Bakugo and Aoyama in now that his favorite listener seems to be in a mood to talk. But Bakugo takes advantage of his distraction to slip under his arm, inviting himself in to gawk at the goldfish on top of the kotatsu until Eri introduces them.

' *Study. For a little. If okay* ,' Shinsou signs, asking without asking, with his eyes still not meeting Yamada's, and Yamada still can't say no. While it wasn't that fun to see those flashes of anger from Shinsou, this meekness was even more unbearable.

"For a bit, yeah! That's fine," Yamada caves, and Bakugo invites himself to Shinsou's room with a pat on Eri's head and a slap on Shinsou's shoulder. Yamada waves off Shinsou's thanks, but before he lets Aoyama follow Shinsou down the hall, he takes his arm. "Hey listener, let me just take a minute from ya!"

Aoyama's tilted head and wide eyes, perhaps a bit excited to spend some time with Shinsou, only made Yamada's request even harder to ask.

"So, I get that it's pretty hard for you to not slip into French, and it's such a beautiful language, I'd love for UA to offer a course to learn it," Yamada says, trying not to ramble yet still finding himself doing so. "But, I'd really appreciate it if you really, really tried not to do it around Shinsou."

"Por quoi?" Aoyama asks, head tilting to the other side. "Shinsou does know some, I- well, I have heard from others, but do not know this myself, of course!" The forced laugh makes it all the more

obvious that Aoyama must have learned that about Shinsou from the ever-so-secret group chat, but Yamada ignores that for now. For whatever reason, the little herolets had decided to keep it a secret, and he'd let them have their fun.

"He does, but it's..." Yamada trails off, juggling the words with his hands before he decides to speak them. "Touchy. Some days it's fine, and others, it's not. It could remind him of something that would be better not to think about. You know?"

That smile falling from Aoyama's face certainly answered that question, and whatever conclusions the student was drawing himself wouldn't need to be corrected. "Oh, of course. I did not know this but... I will do my best!"

Yamada nods, happy to know that even if the language barrier put a little damper on that potential friendship, that Shinsou could still see that not every teenage boy in his little circle had to be so angry and sullen. "That's good! Now, go have fun, I'll bring some snacks by in a bit!"

It isn't until Yamada is halfway through the snack preparations that he realizes that if Shinsou *did* make friends with Aoyama easily, that it might be an indication that he has a certain *preference* in his social group.

One that Yamada himself falls into.

*

27 doesn't let Bakugo preen about the troll doll for long. As soon as French Shine enters and 27 can close the door, he begins his plans to make these two useful to him. '*I am going to be taken away. I need you to distract-*'

"Phone it in, Shitface," Bakugo grumbles, tossing the doll in one hand just to catch it. "You're talking too fast and I haven't had the fucking time to learn more shit."

'*Not going to,*' 27 signs, completely to himself, before he side-steps French Smile to grab a notebook and pen. His hand shakes, but he doesn't care. 'They're going to take me away. Distract Yamada.'

Bakugo misses the catch on the troll doll, glaring at the words on the paper. "The *fuck* do you mean, take you away?! After Trash Bird ate shit, your ass needs to be on lockdown. Fucking..." 27 must have let the mask fall completely, when he notices Bakugo's stare, too calm and too unnatural, he feels how wide his eyes are, his eyebrows raised. "Chisaki got shanked on transit to Tartarus. They didn't tell you that shit?"

No. *No no no no*, Chisaki said *nothing* and The Miasma found him. Chisaki was bound for *Tartarus*, the most secure prison in Japan. *UA has one of the most advanced security systems...*

Chisaki said nothing, and he was killed. 27 already said too much, he told them about Numbers, he told them *specific* things about Numbers, he told them about 127.

It was already only a matter of time. His owner had another lead, a lead that wasn't 27. 27's time was already short, he was already useless, worthless, and now The Miasma was coming to dispose of him before his owner made the time.

27 shakes his head from the fog, he knows there are better ways to do that, but he's too numb, he's too focused from all of them, he just tries to breathe so that the voices that he hears can become words again, but he doesn't care what they're saying. He has something that he needs to say, and he needs them to *listen*.

He underlines 'Distract Yamada' twice, before he adds, 'Office door locked. Investigation behind door. Need in. Need in need in'

Bakugo has a hold in his shirt, pulling him away from the desk, and he lets him, he counts how many ways he could stab Bakugo with the pen while he allows himself to be manhandled to the bed, forced to sit on it. Bakugo waves his arms up and down, and he knows this trick. Bakugo just looks more ridiculous doing it than Rikiya or his owner does.

"This...is not what I had imagined," French mutters, his arms crossed over his chest tightly while he keeps his distance. He doesn't like how fragile 27 is, how easily broken, and it's fine. He won't have to deal with it long, not before someone kills him. His owner or The Miasma, he doesn't have any *time* .

"Fuck *off*," Bakugo hisses, and 27 watches the veins rise from his neck at some strain, some anger. Bakugo is an odd friend, the way he crouches in front of 27 is almost making a shield for him without 27 forcing him to. Maybe he forced him to without realizing it, he needs to stop. Bakugo is a good friend, he shouldn't use him as a shield, not with this. Not when someone is going to kill 27. "Back in fucking orbit, Shitsou?"

27 nods, he feels for tears with shaking fingers but finds none, finds himself relieved at that. '*Need in. Need help.* '

Bakugo still doesn't know enough sign to be useful, rolling his eyes before he runs his hands through his hair. "Fuck it, fuck. You can pick the fucking lock?"

27 nods, and if he didn't feel so exhausted, would roll his eyes too. He already has a disassembled pen for the job.

"Great. Baguette bitch, talk French or cheese at Micsei or some shit, make yourself fucking useful," Bakugo orders French, who takes a moment to consider the situation before nodding and leaving, still avoiding looking at 27. Bakugo looks back at him, slapping his arm before he finds the computer chair and sinks into it, rubbing his forehead oddly. "I can't leave you alone for one *fucking* day, apparently. You're the neediest fucking goldfish in the world, fucking *hell*."

27 listens to the conversation down the hall, trying to work the tremors from his hands. He can't hear the words, but the voices are still too quiet, too stilted. The conversation isn't as engaging as it should be. When he does hear Yamada's voice pick up, a bit louder and a bit more enthused, he hears French Fuck go too quiet.

Before he hears the door open and close, and Yamada says something as though he's confused, to Eri's loud reassurance.

Bakugo pulls out his phone, glaring before he throws it on the floor. 27 doesn't have time to raise an eyebrow at that. If his phone was worth as much as the one that Mirio gave him, he should treat it far better. It was worth more than a 4 year old child.

"Fucking useless, just fucking *left* , fucking," Bakugo takes a deep breath, sighing loudly. "This is why I have fucking minions, and they better lose their fucking detail," Bakugo mutters, picking up the phone to start typing on it.

Whatever Bakugo plans to do, whoever he plans to call, it needed to happen quickly. 27 just tries to hold himself into his body, tries to breathe the shaking out of his hands while he ran through the plan, how to pick that specific type of lock.

27 was worthless to his owner, and a liability to The Miasma. But he needed to know how little time he had.

He had to know when to tell Eri.

*

Yamada considers pretending he's not at home when he hears another knock on the door, before he remembers that Aoyama did leave in a hurry. After just a little exchange in French, one where he knew his accent was a bit slap-shod on some words, Aoyama seemed to wilt before he bid his adieu. But that adieu might have been bid without a book bag or something that Yamada hadn't noticed quite yet.

Instead of Aoyama, though, he sees another blonde herolet and a certain musically inclined student that he certainly didn't expect to see knocking on his door. "Is there a party at my dorm that I wasn't told about?" Yamada asks, hoping that Bakugo wasn't taking some absurd liberties from behind Shinsou's closed door.

Kaminari shakes his head, arms raised in a 'T-pose' behind Jirou. "*We're here to teach you a lesson, old man.*"

While Yamada wasn't too stubborn to be pleased that Kaminari's accent improved dramatically by watching American meme videos, he didn't exactly ask for a demonstration to be delivered to his door. "*I'm your teacher, and if there's any teaching or lessons to be had here, it will be from me. And today is my half day off, so please leave.*"

Jirou huffed, so quickly that if Yamada didn't know any better from her grades, he'd think that she didn't understand him, before she turned back to glare at him. "Your radio show sucks, and you should feel bad."

Yamada *refused* to let that sting. He *definitely* didn't care about what Jirou, a child who hadn't even been weaned at the primordial beginnings of his radio show host career, thought about it. He *absolutely*, couldn't *possibly* give a *shit* what Jirou, a mere *child* who wore the T-shirts but was barely a twinkle in her father's eye during the tour, could *possibly* think about his radio show.

And since Yamada didn't care, at all, he was simply fighting an odd bit of lockjaw when he tried to answer that.

"Oh? And why is that, little listener?" Yamada asks, before he cocks his head, trying not to laugh when he feels so vicious. "I mean, I didn't really peg you for a *fan* or anything, but it's nice to know you tune in so much to listen, *listener*."

Jirou's lip curls, and he knows that this verbal spar has only begun when her eyes begin to darken. "No one can tell you what to play, right? Well, how come the majority of your playlists come from Sony contracts? Your Indie hour is so '*underground*' that not a single featured band doesn't have a contract pending, and your Up and Comings? Have up and *come*. They're old news. You don't have anything new to add, so if an old man like you can't bring anything new to the table, just stick to the 80's thrash scene and stop pretending that's not your wheelhouse."

His lockjaw is just acting up *so bad* Yamada can practically hear his dentist whining in duet with the creak of his molars. At the very least, Kaminari looks like he regrets coming with Jirou, but Jirou doesn't look nearly as full of regret as she *should*. "Oh-ho! Well, you certainly caught my preference, little listener, but there is a little thing called 'investment,' and I can't really throw my voice behind three guys pounding it out in their mom's garage when there's nothing but shoddy

soundcloud and cell phone recordings to back them up! All the talent in the world is useless if I can't direct my listeners to *listen* to something. But, since you're *new* to the music biz, I'll let you in on a little secret - Sony owns *everything*, and if I even paid attention to who's contract is where, I'd drive myself insane trying to find an Indie label with a lawyer that could spell 'right to broadcast,' nonetheless sign an agreement for it."

He knows he's lying, he's lying very poorly and hates his manager all the more for it, but he's determined to not let Jirou *know* that. Because then, she'd *win*.

"But since you have such strong opinions about my show, I'd love to hear them! Maybe I could even get you another internship offer, that way you can really see how my show goes on! You'd learn a whole lot from the experience, I'm sure, like how the best speakers in the world can't really help you if the input is hard to reach!"

Yamada knows that's a bit below the belt, especially coming from a guy who had speakers on his *hands* until his third year. This whole argument has been below the belt and he's supposed to be the adult in this situation, but Jirou narrows her eyes and utters something that seals both of their fates. "You play *Morrissey*."

Yamada hears a distinct popping sound before his eye starts twitching. "*Listen*. Before the dementia set in, that man was a-"

*

Eri looks up at him, finding it odd that he's kneeling in front of the office door with bits of a disassembled pen, but 27 shakes his head and signs '*Danger*,' and *hopes* that she listens to him this time. And thankfully, she does, turning her attention back to the sticker books with a disappointed kick.

He'll explain it later, he'll force the smallest wedge between her and her new fathers if he has to, and he has to do it. This is too important, he has to know what they know.

There's a chance that there's something they don't know, something his owner's lead can't tell them. He knows he's desperate at this point, he knows there's barely a chance, but if he tells them something they don't know, that they want to know, they might keep him. He might make the smallest place for himself here, just enough to deserve their protection. 127 already inspires an odd bit of sadism in his owner, but he can't trust it, can't know it's enough unless he has something to offer to prove it. Unless he earns it.

The lock clicks open, and 27 pulls the bits of pen out, before he opens the door and pulls himself inside. He stands only after he turns on the light, after he checks again and again that there's no one else in the room. This unnamed, unknown 'lead' isn't standing there to taunt him that his place is no place at all, that it's already been filled.

27's eyes fall on an open closet, full of Present Mic and Eraserhead's hero costumes, before he sees the box open in front of it. And though he knows that the information he wants is probably on their desks, or more likely on the laptop, he can't help but check every aspect of this room that they wanted to keep hidden.

And he finds himself swimming in ill-fitting irritation to see what's inside.

'To my sweet cat son! I will steal you again soon, but keep Sushi company until then! -Auntie Emi'

Underneath that note were face masks. Dozens of cotton face masks like the one that Bakugo made him, dozens of face masks with designs and words and cats and whiskers. Face masks that would hide the scars, would hide a crack in his mask, would make it easier to make plays, would hide how his face wasn't natural, wasn't meant to be seen.

Face masks. That were meant for him.

Yamada tried to make him buy something online, to taunt him knowing that he'd never ask for what he really wanted. And what he really wanted was already his, just hidden from him behind this locked door. Already given to him by Emi, but they *kept* it from him, and even if it was their right as his owner and his owner's husband.

It was *wrong*.

27 grabs a handful and puts them in the front pocket of his hoodie, then takes the note and carefully folds it to put in his pants' pocket. The note is reckless, the face masks might have already been counted and noticed anyway, but it doesn't matter. They were supposed to be *his*.

27 remembers himself when Yamada's voice picks up in irritation, and moves to look at Yamada's desk. There's school work, graded assignments and answer keys that Sparky keeps asking for, but 27 won't risk stealing them now. There are more tests meant for 27, for 'Shinsou Hitoshi,' but 27 doesn't care about Shinsou Hitoshi. Shinsou Hitoshi was never born, never able to live the way he should have. Shinsou Hitoshi doesn't have to worry about dying because of that.

His owner's desk probably has what he's looking for, but 27 can't see it.

Not when he sees her.

50.

Her hair is wrong, wet and pulled behind her head. Her eyes are closed, her skin is wrong, and he knows why it's all wrong, he knows when this picture was taken and where.

But her scars are right. They're *right*, he remembered them right, and when he picks up the folder he doesn't dare think of putting it down. He knows that they'll know, but that thought is just a buzz in the back of his skull, and he's too close to drowning in too much, the happiness of seeing her, having her, this odd sadness that swells because he still can't tell her-

They *can't* have her.

27 feels every thought, every swell of every other useless *fucking* thought and feeling become muted in that. They can't have her, they can't have 50, they can't have a single *fucking* thing about her, not her Number and not her scars and *not this picture*.

He's sloppy, and he knows it in the back of his mind. He can't stop to hide the folder inside his hoodie, he barely remembers to turn off the light and lock the doorknob from the inside. He moves quick, too quick to be completely silent, but the distraction has nearly devolved into screaming.

When he gets back to his room, he remembers that he shouldn't have used the heroes, they're distracting but they exact a price, and Bakugo wants to know but he *can't*. 27 won't give him anything about her. "Oi, why the fuck would you take-"

'*Leave*,' 27 signs, then just gestures for Bakugo to leave, swinging his hand from him to the door. He needs him to leave, he needs to put 50 where she's safe, and Bakugo has already made his other places unsafe, enough that he has a new one.

Bakugo stands up, glaring at him. “Fat fucking chance, asshole, I got your distraction, so tell me what the fuck you- *the fuck?!* ”

27 should have taken the knife out earlier, shouldn't have let Bakugo *touch* her, but he has it now, he has it pressed against Bakugo's throat. It wouldn't be easy to kill him, the blade's not sharp enough and he doesn't have much leverage, but it's a threat that he knows Bakugo won't test. He knows he won't, knows that 27 won't use it either, and even if he doesn't, 27 can't. Can't break that promise, not to 50, not *in front of her*. “Leave.”

Bakugo's eyes are too wide, too wide before they narrow, before he shoves 27's hand with a muted explosion that barely sings with the sparks dancing on his skin. “*Fuck* you.” Bakugo's expression darkens before he turns, before he finally *leaves*, and 27 can't bring himself to listen to his exit, to make sure he doesn't say anything. 27 should, because Bakugo *knows*, he knows that he has 50, but 27 doesn't care.

He has 50. He has 50, and he can keep her safe.

He pulls out and unlocks the box, knows that he needs to move it to the vents now, but he can do that later. He puts the note and the face masks inside first, before the folder. There's papers along with the picture, an Autopsy Report. He'll only read it when the picture stops being enough, but right now, it's too much. He holds it in his hands and lets it become blurry, he knows he can't stop from crying now.

He has 50. He could tell her now. He knows she'd hear it, she'd be able to hear it now.

But when he opens his mouth, the words still catch.

And only the tears come easily.

*

Mrs. Furokage and Furokage Itsuki acted more like strangers than mother and son, and that invisible divide between them only worsened after they confirmed Furokage Mizuki's identity.

Itsuki doesn't look at it, hands resting on his forehead while he curls into himself a bit more, shielding himself from the sight, but Mrs. Furokage stares. Her mouth opens long before she wills the words to come forth. “I don't like that picture. I know it's-records. And all. But I want you to replace it. With a better one.”

Naomasa nods, folding the manilla folder over to obscure the autopsy picture from view for both of them. “We can absolutely do that. Again, I am so sorry for your loss.”

Aizawa finds himself pacing in front of the window into the interrogation room. He's not allowed inside, he has no reason to betray how important 50 is to the investigation, that there even is an investigation beyond whatever muted truth Naomasa tells. But he wants to make sure that Naomasa remembers every weakness that Aizawa pieced out. Itsuki's criminal record, Mr. Furokage's absence likely due to the embezzling scheme that he's likely running again from a new company. Mrs. Furokage herself is clean, but that prim demeanor has a porcelain sheen, and if Itsuki doesn't crack, she needs to.

Naomasa starts slowly, like he always does. “We want to know what happened to cause the tragic loss of Furokage Mizuki's life. Anything that you can tell us leading up to her disappearance would be instrumental for our investigation. We want to make sure that the people responsible are held accountable for their actions.”

Mrs. Furokage sends a chilling look to Itsuki, but it isn't needed. It's hard to believe that his last arrest was 5 years ago, 5 years presumably spent sober, when he's nearly rocking back and forth now. He's to blame, Aizawa suspected it, but now he knows.

And that's all the better. He's a living attachment to the Nomu Organization, and one that Aizawa *will* make sure talks.

"Zuki," Itsuki says, clearing his throat before he starts again, pulling his hands down to the table only to wring them. "Mizuki was a good person- an amazing person. She-she shouldn't have..."

Itsuki winces, covers his eyes this time so that the pained grimace is all on display. It hides nothing, not when he pulls his hands away with a shaky breath, the tears still building in his eyes, thickening his voice.

"I-I was stupid, when I was younger. I had a drug problem, 5 years sober now, I... I got better, smarter, I finally fucking..." Itsuki breathes again, shakier, and Mrs. Furokage has retreated back to acting like a stranger. She stares blankly ahead, arms folded, as though she's just an inconvenienced passenger on a bus who has to listen to her son's breakdown. "I got sober, because it's what she would have wanted, but it was too late. I ran up a debt and she paid it, and she shouldn't have-"

"She shouldn't have," Mrs. Furokage repeats, but the coldness of her tone nearly chills Aizawa just to hear it. From the wince, the forced steadiness that follows after, Itsuki feels all of it.

"My dealer said there were people who were going to front me the money to pay him back, and I just had to do jobs for them. I knew it wasn't going to be good, I just wanted 'Zuki to give me another loan, just a little time to cut back and get clean, start paying him back honestly, but she said," Itsuki winces again, shaking his head but the tears still fall harder, despite how hard he's squeezing his hands together. "She said she'd talk to them. Take care of it. But this time had to be the last time, that I really needed to get it together and clean up my act, and I promised - I *swore* it was the last fucking time, I'd make it up to her and she..."

Itsuki shakes his head, pushes back his chair before he remembers the implication that he shouldn't leave. That they need whatever information he can offer, and he seems to be the only one who can offer it.

"She didn't come back. No one knew, not my hook up. He-he said that he couldn't talk about it, or they'd kill him, and it... it wasn't supposed to be that serious." Itsuki keeps staring at the folder, the shaking of his head becoming more and more muted as the silence drags on. He's losing himself in regret, and Naomasa shouldn't let him simmer too long.

"Do you know anything else about the people who were going to cover the debt?" Naomasa asks, writing a few small notes before he looks up, pressuring Itsuki to continue.

Itsuki swallows, shaking his head, "N-no, just that they had jobs. It was... He was talking like it was going to be out of town or something, like I needed to...to say goodbye. To my family."

Naomasa nods, taking down another note. "Do you recall how large your debt was? How much was owed?"

Itsuki bites his lip, looking away. "Um, no, I... I asked for 100,000 yen, I remember that, I... I knew 'Zuki wouldn't have it though, I-"

"865,000 yen," Mrs. Furokage says, the chill in her tone going brittle as her folded hands clench

tighter for a moment. She doesn't say it, but there's no need to, not with that clear and angry regret.

As much as Mrs. Furokage blamed Itsuki, she blamed herself. Mizuki, a college student working part time at a yakitori stand, had paid her brother's debt. A debt that the Furokages could have paid without missing a single meal, and because they didn't, they were missing their daughter.

In the end, all that comes of the meeting is another lead - 'Chilly' Nisa, Itsuki's former drug dealer. While Aizawa hovers over Sansa's desk, waiting for the database to return a result for that handle, he can't help but turn that number over in his head. 865,000 yen.

He hasn't dealt with a great deal of human trafficking cases, but enough to know that number is small. Not even a year's worth of rent for the worst apartment he's ever lived in, and yet it was enough to claim a young woman's life.

Yet, from the other side of the coin, he knows that it's an oddly high price for Itsuki. The jobs that he imagined took place, the few that Shinsou told him about, were ill-suited for a 16 year old boy with a drug habit and a quirk that only emits light from his body. He knows from Itsuki's quirk registration file that it's not dangerous, there's no risk of blindness. There's not a single criminal activity that would benefit from that quirk, and there are far easier targets for trainable adolescents that wouldn't suffer through withdrawals the first few weeks.

Though drug addicts weren't easily missed, they were hard to control. Mizuki was an adult woman with connections, with friends and family who would have been able to help her escape. These jobs - kidnapping, murder, theft, distraction - they took place in cities and on streets. Outside of a compound where Aizawa imagines the Nomu Organization keeps their 'Numbers.' There are people who aren't a part of the organization willingly, and have chances of escape when they perform their jobs. While the evidence of torture is plain to see in the scars on their collected bodies, on Shinsou, it's not enough to keep this organization hidden for so long. Aizawa knows there's a piece still missing.

Aizawa knows there's a reason that Mizuki wasn't able to escape, but he knows the reason Shinsou didn't. He's never forgotten that impossibly small number - 4 years old. That gap toothed grin from the missing child poster, the tooth probably hadn't fully grown in before Shinsou was given to the Nomu Organization. Shinsou was *raised* by the organization, knew no escape until it presented itself in a sale to Chisaki.

4 years old, with a quirk that was undeniably useful for criminal intentions.

Not for the first time, Aizawa wonders whether Shinsou Ui truly 'gave' away her son. Aizawa knows enough to know that trafficking prices for children can vary wildly, but knowing that the Nomu Organization was willing to take Itsuki for 865,000 yen, he can imagine they were willing to pay far more for Shinsou.

Sansa sighs heavily, dropping his head to his open palm. Aizawa looks up, and isn't surprised by what he sees. 'Chilly' Nisa was found dead three years ago, autopsy results indicate that he ingested poison with a meal that wasn't fully digested before death. It acted quickly.

Aizawa doesn't need the reminder, but he's standing in it right now. Shinsou's steadfast reluctance to eat was founded, was proven before Aizawa gained this sliver of evidence to support it.

He doesn't think to mention that to Sansa, to make sure it's noted before he realizes that he knows the area that 'Chilly' Nisa was found dead in. "Glitzy," is all Aizawa has to say, and Sansa looks between the screen and Aizawa before he finds the humor to chuckle.

“Better you than me, Eraser!”

*

Eri is knocking again. He knows that he promised, he knows that he needs to reassure her, he knows that he’s being selfish.

But he fucked up.

He doesn’t know how much time he has. He only knows that they found her, and that doesn’t tell him anything. He doesn’t know who the other lead is, he doesn’t know what they know or what he could offer them.

He doesn’t know if he can care. If he can move.

He still can’t tell her.

When he hears the doorknob twist, he tucks 50 under his pillow and sits up, he knows that he needs to hide her from Eri for so many reasons. Some of them are selfish, some of them are not. She just shouldn’t see 50, not like this.

Eri hovers in the doorway, not even fidgeting, and he forces himself to wave her in with an apology that’s dearly owed. “Sorry, I just. I’m acting really weird. I’m sorry.”

Eri pulls herself into his lap, into his arms, and he doesn’t hesitate to give her the embrace that doesn’t make up for half of his antics today. He allowed himself to be reckless, to be taken with that irritation and paralyzing fear, to worry her for it. To almost reject her for it.

He knows that he should, it would make it easier for her. But he can’t bring himself to do it, when her warmth is the only thing that starts to settle the ache in his chest and soothe the stinging in his eyes.

“It’s okay, Twenny,” Eri says, but her shuffling kicks betray how not ‘okay’ it is to her. She shouldn’t be old enough to lie, to hide what she feels, but she feels like she needs to lie to him so he won’t draw away again. And he hates it. “Yama said you’re not feeling good, ‘cause you’re not sleeping good. I just...kinda miss you.”

He pulls her tighter to his chest, running a hand up and down her arm. “I miss you too. I just...don’t want to make you deal with me when I’m acting weird. But I’m fine now. I promise.”

“You can be grumpy with me, Twenny,” Eri mutters, picking at the string of his hoodie. “You have to deal with me being grumpy a lot, so now I can deal with you being grumpy. So it’s fair.”

27 can’t fight the half smile, how ridiculous Eri is being. She shouldn’t have to deal with him, and it wouldn’t be fair to make her.

But she’s so kind, despite everything, and he has no idea where she gets it from. But he hopes she never loses it.

“I’m better now, so we should play whatever game you want, so I can make it up to you. And maybe Yamada will let me help him cook, so I can make it up to him too,” 27 says, even if just saying that exhausts him. He doesn’t want to leave, he would rather stay in this room with 50, to try to work the words past his teeth.

But he knows he can’t. He’s been reckless enough, and now he needs to hide it. He can’t let them

suspect, and he can't let Eri down.

And he needs to find something he can give to his owner, better than the lead can, but not dangerous enough that Bug finds him inside his own skin.

*

Aizawa has gathered dozens of informants over his career. There are those who respond better to a firm tone and unspoken threats, and those that have looser lips when they think they're the ones in control.

Glitzy can go either way, but he could already tell by the way she grins and pulls a bottle of champagne for his tab, that she's having a good shift. She'll probably want to have the upper hand, and he honestly prefers that to her pouting.

As soon as they settle into the cramped space set aside for private lapdances, she shakes out her hair just for show, and just because she's well aware of her reputation. He could cancel her quirk just to save himself the trouble of scrubbing his boots with a toothbrush to get rid of the glitter, but he doesn't. He lets her have her fun, lets her have a long pull from the champagne, before he starts.

"'Chilly' Nisa, died three years ago just a few blocks away," Aizawa says, showing her the most recent mugshot on his phone. He doesn't miss the eye roll, and not for the first time he's glad that criminals are often poor tipplers or poor customers. Memorable in Glitzy's profession either way. "Tell me about him."

Glitzy stretches her legs, balancing her stilettos on his knee as though the sharpness of those points could really threaten him, before she sighs. "Foot guy. I don't know what it is with baby pushers like that, but they're all into feet. He was trying to talk like he was a big one, but he was still licking toes, so you know it was all talk."

Aizawa nods, humming like he hasn't heard that before. Like Glitzy hasn't told him what nearly every type of criminal tends to prefer in terms of fetishes, to the point that he catches himself wondering during a few arrests.

"I remember that one, though. It happened here, but, you know. It *didn't*," Glitzy says, tone becoming firm with her head tipping towards the door. He can ignore the interference in the investigation of Nisa's death, especially if there's more to it that Glitzy can tell. "So, he definitely wasn't talking about these big shadowy goons that owed him for something, some big deal that he pulled off for them. And he wasn't pulling top shelf shit and swearing that I just had to dip my toes in it to make it worth his time."

Aizawa tilts his head, urging her to continue while she takes another pull from the bottle just to build anticipation.

"So, I was working for that big tip, you know, but this lady that was just supposed to be a customer starts eyeing him. And, you know, skimpy little shrimp like him decided he'd rather stick to his budget after that. They haul off to a room for a bit, she leaves first, but when his time is up, we find out his time is *up*," Glitzy says, waving a hand with an eye roll, and that lets him know that she was part of the clean up detail. "Whoever she was, she knew exactly what he liked. And if she knows what cuts through the cheese smell, I'd love to know."

"Tell me about her," Aizawa says, and he lets her pretend that she's wringing him for more money than he intended to give her, rolling his eyes when he doubles the cash in his hand twice over.

She plucks the money from him and tucks it into her bra with a self-satisfied smirk, before she leans back again, crossing and uncrossing her ankles. “Mm, looked like a Dominatrix. Black hair, real short. Not too old.” Glitzy shrugs, raising her arms above her head before she eyes the door, and Aizawa knows that’s all she has. “I know you’re a freak about quirks and all, but I don’t have a clue. That’s all I’ve got.”

It’s not worth 29,000 yen, not when it’s barely more than a dead end, but Aizawa tries to convince himself that it’s not. The Nomu Organization has more than one hitman, and this one wasn’t invisible.

And he hopes that Shinsou being familiar with this woman’s method means that he’s familiar with her name as well.

*

27 tries to hide it. He wants to go back to his room, he wants to curl himself around that picture to make sure it isn’t taken from him, but he knows that will only draw more attention to it.

He plays several board games with Eri, making sure to let her win each round, even though he has to lie about the rules a few times to his own disadvantage. Yamada knows, and shoots him a sly grin each time, but Eri doesn’t catch it, still pumping her hands victoriously with each win.

When Yamada slips into the kitchen to start making lunch, 27 makes sure that one of Eri’s favorite cartoons is on to entertain her. Yamada seems a bit too enthusiastic for the offer of help, but that wide grin falls in shades as 27 sets to work cutting vegetables, and 27 can’t help but wonder if he notices that he doesn’t twirl the knife like he usually does. He doesn’t feel the need to anymore, not when he has her in a different way.

“So, Bakugo,” Yamada says, oddly quiet for his usual way of speaking. “Everything good with him or...?”

27 forced himself to shrug, but still couldn’t look at Yamada to fully convince him. ‘*Told him to study. Didn’t like. Got mad. He’s like that.*’

Yamada tilts his head, sighing. “Yeah, I guess he’s getting a little Midterm crazy too. I’m not looking forward to my dorm shift tonight, even if I should be grateful that Principal Nezu is giving us a pretty light week.” Yamada takes the cut vegetables to start searing them in a pan, drizzling a sauce over them with a spoon while 27 watches. “But, you like Bakugo, right? He’s a pretty good friend?”

27 nods, even if he’s not sure whether Blasty will see it that way anymore. Now that he looks back on it, the knife might have been a bit too much. But Blasty just doesn’t *listen*. ‘*Good. Annoying, but good.*’

Yamada laughs quietly to himself, shaking his head. “I wonder how much Shou thought that about me.”

Yamada still seems worried about something, something that 27 can’t piece out, can only try not to reflect. He finds himself leaning on the counter as he watches Yamada cook, still not able to say what he wants to say. He wonders if Yamada would give him a clue to what his owner wants to know, other than what he already knows. His owner wants The Miasma’s name, Boss’ name, or the location of the main compound. He can only give one of those pieces of information away, and after that, he might lose his only piece of worth here. If it hasn’t been taken away already.

But he finds himself distracted with other thoughts. If there's a trick to talking alone in his room, like Yamada said he did. Yamada said it helped him when he couldn't speak, and 27 doesn't want to do it to speak. He just wants to talk to her.

He wants the mask to open now that it's gone. He wants to tell the picture what he should have told 50 before, what he wishes he could have told her with his hands or his mind, with a quirk that he wanted instead of the one he has.

To tell her he's grateful, he's never stopped thinking about her. She was the only one who smiled at him like that and he's never forgotten that smile. That he wants her to be here, that she deserves to be here more than he does. That she would have done better by Eri, but he did his best, because she showed him how.

Even if Yamada knew that she was here, even if Yamada had hidden her too, he's glad that he has her now. He still won't tell them anything about her, he has no reason to. But he can have this, this small part of her, and it feels too large because of that.

When his owner returns, he has a thick file in his hand that he pulls behind his back when he greets Eri. While Eri tells him about all the games she 'won,' and how Fishie and Fishio are doing, 27 tries to find a place to look where he can keep track of his owner but not invite his attention.

That file was large, and he knows it's full of information about The Miasma. It's a stack of papers that only makes him more worthless, his place more fragile. But the way his owner's eyes focus on him when he nods to Yamada, and tells him he'll be ready for lunch soon, seems to imply there's still a use for 27.

He tries to prepare for it. He knows he'll hear Bug's words, he'll feel that burn under his skin. He has to bear it, he has to beat it. Even if his time is short, he has to secure it.

But when his owner returns for lunch, that look has changed. There's still no tell that he can directly piece out, but his owner seems unsettled by something. Irritated, even. 27 finds himself more quiet because of it, finds it harder to eat when he doesn't feel like he can. He's not nauseous, but there's a heaviness in his hands every time he tries to lift them, and it carries in his mouth as he chews. He gives up when his owner finishes, and he knows Yamada worries because he doesn't hide it well when he gives him the supplement, but he tries to hide it too.

Yamada pulls Eri into a game before his owner turns to look at him, and that seems too convenient to be coincidence. But it doesn't matter, it won't matter if he doesn't do well by this. "Shinsou, come to the office with me. I need your help with something."

27 follows, and doesn't miss that the flaps of the box have been folded shut, but he keeps his attention from being noticeable. He sits in Yamada's desk chair after his owner directs him to with a wave of his hand, and tries to keep himself settled even after his owner sighs. Sighing has never meant anything good, not from Boss and not from Chisaki and not from Bug, but a sigh from this owner, in this moment, is even more frightening.

"I know that this is...frustrating," his owner says, a finger dipping into the folder still laying on the desk while his hand rests on top of it. "I hope that this will make it easier. There's several people that I want to talk about, people that I suspect are part of the organization that we're investigating. I want you to tell me more about them. Anything that you can."

His owner is odd, his tone so oddly soft yet tinged with irritation, with something close to exhaustion but not quite. When he pulls out the first piece of paper, 27 is almost sure it will be Boss again, but instead, it's blank except for a few words written on the top.

“A short woman with short black hair,” his owner reads, before he sets the paper back down, their eyes meeting for a moment before 27 looks away. “Suspected of using poison to kill someone. Is that someone you know?”

Memory. He knows about Memory, and that means he’s deep. It means he’s close to Boss, it means he’s close to finding all their connections. Memory handles everything, all the informants and leads for new Numbers. She proposes new business ventures and which competitors to silence. He knows that she uses *poison*, and that means.

It means he knows what to expect. If he wants to keep 27.

27 needs him to keep him. He needs to make himself nod, he needs to reach out for this chance and take it. But Memory is important, Memory isn’t just a right hand, she means so much to The Miasma that it would probably crumble without her. And if Memory knew, if she ever found out, she’d use *that* poison. The slow one, the expensive one, the one she only threatens to use but she never has because it makes her hands a bit too unclean for the mess it leaves. Skin falls away like tissue paper, and the victim just bleeds out slowly, just can’t hold themselves together when something as easily damaged as skin falls apart like that.

But he needs to be kept. He needs to nod, he needs to *nod*, he can’t lose Eri like this, he can’t lose 50-

“This woman-”

27 shakes his head before he looks away, he feels his fingernails in the scars and he just doesn’t want them to burn, he just wants it to stop when they eat into his skin but not when they’re *inside* it, tearing it apart, tearing him apart slowly when he *feels them moving* *You won’t tell anyone anything about the Miasma 8 hours Cherry and Blossom Cherry and Blossom Cherry and Blossom*

“-sou, Shinsou it’s alright. Stop-”

You won’t like it You won’t like it 12 hours Cherry and Blossom Little shit Stopped moving, they stopped moving he knows he shouldn’t move but they’re on something painful he can feel them swelling he tries not to, he knows not to, they started moving again eating him eating him eating him

The restraint is only on one wrist, he knows not to fight it, he knows to go limp, he knows she sees it when he flinches, when he tries to hold his skin together before they tear it apart

How long how long how long? In his head, they get to his head they eat him eat everything kill him die in the Red Room the Red Room Went too far this time, Bug. How long. Hours eight hours eight hours twelve hours hours

Drag of paper towel, but the sting is wrong, the voice is wrong it’s wrong it’s.

His owner’s.

“-shido Mina, Asui Tsuyu, Bakugo Katsuki,” his owner mutters, listing the students in his class under his breath, staring at 27’s wrist, placing a cotton gauze over it. He dug too deep with his nails, he can see the blood still under them on his other hand, but that’s all the blood there is. He watches his owner’s hands move, his fingers, hears the muttering until he starts to feel the warmth from his hands too sharply, flinches back even if it’s not permitted.

His owner looks up, not angry but he should be, and 27 forces his hands to move even if they shake. ‘ *Not fighting. Not. Not.* ’

“I know,” his owner says, and he can’t *possibly* be this calm, he *has* to be angry. He has to be disturbed by what 27 did, he has to be angry that 27 would damage himself like that. “It’s fine. I won’t ask you about that person again.”

His owner just waits, just stares, and 27 tries to collect himself as much as he can. The pull of the gauze on his arm, his feet connected to the floor, the buzzing under his skin muted in this odd exhaustion that falls over him as heavily as a blanket.

He ignores it, only feels it to settle himself, to breathe. He needs to prove himself, he needs to offer *something* .

‘ *Other.* ’ 27 signs, refuses to look up from the floor. He focuses on his hands, lets everything else about him swim in that buzzing that grows even sharper. He tries to work against the shaking. ‘ *M. E.* ’

He curls a hand around his mouth when he feels it, when he feels *them* , he feels like he’ll vomit them out of his mouth but he *can’t* , not in front of his owner, he’ll die, he’ll kill him, he tries to *breathe* .

His owner says nothing, nothing for too long, watching, waiting, he *needs* to be useful, to say it.

“Shinsou, it’s fine,” too calm, it’s a *lie* . “You know her, that’s all that I needed to know. Just breathe.”

He knows it’s a lie, he *knows it’s a lie* . But he trusts it, he forces himself to believe it just to get them out of his stomach, just so he can breathe, just so he won’t vomit. Make a mess, a mess that they’ll make out of him in turn, rip him apart.

But his owner won’t. 27 doesn’t know how he’ll do it, but it won’t be like that. It won’t be the Red Room.

27 still can’t look up from the floor, but he breathes, he forces his hand down even if he wants the weight around his jaw. That only reminds him of the masks they hid, and he tries to ignore it, too raw to hide the flicker of anger that rises with that.

His owner stands from where he was kneeling in front of 27, returns to his chair. He’s not dismissed, but his owner is waiting for something, something that 27 knows and wants to give, but feels too exhausted to give it. He can’t even think about forcing his hands to move now, can barely imagine getting out of his chair and leaving when he’s allowed to. “There’s a picture that I know you have. I want you to exchange it for this one.”

50.

But it’s *wrong* .

27 doesn’t have time to go numb, knowing that his owner caught him, that he was sloppy, he was caught, when he’s staring at a wrong 50. Her hair is short, she’s too young, she’s barely even *smiling* , the scars *aren’t there* . It’s not 50.

“I’m not angry that you took it. I understand why. But... this is a better way to remember her.”

His owner keeps holding out the picture of that wrong 50, but 27 isn’t going to take it. He’s not going to *exchange* it, trade the right 50 for the wrong one, he can’t *make* him do that.

“Her name is Furokage Mizuki. I’m not sure if you knew that-”

27 stands up, even if he feels the sting of it, even if that numbness sharpens with every step as he leaves. He knows it's wrong, he knows it's not allowed, he knows *far* better than to let the door slam closed behind him, but he can't.

He can't stand to listen to his owner talk about that wrong 50 anymore.

He's smart enough to block the door with his body, to sit in front of it with his arms curled around his knees. He hears talking, he hears it too clearly in the numbness, while he's shaking, while he throws his head back against the door because he's crying *again*.

It's messed up. He can't win like this. He's not supposed to.

The Miasma or his owner. Sometime, someday. Soon.

Soon, he'll be like 50.

*

Yamada was very rarely at a lost for words, but right now, pacing in front of Shinsou's door, he can't think of a single thing to say.

He *knows* he locked the office door, but Shouta thinks that Shinsou picked it anyway. That would explain the little distractions that the herolets had been providing, even if a murderous looking Bakugo storming out was still a mystery. And being 'told to study' seems even more ill-fitting as an explanation than it did in the first place.

Shouta doesn't think he'll be able to break through to Shinsou, and Eri just shouldn't be involved in this, *at all*. The poor kid has a picture of a *dead woman* in his room, a very clearly deceased woman, and while Yamada can accept a lot of things for the sake of keeping Shinsou a little closer to level, he doesn't think that's anywhere *close* to being okay.

Shouta said Shinsou looked absolutely *furious* when he saw the picture of Furokage Mizuki from her passport, and while that might be because Shinsou has an idea about the keylogger, he's hopeful it's just something about the picture that wasn't right for Shinsou. Yamada took his time going through Furokage Mizuki's memorialized Facebook profile, and the profiles of her friends to come up with some better ones.

Yamada knocks, loud enough for Shinsou to hear, but soft enough that hopefully Eri won't be distracted to come to his aid. He waits for a clap, even if his nerves grate knowing that there isn't likely to be one. The door intentionally doesn't have a locking mechanism, but Yamada isn't going to use that to his advantage. He's not going to barge in and take what little privacy Shinsou has.

Even if he wants to. "Shinsou, I want to talk to you, if that's alright. It's just me."

The silence drags on, and Yamada knows that he needs to be at his designated math block in less than an hour. *Why* Principal Nezu would assign him to supervise a math exam is completely beyond him, but he has far more reasons to hate it now than he did before.

Yamada bends down, hoping that maybe a little offering might sway his little listener into talking. He slides the stack of pictures under the door, and is surprised to hear them rustle against one another immediately. Shinsou must be sitting close to the door, or even in front of it to make himself into a lock. Yamada can't help but hope that it opens.

But it doesn't. The pictures are shoved back under the door, the ones in the middle sliding farther and scattering against the wall.

Yamada bites back a sigh, gathering up the pictures before Eri notices, and just *wishes* they could talk about this. Whatever is eating at Shinsou right now, it's killing Yamada not even see it. Shinsou just doesn't seem to get angry easily, but whatever has gotten under his skin has gotten in there deep. "Shinsou, we don't have to talk, but..."

Yamada still can't find the words to say, when anything that comes after that would be a lie, but he doesn't have to. He doesn't hear a clap, but the door creaks open, the knob only twisted so that the hinge could swing. Yamada steps inside, too quick to let Shinsou doubt his decision, and sees the kid half-hiding behind the door.

He knew whatever he was going to see, it wasn't going to be pretty, but the puffy red eyes that are so full of fear, and the slight tremble in the hand on the door isn't an easy sight to take in. But Yamada forces himself to smile, and only hopes it comes out reassuring. "Thank you, Shinsou. Let's...just sit for a minute, alright?"

Shinsou closes the door, and when Yamada sits near the middle of the bed, Shinsou takes the chair. He's visibly on edge, looking anywhere but at Yamada with his arms crossing and uncrossing in front of his chest, but Yamada waits. He tries to hope that the uncrossing means that Shinsou might want to talk.

When he finally gets a glance, finally sees Shinsou looking up at him with those clear violet eyes, Yamada takes it as a sign to risk it. "So, I know that you're really upset. And yeah, you've got a million reasons to be. But, I just want to help with that, and if talking's not on the table right now, that's fine. And it's cool if you want to hang out in your room for a bit, I just."

Yamada rubs the back of his neck, trying to think of *some* way to get this out of Shinsou. He can't look away, he can't let himself not see it like he didn't see 'Dog.' He still needs Shinsou to let him in, to let him help.

Yamada sighs. "Look, I'm just worried about you, kiddo. I know you're hurting, and I want to help. So, whatever way you want me to help, I want you to tell me. So I can make it right."

Shinsou looks at him and looks away, up and down before he finally untucks his hands from under his elbows. ' *Five words. Will tell you everything about investigation.* '

Yamada can see that Shinsou desperately wants to hear those words, as cool as he's trying to play it off, his eyes are practically pleading with him to figure it out. But Yamada isn't that good with riddles, especially with no clues. "The investigation is important, but I'm way more worried about you, Shinsou. I know that Shouta has been putting a lot of pressure on you, and I really don't agree with it. He's worried, but... he said he scared you pretty bad in there. And he didn't mean to do that, he didn't know-"

' *Five words,* ' Shinsou signs, his jaw clenching for a moment. He's getting frustrated, and honestly, Yamada is too.

"I...don't really have a clue, listener. Can you give me a hint?" Yamada asks, and Shinsou just shakes his head, eyes narrowing at his bookshelf. It might not be the investigation, since Shinsou didn't seem to react to his mention of it. It probably wasn't Bakugo, even though he's sure that Shinsou is a little worried about that as well. That can only mean that it's 50, something about her that has set Shinsou a little more on edge. And Yamada can only hope that it's not what he's beginning to worry about, beginning to doubt what he thought of her smile. "Is it about Furokage Mizuki? About 50?"

Shinsou doesn't nod, probably doesn't mean to confirm it, but the way his eyes dart to his before

he looks back at the wall seems to mean Yamada is on the right track.

“She was someone important to you, right? I don’t really know her, or much about her, but... you talked about her in your sleep once. Was she-”

‘ *Five words.* ’ He can tell that Shinsou is getting angry, the signs quick and sharp. This riddle is just impossible, and no matter how badly Shinsou wants him to figure it out, he can’t.

“I don’t know what you want to hear, Shinsou,” Yamada admits, folding his hands. “Trust me, I’ve got a lot more than five words to say, but I just need a little input, kiddo. If you want to talk about it.”

Shinsou glares harder, his jaw clenching so tightly that Yamada can see the veins becoming more prominent, before he turns to glare at Yamada. ‘ *I’m sorry for your loss.* ’

It’s not the glare that hurts, it’s seeing those tears building back up. Yamada doesn’t even need to see that to feel like the biggest asshole in the world.

He knew, he doubted, but he *knew* that Shinsou was torn up about 50. He was *mourning* , whether 50’s death was news to him or not, it was tearing Shinsou up inside. The kid wanted consolation, just five *fucking* words. Words that he gave to Yamada as soon as he knew about Shirakumo, and didn’t know a thing about Shirakumo other than the fact that he was dead.

Yamada lifts his hand but Shinsou pushes the chair away from it, and if that’s not a clear rejection, Yamada doesn’t know what is. There’s not a thing he can say, not now, but he can try. “Shinsou, I’m sorry. I *am* sorry for your loss, and I’m sorry...that I didn’t really think about it like that. I really should have.”

Shinsou doesn’t look up, going so tense that he nearly shakes with it, and Yamada knows he’s not helping. He can’t help, not now. He had a chance and *blew it* , the Voice Hero himself couldn’t figure out those five words.

But there’s something else that he’s figuring out, and he can make that call on the way to his exam block.

*

Eri is knocking again.

27 lays on the floor, boneless. Exhausted, but not the right way. He knows Eri won’t help, that she needs to get used to this. The door held shut by the chair beneath the knob is a kinder separation than the one that will come between them.

He closes his eyes, even if the lights are still on, and pretends it’s darker. Pretends he can’t see, can’t hear. He remembers flashes of it, enough to know that the nothingness was close to it. He remembers the blink near the end of a bad quirk training session, that sudden realization and the numbness that comes with it, before it’s gone.

He lets himself drift in the memory of that nothingness, and knows that he doesn’t need to worry about his voice being stolen. He doesn’t need a voice anymore, they can have it.

He’s dead.

He’s dead, like 50. Like Chisaki. Like his mother. They could all be standing next to each other, or lying next to each other, and they wouldn’t know it. Wouldn’t feel, see, or hear it.

It should work, then. Even if she doesn't hear it. He lets his mouth fall open, and he wills the words to come out. To just *say* them, even if she doesn't hear them. He tries to imagine that she's next to him, with her eyes closed and hair wet, too far away to feel but close enough to *know*.

They still won't come out.

*

After three hours, Eri close to tears after five attempts to talk to Shinsou went unanswered, Aizawa pries the pins out of the door hinges and angles the door so that it comes free, regardless of the chair under the door knob.

And he finds Shinsou asleep. On the floor, oddly enough, but the steady rise and fall of his chest is enough to reassure Aizawa's darkest worries.

He knows the picture is in this room, and it's likely in the locked box that Hizashi bought for him. The box is likely under the bed, and the key for it is likely in this room as well.

But Aizawa doesn't move to confirm any of his suspicions, he doesn't need to find the picture. He knows that Shinsou is safe. Hurting, clearly, but safe.

Shinsou rolls over on his side, and for a moment, Aizawa thinks he'll wake up, likely confused then angry at the state of his door and Aizawa's presence. But Shinsou settles, his arms pulled tighter into himself. Whether it's a search merely for warmth, or habit from sleeping with Eri at his side, Aizawa doesn't know.

He knows it's reckless, but he lays the comforter from the bed over Shinsou, and only breathes when he doesn't stir. Shinsou will probably question it when he wakes up, but Aizawa won't leave any other evidence of his intrusion. He knows that Shinsou is safe, and that he isn't cold anymore.

"Not cold here," Shinsou mutters, startling Aizawa despite himself. It takes too long to convince himself that it's another sleep-talking spell. He spends too long watching Shinsou breathe slow and steady, remembering the flat tone of his voice with those words. "So stay...."

There are very few things that Aizawa knows about the Nomu Organization. That they kill, and have two members known to do so. That they buy some of their members, that they sell them as well. That whoever the woman is that tried to kill Shinsou at the hospital, whatever her number is, she did *something* to Shinsou that terrifies him to the very brink of what he can handle.

And now, he knows that it was cold. He could be wrong, his gut tells him that Shinsou is sleep talking about the Nomu Organization, but it could simply be the ramblings of an incoherent dream. But he *knows* it isn't, from an instinct that is very rarely wrong.

In terms of what he can offer The Commission, that piece of information is the most useless thing he's learned all day. But for Shinsou....

He'll never hesitate to put a blanket over him again.

Tanabata - We Meet Again

Chapter Summary

Tanabata - A summertime festival that occurs on July 7th, celebrated in Japan and China, alternatively referred to as the 'Star Festival.' It celebrates the meeting of Orihime and Hikoboshi, two deities that can only meet once a year by traversing the Milky Way galaxy, and only if the weather is clear.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: 50 content

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri calls Aizawa and Yamada 'Dad' sporadically. When Shinsou, Eri, and the Big Three were playing PokeGo, Shinsou signed 'Hero' to Mirio's turned back and Eri noticed. Shinsou wore the 'Lemillion' shirt because it was a short sleeved shirt that would show that the 'Dog' portion of his tattoo had been removed. Mirio gave Shinsou the phone that he received for his internship at Sir Nighteye's agency so that Shinsou could use a text-to-speech app to talk to people who didn't know JSL. Mirio was at the dinner in Chapter 27 where Yamada was showing Shinsou and Eri the scrapbook with Shirakumo's memorial pages. Eri's sign name for Shinsou is 'Mom Shi.' During the photography session for Shichi-Go-San, Shinsou held up 'bunny ears' over Aizawa's head and the photographer was able to get a picture of it. 50 gave Shinsou taiyaki once while he was at The Miasma, and he had to wait until the mask was opened for him to eat it.

Eri didn't sleep well. Even when Aizawa let her follow him to his own doorway, even when he wordlessly accepted her taking Hizashi's side of the bed. They both tossed and turned between fits of intermittent sleep, and he hated seeing it in Eri far more than feeling it himself.

Hizashi hasn't slept at all, but Aizawa knows him well enough to know that the weariness so clear on his face isn't from that. He doesn't ask outright when he hands Aizawa a thermos of coffee, but that glance down the hall is a question in itself. One that Aizawa answers with a shake of his head.

Shinsou hasn't come out of his room. He heard him moving around, pressing his ear to the door after he knocked to let him know that breakfast was ready, but he hasn't left.

Whatever comes of that, however it breaks, Aizawa won't be there to see it. He hopes that Hizashi can wear Shinsou down, he hopes that Eri's voice will eventually reach him. This stalemate can only last so long, and the concept of privacy has already become a very meaningless one in this situation.

He hopes that it won't come to it, but if Shinsou isn't out of his room by the end of the third year's exam block, he will resort to more drastic measures.

Yamada starts searching the cabinets, having already turned the couch inside out. He doesn't lose his phone often, but Shouta isn't even here to call it for him, since he has his Hero Ethics Midterms to supervise. The photographer should be sending him the finished pictures soon, and as soon as he does, Yamada needs to print them out and hope that plan works.

When the cabinets turn up empty, completely unsurprisingly, he casts a glance to the refrigerator before he shakes his head. He's not *that* sleep deprived. "Hey, little bean! Have you seen my phone hanging around somewhere?"

He hears a quick flurry of footsteps that he almost mistakes for a knock, before he sees Eri holding his phone up to him. And then he *does* hear a knock.

After taking his phone, Yamada tries to work a smile on his face that doesn't convey half of the irritation that he feels. Whichever little herolet has decided to drop by unannounced, uninvited, and completely unwanted will still get a verbal lashing, but he's finding it far too tempting to just let his quirk do the talking.

Until he opens the door and sees Mirio's cheerful wave. "Good morning! I'm not sure how much help I can be, but I'm definitely going to try...." Mirio trails off, probably noticing the confusion plain on Yamada's face.

But the explanation comes from Eri. "Dad, Mirio can help Twenny! Twenny called Mirio a hero, and Twenny needs a hero to help him stop feeling weird so he can come out of his room!"

Mirio looks down at his phone and starts rubbing the back of his neck, as Yamada pieces out that his phone hadn't *really* gone missing. And as much as the thought of it stings, the thought that Mirio could be the one to break through to Shinsou because he's a hero in Shinsou's eyes and Yamada *isn't*, he's desperate enough to only let it sting. "Well, I kinda would have liked to know the plan, little bean, but I do think it's a good one. If Mirio's up for it, we'll have a little 'heroes only' chat to read him into the mission."

Eri still doesn't look ashamed at all, and they definitely need to have a conversation about asking for permission rather than stealing phones to grant it, but Mirio looks no less determined. "I'll be following your lead, Present Mic."

That determination only wavers a bit when they do get into the mission briefing, kept away from Eri's ears in the office. "We don't know who this woman was to Shinsou, and he's not talking to us, but... If he asks you to say five words, they're 'I'm sorry for your loss.' He's just...."

Mirio looks at the door, that smile completely gone as his eyes seem to become a little more distant. "He's not talking about it, that's... really rough."

It's the hesitation that worries Yamada. He knows that Sir Nighteye is still a raw topic for Mirio, that as little as he's talked to Yamada about it, he's probably talked to his friends even less. And as much as that can help him connect with Shinsou, to understand exactly what he's going through by feeling it himself, he doesn't need two kids tangled up in their own pain so deep that they can't cope with it.

But Mirio pulls on a smile, one that almost laughs at his own pain still reflected in his eyes. But it's an honest one, and a promising sign. "I'll see what I can do. I'm not sure why Eri thinks I'm a hero to Shinsou--"

"He wore the shirt," Yamada says, scratching his head nervously when he remembers how embarrassed Mirio had been when he found out Yamada made it. "He was going to wear it to see

Chisaki. It's probably not a 'fan thing,' considering, but... It's pretty easy to see *why* he thinks you're a hero, kiddo."

He does see that same embarrassed blush. As much as Mirio seemed to play it cool when it came to other aspects of his future hero career, fan culture and merchandising were easier to accept in theory instead of experiencing it. But Shinsou wasn't just a fan, and Mirio already knew that. Shinsou was someone that Mirio had already saved once before, and someone that needed to be pulled out a dark and painful place again.

He knows that Mirio can do that, as long as he's allowed in.

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Mirio kind of figured that Shinsou could be a stubborn guy sometimes. He probably couldn't have made it through a lot of the awful situations he was put in if he didn't know how to dig his heels in when it counted.

But Mirio is kind of running out of ideas on how to convince him to give up.

Knocking didn't work, trying to talk to him through the door wasn't working, food and coffee didn't either. Mentioning Eri, Yamada, Aizawa, and even the friends Shinsou was making in Class 1-A wasn't working either.

Mirio scratched his head, frowning as yet another message to their chat went unread, before he realized that Shinsou might not even be checking his phone. "We could talk on the chat, if you want! It's probably easier for you, even though I do kind of want to just check on you. We all just want to see you for a second, just make sure that you're not hungry or thirsty or anything-"

Mirio almost falls backwards when the door opens, having sat against it for so long that he doubted it was going to open that quickly. He looks up to see Shinsou staring blankly down at him, but when Shinsou steps away, Mirio takes it as an invitation inside.

Shinsou doesn't look great, and Mirio didn't expect him to. He looks a little paler, his hair is messy and tangled, and he just looks exhausted. He takes a seat on his bed, leaning on his elbows on his thighs, and Mirio just takes a seat on the floor in front of him. Shinsou might have let him in, but he still looks like he wants a little space.

When Mirio raises his phone, waiting for Shinsou to take out his, Shinsou just shakes his head, before he tries to give his phone back to Mirio.

"It's okay, Shinsou, I still really don't need it," Mirio says, trying not to be hurt that Shinsou doesn't want it. Even if he's shutting people out right now, he shouldn't give away his voice like that. And judging from that 'five words' riddle that Yamada talked about, Shinsou's already making it harder for himself. "If you don't want to talk with the phone, we can try to use sign. I'm still just not that great at it, but... Maybe instead of talking, you'd rather listen?"

Shinsou doesn't nod or shake his head, doesn't answer that question at all. But after he puts his phone down on the bed, he glances at Mirio. And it looks like he's waiting for Mirio to start.

And it's hard to know where to start from. "You know, I... lost someone who was really important to me. So I kind of know what you're feeling right now. I didn't want to talk about it either, so I get it, but.... Talking really helped."

He started crying before he even wrote that first text message to Mic. He just kept thinking of the way Mic's eyes were so full of longing, the way his voice got so soft when he talked about

Shirakumo. *I really wish you guys could have met him.* And it was selfish, because he just really wished that his father could have met Sir Nighteye.

It's almost childish in a way, like looking forward to a parent-teacher conference so that his mentor could tell his father about all of Mirio's accomplishments. That dead-serious way that Sir Nighteye would say embarrassing things like 'A bright and shining hero,' or 'A symbol for his time.' Mirio could barely *stand it* when Sir Nighteye dropped a line like that, especially when he knew that Sir Nighteye never said anything he didn't truly believe, but his father.

His father might have seen that. And his father would have had to believe him.

But Sir Nighteye will never get to meet his father, and never really see whatever hero Mirio becomes. "I... talk to him sometimes. I'm not really religious or anything, but I like to believe that he can still hear me. Just, about stupid stuff sometimes, the stuff I used to tell him anyway, like 'Tamaki and Neji really got into it again,' or 'Man, this essay is really killing me right now!'"

Sir Nighteye probably thought it was stupid to hear those kinds of things from him in the first place, but he never told Mirio to stop. If he was busy, sometimes he'd only hum to say he was listening, but sometimes he'd look up and offer his own advice. *Tedious assignments like that can be overcome like any other stalemate. Try to look at it from another perspective.*

Sometimes, just saying those things is enough to remember those words, and exactly the way that they were said. Like Sir Nighteye was still there to give him that advice.

Shinsou clenches and unclenches his hands, before he finally speaks. ' *Tried. Can't.* '

He doesn't need to see Shinsou blinking back the tears to know how bad that must hurt. How *cruel* it could be, for all that Shinsou had lost, to lose the ability to even talk to the person he had lost. In a way that was so similar, yet so *different*. "I'm sorry for that, Shinsou. I... It doesn't have to be talking, though. You could sign or just... think it to them. I do that too, sometimes."

Sometimes, when he doesn't want to look like a crazy person in front of his friends or classmates, he just takes a minute to think it to Sir Nighteye. *Hey, the weather outside is so nice today! I'm going to get a treat from our usual shop, and I'll make sure to get your favorite too. It'll be right in front of your picture, tall black coffee with 5 sugar packets, barely mixed in. Just in case you wanted to stop by.*

He probably is acting like a little bit of a crazy person, to find himself nearly crying when he realizes he has to throw away that day old coffee. That it was probably crazy to buy it in the first place.

But crazy things helped. And Mic said that whatever helps, helps, as long as it actually helps.

Shinsou takes a moment, long enough for Mirio to think he's thinking it, he's trying that tactic, before he raises his hands again. ' *Thank you* , ' Shinsou says, but his eyes are distant enough that Mirio knows he's not thanking him.

And it all crumbles after that. That shaky exhale, that twist of Shinsou's lips before he covers his face with his hands, breathes in but he holds it. Mirio knows that Shinsou is in a fragile place right now, and he's probably not supposed to be here to see it, but he can't just watch it happen.

Mirio pulls himself to kneeling, and puts a hand on Shinsou's back, rubbing those same circles that he's traced on Eri's back through so many of her teary fits. And when Shinsou doesn't freeze, doesn't try to pull away, he wraps the other arm around him, pulling him in to cry it out on his

shoulder.

And if Mirio finds it a little harder to breathe easy, feels the tears catching in his eyes when Shinsou drops his hands and fists them in his shirt, when that tiny gasping sob breaks through, he doesn't let it shake him. Shinsou held out long enough, and he needs someone steady to hold him through the break.

Mirio can be the kind of hero that does that. He learned how from the best.

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27 tried not to bother 50. He knew that she wasn't supposed to come to his room as often as she did, she didn't have to talk to him and she could always decide not to. But there was one time that he was too weak to hide it from her.

He was scared. He kept dreaming of Honzo, kept thinking about it. His bones shattered, that fever unbreaking, the flashes that he remembered of fists and grunts and that *shattering* pain, and when she came to his room, when her eyes locked on a bruise still lingering and started to water, he couldn't help it. He cried.

He remembers how loud his breathing was from behind the mask, that he was young enough to forget to not try to open his mouth because the metal would dig deeper. He remembers that there was enough blood from those wounds that it trickled down his neck, and that she tried to clean that off while she held him, while she rocked him back and forth *I'm going to get you out, it's not going to happen again, I'm going to-*

He remembers being small, and shaking, and crying like a little brat who didn't have a single reason to be so weak, so needy, but he remembers how nice that felt. That even when he trembled, she just held him tighter, and even when he forgot how to cry quietly, she just whispered *It's okay*.

He's not small, but Mirio is built enough to make it seem that way. The warmth of that large hand, the firmness from muscles that he knows could crush him, are close enough. He can close his eyes and imagine her hair, he can twist Mirio's voice into hers when the words are the same. "It's okay, just let it out."

He's wanted to feel her arms around him for so long, he's *ached* for it, and this is so close that it only breaks him more. He's falling apart the same way, just shaking and sobbing, clinging to someone who has no reason to hold him.

But Mirio just holds him, rubbing his back the same way he rubs Eri's. 27 taught her to soothe herself with that, breathe in at the top of the circle, breathe out at the bottom. Even if Mirio has been tracing circles on his back for a while, waiting for 27 to do that, he's selfish enough to ignore that.

But he does, to see if that trick even works on him. Because he's bothered Mirio with this, he's bothered him enough, and he hates it.

He tries to wipe the tears away, he feels *disgusting*. He only skipped last night's shower but he hasn't changed his clothes since yesterday morning. His nose is stopped up, mucus too thin and streaming over his top lip, but instead of checking his shirt for the mess, Mirio grabs a tissue from the box on his desk and holds it out for 27.

"It feels a lot better to let it out," Mirio says, and 27 would rather he look away when he tries to blow his nose, but he doesn't. "Having a good cry always helps."

It does. He feels tired in a different way, in a brighter way. His eyes still sting, enough that he just wants to close them and hope that he just *stops* crying. Even Eri has never cried this much, it's pathetic.

Mirio puts his hand on his back and sits down, close enough that 27 feels like pulling away, but he doesn't. That hand is still large enough to be similar. "She was a really important person to you, wasn't she? Maybe, she was kind of like a mom?"

27 shakes his head, has to keep from rolling his eyes. 50 wasn't the kind of person who could have a label like that, 'mom' or 'friend' or 'mentor.' She was so much more, so *much* more than meaningless words like that could say. ' *More. Better.* '

He throws the used tissue in the trashcan, and winces when he realizes he's gotten Mirio's shirt wet. His *uniform* for school, he probably has a Midterm today, 27 has distracted him and that's bad enough, but now he's ruined his shirt. "I'm going to wear my blazer anyway!" Mirio says with a wave, brushing a hand over the stain. "I just forgot to bring it when Mic- or I guess, when Eri texted me."

Eri. 27 feels that heaviness again, only worse. He's worried *Eri* over this, he's been so selfish. He didn't act like this at the 8 Precepts, he knew what was important and it was Eri, and even if Eri has other people to care for her, he shouldn't forget what he is to her. He's her *mother* , he's *Mom Shi* , and he's a better one than his mother. He won't lock himself away in a room and let her cry alone outside it.

That hand moves to his shoulder, and Mirio smiles at him. "It's okay, Shinsou. A lot of people are worried about you, but they understand. If you need some time to yourself, it's okay." That still doesn't make any sense, not with how often Yamada and Eri and even his owner have knocked at his door, trying to get him to come out. "But, just make sure to check in every once and a while. And eat something! Mic has some leftovers from breakfast waiting for you, but if you want to just eat in your room, I can--"

27 shakes his head, frowning when he runs a hand through his hair. He needs to leave, he needs to reassure Eri and face whatever punishment Yamada and his owner see fit to dole out. He's been acting like an *idiot* , and he needs to stop. To hold on to whatever energy he has left to leave this room before they simply drag him out of it.

50 is safe in the box, and the box is safe in the vent. He hates to think about it, but even if she wasn't, he still has her.

He remembers her now. He can remember every part that went blurry, the parts that he wasn't sure about. Her eyebrows, her unpierced ears. The scars that he remembers, and because he remembers, he can picture her smile. Her voice. *You'll be what, 16? You'll be pretty cheap in 10 years, and if I can't buy you, I can just rent you out every day.*

We'll get out. We'll get out, buddy. Don't give up, we're going to get out. We'll live somewhere where it's warm, we can have the heat on all the time and no one can say anything about it. We can just lay around all day. Me and you, and your buddy right here. We're all getting out.

He's out. As much as he'll ever be. The Miasma is still going to hunt him down, and the best chance he has of surviving that is with his owner hunting them down first.

It's insane, it's an impossible dream to think about, that his owner could dig out every place that The Miasma has hidden. That even with his quirk, with his training and with all the heroes in this place, that they could take down *all* of them. All the Numbers, all the informants, to take down

Memory and Boss and *Bug* .

But 27 can dream. He feels like he can, in this place. He can close his eyes and feel how warm it is, and it can feel like another dream. One where 50 is there, just invisible. A ghost.

‘ *S-H-O-W-E-R. E-R-I,* ’ 27 signs, knowing that he definitely looks like a wreck. Even if he doesn’t feel like he’s dead anymore, he doesn’t feel like he can even pretend to be, he probably looks like it. And Eri shouldn’t see that from him.

Mirio nods, and smiles. “That sounds like a good idea. If you ever want to talk about it some more, just let me know. I’m here for you, you know. A lot of people are.”

27 won’t. He feels bad for not using the phone, but he can’t. He still can’t bring himself to touch it, knowing how much it costs. But he’s grateful for the offer, for everything that Mirio has done. ‘ *Thank you.* ’

Mirio takes a moment before he remembers the sign. ‘ *You’re welcome.* ’

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Even if Mirio left after Shinsou hopped into the shower, Yamada didn’t have to worry about another retreat. Eri decided to sit right in front of the bathroom door to prevent that, and anything short of grabbing her under the arms and dragging her away wasn’t going to convince her to move.

Luckily, Shinsou seemed fine with that. He just picked her up into his arms, and they hugged it out for a while before he started apologizing, and Yamada didn’t have to be the one to tell him to stop. “It’s okay, Twenny!” Eri told him, and repeated it every time he tried to apologize again. Even when he tried to apologize to Yamada. Even when Shinsou sat down to eat a late breakfast that was nearly lunch, she refused to let go just in case.

With his two wards still clinging to each other, watching cartoons since board games were impossible to play unless Eri let go, Yamada slipped into the office to print off a few more pictures.

The ones from Shichi-Go-San had already been delivered in the mail, and they turned out wonderful. Yamada would like these to be printed out on the same kind of material at some point, but for now, plain printer paper would have to do.

They turned out great too. Things that he didn’t even think to mention are there, like her longer hair or a bit of adjustment to her jawline to make her seem a little older. Altering the pictures from before to match the details that came after, hopefully finding something that resembles that mysterious middle, only brighter.

Yamada won’t let himself doubt that smile, when he hopes that it didn’t change too much after this picture was taken.

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Eri still clings to him, even when she falls asleep. It takes him too long to move to untangle her hands from his shirt, and even then, it takes too long to put her on the couch. He pulls a blanket over her, and lets her legs rest on top of his.

He missed her. He just didn’t realize it at the time.

She’s growing up so fast. Like that plant she keeps in her windowsill, she just needed a place where

she would be watered, she needed sunlight and good soil. It's hard to remember how she looked at the 8 Precepts, she seems so much younger there, so distant.

She's still small now, but she'll grow fast. And even if he's not there to see it, he knows she'll grow up happy. She has fathers who take the time to treasure these moments, to want to remember them when she's older.

Yamada has been working on the scrapbook at the table, and 27 finds it easier to move when he remembers he hasn't seen those pictures from Shichi-Go-San. He wants to see what Yamada will do with them, how he'll arrange them. Even if he's not allowed to help anymore, he wants to watch.

But Yamada smiles at him when he approaches, and flips over to the first page. It's the family portrait, the one that the odd Shinsou is a part of. Shinsou Hitoshi doesn't have scars, which makes him look weird and unsettling, but he has cat ears. And 27 wants to be irritated that Yamada still got a picture of 27 wearing those cat ears, but he can't. Not when Eri looks so beautiful.

She looks beautiful in every picture. Even the candid ones, when she's not posing. When she's tugging on 27's clothes, or when Yamada is fussing over her while she pouts that he's taking too long. It's clear that Yamada cares a lot about pictures, cares a lot about the pictures that were being taken in the candid shots where they're all smiling at her to encourage her own smile.

He took a picture of *that*. That reckless moment, that *stupid* idea that 27 had, just too tempted to do it, to see how it would feel- *has his owner seen this?*

Yamada must have noticed it, noticed that 27 wanted nothing more than to rip that picture out and tear it up, hide the evidence even if Yamada would still tell him. "Shou really liked that picture," Yamada says, laughing to himself. "I had to steal it from him to put it in here. He doesn't get to see nearly enough of your attitude, so feel free to start laying some 'Delete Face' on him. He wouldn't even pretend he doesn't like it."

That's...confusing. That's the oddest thing about his odd owner, if it's true. But Yamada hasn't lied to him yet, has only hidden things that 27 still stole. He's not going to try it, but if his owner liked that picture.

He can keep it.

Yamada shows him the other pictures he hasn't put in the scrapbook yet. Pictures from the festival, pictures of Fishie and Fishio and Eri feeding them. Pictures that Yamada took long ago, when Eri still had that tooth now missing.

There's a picture of Eri sitting on a hospital bed, wearing the most adorable outfit 27 has ever seen. She looks somehow younger there, she looks more scared than she should, and the picture itself is a little blurry, like it wasn't taken by someone with a practiced hand like Yamada.

Yamada frowns at that picture. "Oh, that's *hideous*, isn't it? The one and only time I trusted Shou to go clothes shopping. Shinsou, I need you to settle this once and for all - is that the ugliest outfit you've ever seen?"

27 shakes his head, he has no idea *what* Yamada is looking at, but all he sees is an outfit that he wishes Eri could wear every day. ' *Cute. Most cute. Perfect. I like.* '

Yamada shakes his head before he sighs, head falling to the table in defeat. " *No*, Shinsou. You *can't* have his fashion sense too."

While Yamada is distracted, 27 tries to peek under the scrapbook to see if there are more pictures that Yamada is hiding. More pictures of Eri from that time he was missing, more pictures of her wearing adorable clothes like that. Yamada catches him, raising his head and putting a hand on the scrapbook.

But, he doesn't look angry that 27 tried to look. He looks worried about something. "So, I know you didn't like the other pictures. Of 50. And I...kind of think I know why."

27 pulls his hand away. If those are more pictures of the wrong 50, that young and unscarred 50, that *Furokage Mizuki*, he doesn't want to see them. 50 is 50, and even if he knows that she wasn't always 50, he doesn't want to see that. Doesn't want to know what The Miasma did to her. Doesn't want to imagine who she would be if he never met her.

"At Shirakumo's funeral, they used a picture of him that wasn't... wasn't him *at all*. I don't know how they even got a picture of him looking so serious, because he wasn't a serious guy. I *hated* looking at that picture," Yamada says, shaking his head. "If these pictures aren't... aren't right, if they're missing something, we can change them. There's ways to alter them and make it closer to what you remember. If you want them."

He does.

It's 50.

Her long hair, the right scars, and that *smile*. She's smiling so bright, so warmly, laughing at something and she rarely laughs like that, but she has a reason to.

She's outside, bathed in sunlight. There's a floppy, wide brimmed hat on her head and she's probably laughing at that, at whoever made her wear it. But she's not laughing because it's ridiculous, she's not laughing so hard at something that mundane.

She's laughing, so freely, because she *escaped*.

This is the 50 that got out with him.

27 doesn't even feel the tears stinging, they just feel like relief. Everything feels like relief, he only feels boneless and weak because he never even *imagined*. He's never even pictured her being this happy, even in their escape. Never thought of what she'd look like in the sun.

He picks up the other pictures, he wants to know how many things he's never imagined doing with her. Even if he looks ridiculous, wiping his eyes just to see them better, they're perfect. They're more than he ever imagined.

Her eyes lit up, reflections of the string lights that break up the darkness of the night, her grin sly as she watches something outside the frame. They're at a party, a quiet corner of it, where he can watch her watching happily, content to just be together even among all those people in the background.

Her arms are stretched between two faceless people, only their shoulders are in the frame. Her arms are thin, she would lose the muscle after she stopped training, stopped working jobs like that. She's facing the camera, posing in front of a brick wall, and maybe he's taking the picture. Maybe he's one of the people outside of the frame, and as soon as the picture's taken, she'll pull him in for a hug.

She's on a beach, a smear of sunscreen under each eye, wearing a loose white shirt over her bathing suit. She doesn't care about the scars on display, that look in her eye almost dares the person taking

the picture to say something. She doesn't care, so he doesn't either. Eri has never been to a beach, never learned to swim, so they'll both wear bathing suits and teach her.

There's others, he knows there are more, but he can't look away from this picture. He's never been to a beach either, but with that much sunlight, how little clothing everyone else in the picture is wearing, he knows that it's *warm*. He knows that he'd feel that sunlight on scars and skin, he imagines the water would still be cold, but Eri's hand would still be warm when he holds her in the shallow water, when they both encourage her to kick. They could each hold Eri's hand, they could be there with all of their scars, all three of them.

It would be fine, because 50 would be there, daring anyone to stare. To stop them if they did. To hide them with her quirk if it was too much for Eri, for that sunlight to turn black if it needed to, to *protect* them both and 27 wants.

27 wants her to be here.

He's wanted so many impossible things, and even if some of them came true, this one *won't*. 50 is *dead*, she'll never be here, she'll never hold him again, she'll never even *meet* Eri.

But this is a 50 that Eri could meet. This is a 50 that she could see. This is a 50 alive in so many ways, alive with that smile and warm and happy and *safe*.

27 puts the pictures down, even if it hurts to pull his hands away from them, he has to. This is more than he imagined, this is *too much*, he doesn't know why or how Yamada did this, but he has to answer to it. '*Thank you.*'

Yamada is crying, he doesn't know when he started crying, but he smiles like he wants to laugh. "Thanks, Shinsou, I...I'm really glad. They're good, right? I," Yamada does laugh then, probably catching on 27's concern. "I'm an idiot, I cry over anything. Now you know how lame I am."

27 shakes his head, trying to wipe away his tears. He doesn't think it's lame, it's just lame that 27 keeps crying. He's beyond tired of it, he's never cried so much in his *life*. '*Not lame. Thank you. Perfect.*'

Better than perfect. This isn't just a picture of 50 as she was, her smile bright like a candle that refused to be put out. This is 50 as she could have been. More than what 27 remembers, but as he *wanted* her to be.

Yamada didn't even know who she was. He asked if she was important, and didn't even know. Whatever he did, he did too much for the sake of a stranger.

And he would have been there too, after they got out. They would have rescued Eri somehow, and somehow, Yamada would be there too. As embarrassing as he could be, as loud and enthusiastic as he almost always was, especially when he was playing the part of Present Mic. 50 would have liked him. She would have seen through it immediately, and pretended not to. She would have gotten loud with him, they would both have the other in fits with their jokes. She would probably smirk and juggle knives while they cooked, just for show. And he'd love it because he loves a good show. 50 probably knew more about music than 27 did, and they could talk about that far more than 27 could with Yamada.

'I wish you could meet her,' 27 signs, trying in vain to stop the tears from falling again. '*You would have liked her.*'

Yamada nods, smiling in a way that almost becomes a grimace while he wipes away his tears.

“Yeah, I would have. She was a good person to you, wasn’t she?”

‘Good person’ doesn’t even begin to describe it, it’s the vaguest thing that could be said about 50. It’s almost insulting that Yamada would say that, but Yamada doesn’t really know 50. He knows Furokage Mizuki, but it seems like he barely knows her either.

27 wants someone to know 50 here. Yamada would probably be able to understand that more than anyone else.

‘ Only person who smiled. Only one who talked, ’ 27 sits down, legs shaking just at the memory of that, that flash that reminds him of being shoved in the hallways, those words thrown at him that he couldn’t answer. Creepy kid, look at him. Look at those eyes, he’s crazy. ‘ Talked to me. For me. Like you. Sometimes. ’

Yamada nods, but brings a hand over his mouth like he doesn’t want to let 27 know what he feels about that. He’s not smiling behind that hand, maybe he’s worried that 27 has always been like this. That he’s always been broken, unable to talk.

‘ Mask. Opened to eat. Closed. Couldn’t talk. 50 talked anyway. Couldn’t talk. Couldn’t tell. ’ 27 has to stop, has to bite his lip, he’s tired of crying. He breathes until he finds a place where he won’t cry when he finds the ground under his feet to tell him. ‘ Couldn’t tell her. Thank you. Died. Couldn’t escape. ’

He puts his fingers to that scar, the first session from Bug. The easiest one, probably because he was young. Too young for Cherry and Blossom.

It’s not a scar to remember her by, it’s not one that she gave him. He gave it to himself, he was acting stupid and reckless and paid the price for that. None of his escape attempts worked, they only ended in scars.

Until the raid. Until it was for Eri. And there was a time, between being handcuffed in the car and the police officer saying his name, that he really thought that he had gotten out. That even if he was in prison, The Miasma wouldn’t find him. That they forgot about him.

He knows better, but it feels too much like that sometimes. It feels better than that, it feels like a dream. *‘ I wish she was here. ’*

Yamada sucks in a breath, the tears building again in his eyes, but he tries to blink them back. 27 hopes he does, he feels like crying just because Yamada is crying. “You know, my birthday is July 7th. There’s a festival that day, Tanabata. There’s a story behind it about two gods who can only meet on that day, if the weather is nice, but...” Yamada rubs his eyes with the back of his hand, grimacing before he laughs. “Maybe it’s the part about the weather, but I always think about meeting Shirakumo again like that. On a year that Orhime and Hikoboshi can’t meet because it’s cloudy, me and Shirakumo could meet on that Milky Way. There’s so much we didn’t get to talk about, so much I didn’t say. I can’t imagine never getting the chance to say it, but...”

Even if it only happened once. For one night.

“I don’t think the world is that cruel, for us to never get the chance to say it,” Yamada says, and 27 believes him.

Even if the world is cruel. Even if he has no reason to believe that it wouldn’t be, that everything he knows to be real would bend for that chance, he believes it. He doesn’t even think it would be at night, it wouldn’t be dark when The Miasma was dark enough.

They'd meet in the sunlight, and he'd see for himself the way the sun lights on her green hair. They'd both be warm, for once they'd *both* be warm, and when 50 smiles, he'd be able to smile back.

He'd tell her everything. Even if he's taller, he'd still feel small in her embrace. And even if it's only for one night, or one day, or even less than that, it would be enough.

They'd both be out, and safe. Together.

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27 is worried, but he doesn't want Yamada to know that.

Yamada doesn't fry things often, but 27 knows he's a good cook. He *should* be able to fry this, Yamada said it was easy to make. It's easier to make the frozen ones, but he wants to do it right, he wants it to be *exactly* like the one that 27 had. That 50 gave him.

27 wants it to be too. And he's worried, because if it's not, if it's somehow worse than the four hour old bits of pastry and sweet bean paste that he remembers, he doesn't know how to hide that. It shouldn't be, he knows that it shouldn't be. Yamada is still a good cook, even if he doesn't fry things often, and Yamada doesn't look *that* worried about it.

But Yamada looks nervous. They used a mold to make the fish shape, but Yamada has never used that mold before. He's never actually *made* these before, they're probably not supposed to be homemade. The one that 50 stole from the street vendor was probably a fried frozen one, and it won't be the same, it might be *horrible*, and 27 doesn't know if he can lie to Yamada and tell him that it's good.

He knows it's already different because they're warm, so warm that he can see wisps of steam coming off of them. 50 said that they were supposed to be eaten warm, that they would eat them when they're fresh and warm and crispy when they get out. They look crispy.

He doesn't have to eat them like he ate the one 50 gave him, sneaking pinches of it quickly into his mouth when Bug was distracted. He was still young enough that she brought his food to his room and usually watched him eat it, barking at him to eat faster and stop wasting her time. But she had paperwork to go over that day, and he was able to eat all of it, he was able to feel *full* after eating for the first time in a long time. He was able to keep that flavor in his mouth afterwards, to taste something other than gruel.

Yamada said that it was probably red bean paste. It's the most popular filling, but Yamada likes custard. His owner likes chocolate. They don't have custard, and Yamada hasn't replaced the chocolate chips, but they have red bean paste. Yamada uses all of it, enough to make 10 fish pastries.

Eri stares at them, waiting for Yamada to say that they're cool enough to eat. When she woke up from her nap, she pulled herself into 27's lap, and they looked over all of the pictures. Even 50's.

Eri said she looked pretty. 27 told her that she was. She was a nice person, the only nice person in the Bad Place. He felt bad for lying about 10 when he said that, he knows 10 was a nice person too. But 10 was probably alive, should be hidden unless his owner asks about him. Until betraying him serves a purpose for 27.

27 told Eri that she would have liked her. Eri said that she already does. She likes her hair, and her smile, and 27 finds himself smiling instead of crying to think about that. To imagine 50 letting Eri

braid her hair, how she'd insist that Eri do it and praise her all the while for doing a good job. That 50 and 27 could share a look, an understanding and appreciation that this was all Eri had to learn to do with her hands. That they'd never put a knife in them, that Eri wouldn't have to train. She'd never need to.

They'd all be safe.

"I think they're ready, but be careful! They get pretty hot in the middle," Yamada says, and even if he takes one after Eri and 27 do, he doesn't take a bite.

27 doesn't either, until Eri chimes in, her mouth still full. "Yummy!"

27 takes a bite, and he feels the same way.

It's crispy, it's hot. It's sweet, *exactly* as sweet as he remembers. It's not soggy, it's not cold, nothing else is the same but that only makes it better. It almost makes it too much, when he imagines the festival lights playing on 50's hair, imagines what kind of yukata she'd wear. Imagines that she'd hand him this pasty with a smile that said everything, that said *We're out, and now we can eat them while they're hot.*

He can imagine it's Tanabata, because it feels like it is.

Murder Trial

Chapter Summary

27 decides to tell Aizawa as much as he can about The Miasma, as much as is safe to, but a certain member of Class 1-A makes a move that dismantles that plan almost entirely.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Panic Attack

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou stole 50's autopsy report with a picture of her dead body before retreating to his room. The ventilation systems at UA have robots that patrol for security reasons and pest control, and Shinsou has talked to Principal Nezu unknowingly through that, and now believes that the robots are sentient. Shinsou was force fed when he was living at the police station because he refused to eat, and was sedated before the force feeding took place. Shinsou pretended to be dead last night to try to talk to 50. Bakugo saw that Shinsou stole the autopsy report because he was helping to distract Yamada while he did, and saw that it was an autopsy report before Shinsou put his knife to his throat to threaten him into leaving. Class 1-A refers to The Miasma as 'Villain School,' as Shinsou told Ashido and Kirishima that he went to 'Villain School' after he was kidnapped. Shinsou signed 'I'm weird. Are they weird?' after being drugged with Benadryl after hanging out with Bakusquad over the weekend. Kaminari has been convinced that Aizawa will have Shinsou fight Class 1-A for training purposes for a while. Shinsou sparred with Aizawa after the Chisaki interview. Yamada asked Aoyama to avoid speaking French around Shinsou, since Shinsou's mother spoke French. Todoroki has a cat named Soba that Shinsou doesn't like, and has said before that he and Shinsou are going to be friends but in accordance with the Sports Festival match he had with Midoriya, will have to fight to seal the deal.

Aizawa finds himself sighing in relief when Hizashi texts him to say that Shinsou was out of his room. That he was talking again.

But that relief is short lived when he knows that he needs Shinsou to talk about something else.

Naomasa said that they'll need to bring Shinsou to the station tomorrow. He doesn't know what that means, what The Commission has planned, and neither does Naomasa. Naomasa traded in a long string of favors just to confirm that Mind Slice wasn't involved. Not yet.

Not Mind Slice. Not Chisaki. But Aizawa doesn't doubt that whatever The Commission has planned, it won't be pleasant. Not with Endeavor leaving the hospital with that massive scar to show for it.

If Shinsou just gives him *one* thing, one actionable lead, they could avoid it.

M. E. Not 'Me,' and not a Number. Shinsou wanted to talk about the poisoner, had been fighting to talk before it became too much. Aizawa tried not to think about the reason why Shinsou dug his fingernails into that scar, why it was always a scar that he found when he began to shut down. And he didn't want to think of the hand fisted in front of his shirt, pressed against the other scars. The ones that Aizawa *definitely* didn't want to think about.

Aizawa tries not to think about it while he walks back to the dorm. He tries to work up the energy to dread grading his essays, tries to regret assigning so many to his Midterms when he already has too much on his plate. Tries to worry about his students, how well they'll do on the Heroics Midterm on Saturday when they already seem to suffer under the strain of their fundamentals. Todoroki, surprisingly, was doing well. In fact, he was one of the few students in his class that didn't seem to hesitate to meet his eyes, didn't seem to be distracted or anxious during the course of their exam.

He knows that something isn't right with his class. There's enough of a separation afforded by the Midterm exam schedule that he doesn't know when it set in, but something has rattled nearly all of them. His gut tells him it's not just Midterms, but he doesn't know what else it could be. He won't know until his dorm shift tonight gives him a better opportunity to investigate.

He hesitates before he opens the door. Hizashi said Shinsou was out of his room, that he was talking, but he doesn't know what else that could mean. Whether Shinsou was still signing in that stilted way, that fear barely hidden and his movements slowed with it. Anxious. Fearful. Or if Shinsou had gathered enough of himself to return to those flashes that Aizawa had seen the past few days, that wide and grateful smile, that openness.

He doesn't know what he prefers to see, what will make his necessary task easier. If Shinsou was waiting for more questioning, fearful but resigned, or if he had a flash of happiness that Aizawa had to rip away from him.

When he opens the door, he sees that it's worse. It's not just happiness, but contentment too.

Eri runs to him, and he forces a smile as he kneels, as he strokes a hand over her head and she tells him about all the things that he missed. That Mirio visited, that Twenny is feeling better, that they ate taiyaki and Twenny has pictures of a really nice lady named 50, and they're putting together pictures in a book just for her.

Shinsou looks wary, but resigned. He looks back at a framed picture in his hand, one still on the table in front of him. Aizawa knows that Hizashi made sure to clear out a frame for whichever picture from Shichi-Go-San that Shinsou wanted to keep, but the second frame is a mystery.

It is until he passes behind Shinsou to wash out his thermos, and he sees it's a picture of Furokage Mizuki.

He doesn't know how Hizashi did it, but he found and altered one that wasn't from her ID or passport. The young woman in the picture is smiling, despite the scars plain to see on her face. It's unsettling to think of that process, to think of putting scars on that face just so that it resembles a nightmare that happened after the fact.

But he hopes that having that picture means that Shinsou gave up the other one. The more unsettling one, the one that Mrs. Furokage herself didn't want to look at.

He won't ask, not when he has more important questions, but Shinsou doesn't allow him to ask him to go to the office to talk. He just stands up, taking the pictures, and leaves. To his room, judging by the footsteps, and Aizawa hopes this isn't another retreat. Another shut down.

He busies himself with the other dishes, with cleaning up the kitchen until Hizashi steps beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulder to whisper low enough that Eri can't hear. "You're going to talk to him again?"

Aizawa nods, even if he doesn't want to. He doesn't want to hear that sigh, that disappointment never more ill-placed. Shinsou was *close*, if he could just give him another name and description. A member with a record, a name that they could find and the trail that could begin there. He needs to offer *something* to The Commission, and 'M.E.' wasn't enough.

"Be gentle, alright? He's...not there yet." Aizawa *knows*.

He knows, and that only makes it harder.

*

27 sets the pictures down on his desk. The other pictures of 50, the ones he doesn't have framed, go in his drawer, and he doesn't think he'll move them to the stash box. He needs to take the stash box down from the vents, before the robots think to pick the lock and open it, if they're capable of being that nosy.

He wants a copy of the picture of Eri in that outfit that Yamada hates, but for now he has the first picture of her smiling for her Shichi-Go-San portrait. He was terrified before that smile rose up, when he forced himself to smile and forced his hand on his owner's shoulder. He hoped that he hadn't read her wrong, that she wouldn't spin into a fit of jealousy like she had before, that she wanted to pretend that he and his owner could be friends. And it worked. She was so happy that she couldn't help but smile at that.

The other picture is of 50 wearing the wide brimmed hat. It's the one where she looks the most free, when that laugh is the loudest. He can almost hear it when he looks at the picture, he can hear her voice afterwards saying things that she was never able to say. *Let's have a picnic! I got a whole load of apples for Eri in here or I look ridiculous with this hat. No, you have to wear it! Come on, 27!*

He'd wear it. He'd look ridiculous too. 50 would laugh, but it would be a different kind of laugh. They could take the picture and remember that they can.

They can know that it's warm in the sunlight. They have a ridiculous hat, they can walk together in the sun. They're out, they're free enough to be out, to take pictures and have picnics.

27 is out, but not really. It's a ridiculous chance, a ridiculous idea, but he can try it.

Bug only told him not to tell anyone about The Miasma. Not to bark about it.

But he might be able to write it down.

It's not the police station. There's no one here to watch him. No one that holds down his arm to inject the sedative, and even the flash of that reminds him of another restraint. A flash of the Red Room.

He's alone, he can pretend he's free. When he starts forgetting that, he can look up and see 50. He can remember that they need to do this, he needs to do this for her. They can both be out, they can both be *safe*.

But when 27 sits down, when he opens the notebook and finds a pen, finds a place to start and it's Memory's name, he hears it.

The door opens behind him and closes. He knows that it must be Eri, she must be worried again, but when he looks, she's not there.

No one is.

But he knows that's not the case. He can *feel* someone in the room with him, even if he can't see them. It gets harder to breathe when he thinks about that, when he *knows* who it is if he can't see them. It shouldn't be so soon, they shouldn't have found him this easily, Chisaki shouldn't have told them because Chisaki shouldn't have known.

When he looks back at the paper, trying to convince himself that he's just going crazy, he hears it. A footstep.

Inside his room.

He takes a moment to breathe, to go numb. His nerves sharpen under his skin, but fade when he touches the handle of the knife. There are times that he doesn't have it, times that he puts it in the drawer of the desk, but he wanted to have 50 closer to him in that way.

And despite what he wanted last night, he doesn't want to be closer to her any other way. She'd understand. He knows she'd understand, if they're not taking another thing from him but he's trying to keep them from taking it from him.

He works the mask open, his nerves sharp and stinging, enough that his own voice startles him. "I know you're here."

He stands up, keeps the unsheathed knife close to his thigh. It's still sloppy, he's being sloppy, but 127 is being sloppier. A *footstep*, 127 knows how to move silently. He's taunting him, or he's sloppy, but neither will serve him well.

27 doesn't know exactly where to look, but he pretends he does. He doesn't care if that lets 127 know he still has the upper hand, but if 127 gets sloppier, if he reveals himself in another taunt, that's all 27 needs. He needs him to mess up, *once*. "Did Bug...."

They *catch*. Now, out of any time that it could have happened, the words catch in his throat. The mask is so tight, too tight, he can almost feel himself choking on the words. He can't ask, he can't ask a question, to cast a line and *hope* that 127 answers.

He's useless. *Quirkless*, and he never should have wished for that. He's toothless except for the knife, and he knows that 127 is better with knives. He's better at this, 127 has killed *a lot* of people.

And 27 will be one of them.

It's nearly impossible to fight an invisibility quirk. He fought only a few at the 8 Precepts, and they always had a catch. A time limit, holding their breath, closing their eyes. Inside that 15 meter radius, 127 is invisible, and there's no other catch. Even if he slips up again, makes another noise so 27 knows where he is, if 27 reaches out he's more likely to catch a blade in his hand than a grapple.

It's useless. He's been lying to himself, dreaming instead of living in reality. He's not out, he's never getting out, this was always going to happen.

If he tries to stab 127, 127 will get him first. He's probably moved closer already, the footstep was a taunt, a chance that he knows 27 can't take advantage of. Even if he could scream, could try to get his owner or Yamada's attention, it would be too late. It would only draw Eri's attention, and.

He doesn't want Eri to see it. That's the only thing he wants, the only thing he's *ever* wanted. He doesn't care what happens after, *he can't let Eri see his blood*.

"D-don't... let her see i-it," 27 whispers, swallowing, trying to swallow that stutter from his words without swallowing the words themselves. He hopes, he just *hopes* that 127 will listen. "The l-l-little girl. Please. B-brother. D-d-don't. L-let her. S-see the b-blood."

The door opens again, and 27 doesn't even see who opens it before the room becomes a blur, before he feels something tight wrapped around his arms and chest as an afterthought, after it's already wrapped around him. His shoulder hits the wall, he sees his owner step in front of him, his hair raises and then he hears a scream.

A scream from inside his room, but it's hard to remember that. He knows what Eri sounds like when she screams, and it's deeper-pitched than that, but it's *definitely* not how 127 would scream.

His owner half-closes the door, hand resting on the knob tightens before he speaks, voice low and more threatening than 27 has ever heard it. "Get dressed."

It's a female voice, slightly familiar and incredibly distressed that answers him. "Ye-es sir."

His owner shuts the door with far more force than necessary, the sound of it making 27 flinch, before he turns to look at him. The scarf pulls back around his neck fully, it had loosened from its hold around 27 at some point. His owner sounded angry, he *had* to be angry.

But he looks at 27 like he's concerned. His eyebrows are pulled together, raised, his eyes are a little wider. It's something so open, a break so unlike his calm owner, that it's startling.

"Are you alright, Shinsou?" his owner asks, hand raised but it stops. His owner doesn't seem to know what to do with it, and 27 finds himself staring at it before he finds himself able to nod.

He can still feel the ghost of that scarf wrapped around him. He's not sure if his shoulder hurts, he can't feel himself enough. He doesn't know *what* he feels, it's different from numb and it's different from too much.

He was sure he was going to die. That 127 was going to kill him.

He was going to *die*.

He feels his knees buckle for a moment, feels his legs shake as he catches himself, forces himself to keep upright even if he needs to lean against the wall. *He was going to die*.

He's shaking, everywhere. All over, trembling, it's *cold*, it's never this cold in this place, it's as cold as the water around the docks but it's not cold enough to make him go numb and stop shaking.

Warm. His owner's hand is blisteringly warm, it's hot to the touch on his shoulder, he's saying something and 27 barely even hears the noise of it. He hears Yamada's voice, he can hear the worry in it, and then he hears Eri's and he turns to look at her.

He can look at her. He's still alive.

He feels the trembling stop, he feels the sweat making his skin clammy. He runs a hand through his hair, there's sweat there too, but the feeling of his hair between his fingers is enough to settle him. That hand on his shoulder finally retreats when he works his mouth open to speak. "I-I'm okay. I'm s-sorry."

He doesn't even know why he's apologizing, and Eri doesn't like it either. Her worried expression pulls into a frown before she throws her arms around his leg. Even if his arms still feel weak, he picks her up into his arms, and he feels more settled with that.

He thought he was going to die, but he didn't. He's here. He's with Eri.

His owner protected him.

He hasn't given him the information he wants. He hasn't proved himself worthy of a place, worthy of protection.

He doesn't know if that's just because his owner hates 127 for some reason. If his owner won't let him die until he knows The Miasma's name. He doesn't even know why his owner wants to know so badly, why he's determined to take down The Miasma or what The Miasma has done to deserve it.

But his owner protected him.

The door opens, and his clothes walk out. The person wearing them is still invisible.

That invisible girl. She snuck into his room, she made him think he was going to die. She just stood there while he was pleading with 127, begging for his life. *Why the fuck would she do that?*

His owner is *angry*. He's furious with her, eyebrows drawn together and low, taking her by the shoulder to guide her out. "We're going to see Principal Nezu."

The door slams afterwards, and Yamada sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Well, that's one expulsion I'm not going to fight. Shou almost made it through a whole year, but *that*? Yeah, I'm not going to argue with that."

Yamada is angry too, and that makes it harder for him to stay calm for Eri. To ignore how angry he is too.

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Don't let her see the blood.

Aizawa keeps a firm hand on Hagakure's shoulder, ignoring the sniffing. Shinsou thought he was going to die, accepted death and only begged for Eri not to *see his blood*.

"*Why?*" Aizawa forces himself to ask, even if it doesn't matter. The fact that Hagakure escaped his notice, had slipped into his dorm with two pro heroes and two other occupants completely undetected is a feat that he wishes he could be proud of. But he isn't in the slightest.

"H-he killed that la-ady," Hagakure chokes out, sleeve raising to wipe at her face. "What i-if he was planning on doing it again? He has a knife, what if he has a gun? What if he's going to shoot--"

"What are you talking about?" Aizawa demands, even if he has an idea. It's not a well-hidden fact that Shinsou carries a knife, not when he used it against Bakugo in that fight, but they shouldn't know about Furokage Mizuki.

"Bakugo said he took the evidence! The picture of that woman, h-he probably killed her--"

"Shinsou didn't kill her," Aizawa interrupts firmly. That's one thing he knows for certain, knows that the projectile spines that were found embedded in her body and noted in the autopsy report

weren't from Shinsou. "Shinsou has never killed anyone."

That's something he doesn't know for certain.

Kidnapping. Distraction. Flashy quirk. 'Just a number.' Interrogation. Shinsou has admitted those things, shakily as they were. Vague as they were. But there's always the chance that isn't everything he's done.

But the doubt that he feels is enough to sway him into changing his course from Principal Nezu's office to the Class 1-A dorms. Hagakure is quiet now, crying more quietly, but he doesn't take his hand from her shoulder. He texts Iida to have his students gathered in the common room in five minutes.

He arrives to the dorm in four, but they're all gathered anyway. That palpable stress that he noticed is still apparent, and while he sees that many of them are staring at Hagakure, he can't tell how many are shocked that she's by his side, or shocked that she was caught. "How many of you were under the impression that Shinsou has killed someone?"

None of them are taken aback by the question, though some of them look furious at it. Some look to their peers that look guilty. Bakugo curls his lip and scowls. "He tried to slit my throat, *Sensei*. Don't tell me-"

"Explain. The circumstances. Behind that," Aizawa grounds out. Bakugo should know what murderous intent looks like, and he doubts that he truly saw it in Shinsou.

Bakugo scoffs. "He snuck into the fucking office and grabbed that picture of that dead broad, and then he put his fucking *knife* to my throat. He was going to use it if I didn't leave."

Aizawa feels the scarf move, and has to close his eyes to force it to settle. "I see. You were so convinced that your life was at risk, that you left Eri with an armed and agitated murderer. And you didn't think to warn me of this incident or report it at all."

Bakugo doesn't look cowed, but his fists clench at his sides as he glares at the ground. He doubted it then, even after having a knife at his throat, for a reason. One that he isn't sharing, unwilling to take responsibility for Hagakure's actions.

"Shinsou probably had to do some messed up things at villain school," Kirishima says, rubbing the back of his neck. "I mean, with his... you know-"

"Why did he take a picture of a dead woman?" Jirou asks, hardly able to meet his eyes. "Sensei, I know we can't know about the investigation, but that's really suspicious. There doesn't seem to really be another explanation-"

"The woman was someone who was important to Shinsou," Aizawa answers, that phrase 'Villain School' still dancing on his nerves. "She died when he was young, and he was never able to mourn her properly. He took that picture because he was never able to have a funeral portrait to remember her by."

There are some of his students who know that loss. Some in a vaguer way than others, distant relations or those closer who had passed. They're the ones that he hopes understand.

"*Villain School* seems to have given you the wrong impression about Shinsou's circumstances," Aizawa says, and he doesn't miss the way that Ashido and Kirishima flinch at his tone. "It seems to give you the impression that Shinsou has done unsavory things *willingly*. And there isn't a single thing that Shinsou did during that time that was done willingly."

There isn't a single student that he trusts would be able to understand that. He doesn't want to explain it to them, and they shouldn't be aware of the details of the investigation as much as they already are. But he's still shocked that out of 19 students, half of them believed that Shinsou killed someone, all of them were aware that it was a possibility, and *none* of them approached him with their concerns.

"I'll ask again. How many of you were concerned that someone with access to a weapon and a history of committing murder had access to a 5 year old child, and didn't think to report those concerns to an adult?"

Bakugo raises his hand first. Kirishima, Jirou, Sero, Aoyama, Sato, Ojiro, and Iida follow. Iida earns the most of his ire. While not excusable, the other students didn't have as much access to Aizawa outside of class. They also didn't have as much responsibility to let him know.

"And how many of you were aware that Hagakure was going to investigate for herself?"

Ojiro is the only one with a raised hand. "I didn't think-"

"You were aware, which is a failure to report breaking and entering," Aizawa interrupts. "All of you will face the consequences of your inaction, but Ojiro will be coming with me. This incident is out of my hands, and it's up to Principal Nezu to decide how to deal with it."

He's lying, but he wants to place it out of his hands anyway.

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Principal Nezu not only ignores the tea cup in his hand, but his ear flicks twice while he recounts the incident for him. At the end, there's a pause before the animal principal speaks. "Regrettable. I suppose I'll need to take a moment to consider our options. I'll let you know if an escort back to the Class 1-A dorms is necessary for your...students."

He knows the pause is calculated. He can feel the anxiety rise to a fever pitch from Hagakure and Ojiro. As much as he feels a flicker of sympathy, he feels far more inspired in regards to his plans for the rest of his class.

On the way back to the staff dorm, he turns those plans over in his head. As much as Hizashi might appreciate being able to sleep in after putting every student in Class 1-A under house arrest to force them to fail their English Midterm, there's no procedure for grading their English class without the midterm. Forcing an entire class to fail a fundamental course isn't something that has protocols in place to deal with.

He could take this as an opportunity to cull a few that worry him for the Heroics Midterm, but Kan would see it for what it is. And he's not nearly as immature as Kan thinks he is, to end the career of a potentially great hero just to secure his own win in the Joint Training Exam.

Bakugo, Kirishima, and Sero worry him for different reasons.

'I'm weird. Are they weird?'

Aizawa isn't nearly as concerned with Shinsou's social skills as Hizashi is, but he's not cold-hearted enough to ignore how painful the revelation of their suspicion would be. Shinsou thinks that he and Bakugo are friends, that Bakugo's close friends are his as well. And apart from Kaminari and Ashido, each of them had turned to the suspicion that Shinsou was a murderer in the course of two days.

It's unfortunate that the procedures in place for wardships means that Shinsou has that proximity to his class, and that puts the confidentiality of the investigation in constant risk. But while Aizawa doesn't want to encourage his students' interest in Shinsou, he does need to assure that there can be peaceful coexistence in their shared spaces. He needs to divest them of any implication that 'Villain School' has placed on Shinsou.

Shinsou and Eri are still clinging to each other, a system of Shinsou answering a question on his exam and Eri immediately checking it before she places a sticker next to it playing out on top of the kotatsu. The reminder that Eri settles Shinsou like nothing else gives him pause, but not enough to keep from asking. "I'm going to be at the Class 1-A dorm tonight. Would you like to come or stay here with Hizashi and Eri?"

Shinsou takes a long pause himself, long enough for Aizawa to consider making that neutral question a bit less neutral to sway him. Long enough to remind himself that Shinsou taking time to answer is normal, and something that needs to be challenged slowly.

But Shinsou does answer, exactly how he wants him to.

'Go with you.'

With the pieces in place, Aizawa goes to the office to take advantage of the opportunity if it presents itself. He's not sure whether Shinsou will come out of his plan for Class 1-A in a mood suited to answering questions related to the investigation, but if he is, Aizawa can't afford to be ill-prepared.

An interview tomorrow, with the machinations of The Commission still hidden from him. His students' suspicion of Shinsou, their method of dealing with it almost convincing Shinsou that UA was not enough to keep him safe from '127.'

It's hard to remind himself that the Heroics Midterm, an unending fount of stress every year, was even a concern to him right now.

*

27 tries to remind himself of his task as they walk to the dorm, tries not to feel somehow smaller and more vulnerable at his owner's side without Eri next to him.

His owner was going to be at the dorm, and 27 needed to take advantage of that. Eri wasn't going to be at the dorm, and he needed to take advantage of that too. That turned the Safe Room into the office, turned it into a space for interrogations, and 27 needed to be ready to meet that expectation. To exceed it.

Memory's name, and anything else that his owner wanted to ask about. Not The Miasma's name, not yet. If it were too easy, he would be tossed away too quickly, but his owner had been in an oddly accepting mood. As long as he offered anything else, his owner would be pleased, but lack an excuse to dispose of him.

He could earn a place, and not lose it. Long enough for him to imagine 50 with him, beside him in this place. Their escape, but real. A dream, but one he could close his eyes and believe in.

His owner doesn't turn to go up the stairs, but instead leads him to the common room where almost all of the hero students are gathered. Tail Boy and InvisiBitch are missing, but it's unusual for so many of them to be in this room at the same time. Unless something draws them to gather here, like Mrs. Midoriya's visit.

“For the next two hours, Shinsou is in charge of all of you. And he’s free to do whatever he wants to you during that time, with no repercussions,” his owner says, and 27 doesn’t know who looks more confused, himself or the students. “There will be repercussions for you if you act inappropriately during that time.”

His owner leaves.

27 watches him leave, watches him turn and open the door to the stairwell. He watches the door close, and has to force himself to look back at the students, still confused and now wary.

What the fuck does that mean?

His owner has given him tests upon tests upon *tests*. He almost misses the way that Bug would hum or tut under her breath when she gave 27 a test, no matter which way he answered, because he learned to pick apart which hum or tut that sounded disapproving actually wasn’t. But his owner never gives him that, never gives him a *single* clue. And this isn’t just a test, this is a responsibility that has no restrictions and a million ways to fail at it.

He has no idea what he’s supposed to do, but Ashi seems confident.

“Movie night!” Ashi cheers, fists raised above her head. “We can make popcorn, and pick a trashy chick flick- pick one that Bakugo hates, ‘cause you know this is supposed to be-”

“Ashido, I don’t think that Aizawa-sensei intends for this to be an enjoyable exercise,” Provost Piston says, glancing at 27 but otherwise keeping his eyes lowered. “And whatever Shinsou instructs us to do, we should be aware that Aizawa-sensei expects us to comply.”

They’re all staring at him, even more warily. But while some are still confused, he’s not. If it’s not supposed to be enjoyable for them, he knows what to do.

He looks at the Fluent One before he signs. ‘ *Villain training. You’re translating. Safe.* ’

The Fluent One doesn’t seem to believe the ‘safe’ part, but he does know his task. “Shinsou says that we’re going to be training. Uh, villain...training.”

Sparky jumps on top of the sofa cushion he had been sitting on, fists raised in the air pumping with each word. “I! CALLED! IT!”

27 won’t be going any easier on him because of that. His owner wouldn’t want him to.

His owner had already measured his abilities with that sparring match, even if 27 hadn’t been able to demonstrate his true skill. His owner found him worthy enough to instruct the students, and had asked for his advice beforehand. Whatever challenge the Heroics Midterm held for the students, 27 imagined that his owner was worried about their skill in meeting it, and wanted 27 to take this opportunity to measure their weaknesses and try to correct them.

And 27 would do his best to meet that expectation.

*

Provost Piston makes it easier for him. Once 27 announced their task, he set out to lead them to an appropriate gym for the training to take place, to make the students’ hero costumes available once 27 approved of that decision. He also insisted that 27 change into a spare gym uniform, something that 27 wanted to decline but after a few minutes of Engine Man rambling about heat stroke and proper attire, he gave in just to make him stop talking.

The blue, red, and white uniform is too large, and he suspects that it isn't really a spare but instead Oil Change's. It also reveals too much of the scars, reveals the tattoo and the students stare at it. But 27 ignores their stares and slips into a mask that doesn't even have scars, trying to imitate that quiet and evaluative way that Bug would act before training really began. ' *Fight me. One at a time. Alphabetical.* '

Bakugo scowls after the Fluent One speaks for him. "Oi, you really want a rematch? If you're still not using your damn quirk, it's gonna be hell for you to keep up. These gauntlets are gonna have your ass *smoked*."

27 tries not to get too excited about it, but he can't help but smirk, can't help but pull out the knife and toss it spinning before he catches it. ' *All I need. Try to keep up, Blast chan.* '

The Fluent One doesn't translate the last part, but he doesn't have to. Bakugo screams behind clenched teeth, glaring at the French One until he enters the sparring ring.

27 had hoped that the gleaming dome in the middle of that belt allowed Shiney's laser to change directions, but it kept shooting out straight to the middle. It's powerful, he can tell that by the shower of debris from the wall it hits. It can widen to become larger, but it's a little disappointing.

27 should have more trouble than he does with a long-range attack like this, but it's easy enough to dodge the laser, to tell by Glitter's stance where it will be coming from. He slides low, grabs an ankle when he goes under French's legs, and pulls himself up while he pulls Shiney down, disappointed that he catches himself before his face meets the floor.

27 taps the knife's point to the ill-placed seam in the back of his armor, right above his spinal cord, before he drops his ankle and sheathes it. ' *Dead.* '

He waits for Glitter Knight to get up, irritated that he's too busy fixing his hair to look at his instructor. "Shinsou says that you need to keep the advantage of having distance in a fight with someone like him. And you need to be able to change up the direction of your quirk," Fluent One translates, then looks at Shiney in confusion. "But, you weren't using Naval Buffet, or trying to dodge backwards."

Glitter Brat just flicks his hair back, winking at 27. "That seemed too much for mon- for my friend! You seemed to be enjoying the fun!"

27 lets him have his fun for exactly 20 seconds, before he kicks his knee out, hand on his shoulder to force him to kneel. The other hand presses the back of the knife to his throat, making a point before he pulls himself away to address all of them. ' *Training. Not fun. Be serious.* '

Ashi doesn't seem to believe that at all, skipping into the ring to take her turn. She swings an impressive amount of acid at him, but it's too easy to catch a hand and press the tip of the knife to the back of it. He could take her down in a number of ways after that, but he wants her to take this lesson seriously. "Shinsou says you need to have some protection on your hands. If he stabbed you there, your own acid could really hurt you."

Ashi pouts, flexing her hand. She probably doesn't want to out of a childish dislike for wearing gloves, but he tries to give her another reason to do it. He draws the protective plate she should be wearing on his own hand, before he backhands an invisible opponent. And she grins at that, adding her own side effects when she imagines it herself. "Wa-poosh! Pah! Acid!"

He had high hopes for Amphibian Fibber, but he finds himself disappointed right off the bat. He can't catch her tongue, too slippery when it darts out towards him, but he slashes with the knife

distant enough not to catch her, but close enough to catch his meaning.

She narrows her eyes, then uses that camouflage skill that she mentioned in the chat. He can still see the ghost of movement, and she doesn't hide her footsteps as well as she should. As well as 127.

She does utilize it well enough, leaping and sticking to walls to try to throw him off, but when he purposefully ignores her last leap to the wall behind him and lets her jump towards him, he cheats a bit at the restriction he put on himself and reaches out to grab her foot. It's easy enough to let her fall after that, and while he knows a few pressure points that could drill the point home, he doesn't use any of them, just puts the back of the knife against the back of her leg.

"Shinsou says he could still see you when you moved, and you need to move more quietly. And since you're reliant on your legs for a lot of moves, you need to protect the back. The...tendons specifically. If he cut them, you'd be in trouble," the Fluent One only half translates, until 27 glares and repeats himself. "You wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

Amphibian Fibber stares for a minute, before she stifles a laugh. "I'm glad I was right about your sense of humor, Shinny."

He hasn't really had time to look at that book of JSL jokes, but he is looking forward to it. Even if he knows who it's from now. Even if she's a liar, she does have good taste.

Bakugo seems a bit too confident for someone he's already beaten before. "Oi, you're not gonna be saying shit about my costume."

He sees one thing already, but he'll wait until Bakugo gives him the opportunity for a demonstration.

Bakugo is still a tough opponent, tougher with that scatter shot that's nearly impossible to dodge. Bakugo is also aggressive, his mobility still a challenge, but when 27 starts to smell the burnt sugar become more powerful, he guides Bakugo under the walkway by dodging back several times. Then, just when that menacing grin gets a little more irritating, he knocks the gauntlet down into position and tucks the knife into the little metal ring before he pulls. There's no pause before it fires, and Bakugo should really get that worked out too.

It sends him flying into the ceiling, much shorter under the walkway than out in the ring. There's no time for Bakugo to react, his back rattles a bit of dust loose and probably knocks the wind out of him, causing him to fall into a heap on the floor.

27 takes the opportunity to twirl the ring around twice before Bakugo recovers, a bit quicker than he expected, but more sloppily than he should. There's no explosion following that hand reaching out for him, and that only makes it easier to grab the gauntlet, the other hand on the back of Bakugo's neck when he forces him into a loose pin, standing behind him.

Bakugo tries to kick him, but that just makes it easier to shove him to the floor, a knee on top of his shoulderblade. There's a lot of protective plating, especially at the neck and he can congratulate Bakugo for that later. There's no clear strike that would kill him, and 27 twirls the knife before he stands up, releasing Bakugo.

He holds up the metal ring, the pull for the grenade that was Bakugo's undoing, before he tosses it to him. *' Awareness of situation. Explosion from sweat easy to guess. Endurance fight both good and bad. '*

The Fluent One only translates half of it before Bakugo cuts him off. “What the fuck do you mean, ‘guess’?! You know my fucking quirk, shit face! You know everything about everyone’s fucking quirk, and we don’t know shit about yours!”

“Shinsou says he’s pretending he doesn’t,” the Fluent one translates. “Like a real villain fight, because he’s pretending to be a villain.”

That’s not what 27 signed, but the Fluent One likes taking the opportunity to censor him, for some reason.

Bakugo growls behind clenched teeth, probably wants to tell 27 to take this seriously. But 27 is, for the most part.

It’s still a lot of fun.

Provost Piston seems like he’s considering how to take advantage of that restriction that 27 put on himself, hand cupped to his chin while he stares. He’s not wearing the helmet, and while 27 would like to find out whether it decreases his range of vision, he’s not going to insist that Engine wears it. “Perhaps we should take a break before continuing, to rehydrate and-”

27 shakes his head. Bakugo in particular had drawn a lot out of him, enough to feel the stretch and burn in his limbs. But this isn’t anywhere close to his limit, and while he doesn’t mind Exhaust Pipe having the benefit of knowing that restriction, he’s not going to give him too much time to prepare for it. There’s little that he can do to take advantage of it, anyway.

Piston moves in straight lines, and still kicks too much. He’s trying to mix it up, to throw in more punches and jabs, and it seems to be difficult for him. 27 slashes with the knife close to his face, trying to rattle him into just letting loose, to stop thinking about it so much, and he scrambles back in a panic.

But he pulls a more determined face, and even if his movements don’t get more mixed, he can tell that he’s trying to hit him a bit harder.

It’s harder to take Exhausting down than the first time, but eventually he can duck under a high kick and topple Piston’s weight against him. He keeps the leg over his shoulder, knowing that Piston will feel the strain in his chest with his shoulders on the ground but his body held over him. He gives Piston the chance to activate his quirk, which would burn 27’s back pretty badly, but he doesn’t.

“Shinsou says you’re getting better, and your costume doesn’t have any weaknesses that he can see!” the Fluent One says proudly, and a few of the students clap as though he wasn’t still taken down.

Piston still has an odd flush on his face, rubbing the back of his neck. “This match was very enlightening for me, and I see where I need to improve in some areas that I hadn’t considered before. Thank you, Shinsou.”

He bows, and 27 finds it incredibly awkward, finding himself looking away until the next match begins.

Long Lobes has her hands tucked into her pockets, cocking her head before she asks. “If one of us beats you, does that mean we can get a free question or something?”

He knows why she asks, why she seems confident about her victory. 27 can already see where it comes from, and he knows that he’ll have to act quickly to prevent it. But he plays that off with a

shrug. ‘ *Fine.* ’

He lets himself go loose, before he sprints forward. She’s a bit quicker than the training session he saw, and that was exactly what he was afraid of.

The sound is deafening, he can hear the vibrations of it in the air around him and feel how that shakes him. He almost raises a hand to cover his ears before he stops himself, before he forces himself forward with his eyes locked on his chance. The only mercy is that it’s a heartbeat, there’s a drop afterwards, and it’s easier to move forward in that pause.

He mutes her by cutting the cords in the front of her costume, though she tries to kick him with the weight of those heavy speakers behind it. He catches them on his arm, and it’s a throbbing bruise but not a break. He puts the tip of the knife close to her throat, and finds himself grinning at the points of those earlobes aiming for his eyes.

It’s hard to hear what the Fluent One says when he translates, since it sounds so muffled. “Shinsou says you have a good balance for long distance and short range, which is good because your heartbeat isn’t a sustained sound. You just need to have a better reaction time. And it’s kind of good that you didn’t take out his eyes too.”

Beat Dropper rubs at her ears after taking out her ear plugs, scoffing. But then, she looks at him with an odd concern. “You’re bleeding a little, it’s...I didn’t think it was going to get that loud. Sorry.”

27 shrugs again, putting his fingers into his ears to see if clearing away the blood would improve his hearing. It does, but he still feels like his bones are rattling. ‘ *Fine.* ’

Spark Rat tries to offer him a break to recover, but seems too excited when he declines to make him think that he meant it at all.

Zappy fires off the stun darts, and 27 puts plenty of distance between himself and the cables attached to them. He’s fought enough electricity quirks to know that more distance is better, and he’s proven right by the feeling of static on his arms even at 4 meters.

It’s risky to approach, knowing that Sparky can emit an even larger amount of electricity from his body. He considers throwing the knife to see if Battery can dodge, though there’s not much protection in his costume to keep from seriously injuring him if he doesn’t. But just the flash of the knife causes Sparky to panic.

And fry himself.

27 feels the static pops, relieved that it’s not enough for the burn or convulsions that he was expecting from that attack, and stares as that dopey look comes across Battery’s face. He sheathes the knife, wondering if there’s even a point to him offering a criticism when Sparky won’t remember it. And there isn’t one.

Kirimson Shark guides Zappy back to the others before he steps into the ring. 27 is disappointed that he hardens immediately, and that he seems to think that he’s won already.

A defensive quirk like that is always an endurance fight. And while the stretch and burn is growing to an ache, 27 still dodges and throws his own blows, careful not to blunt the knife but using it more often now that it won’t result in injury.

The endurance fight begins to wane like it usually does, the area that Kirimson Shark hardens is getting smaller. His blows become more fluid with that, the joints no longer locked and tense, and

27 will definitely point that out to him as something he should take advantage of from the beginning of the fight.

It's also easier to tell when he's going to harden, and when he doesn't do it in time to avoid 27 stabbing him in the throat, 27 pauses with the point still pressed to his skin. When he sheathes it, he and Kirimson seem to be the only ones who know that the match was lost.

' Breath in before quirk. Easy to spot. Stop doing that, ' 27 signs, before he explains the change in speed when he doesn't harden his joints, but adds that hardening them when someone tries to throw or joint lock him could be useful.

Kirimson seems wide eyed in awe, before he curls his fists in front of him with a grin. "That's so manly! You noticed stuff that *I* didn't even know I did! Man, how did you learn to do that? It's awesome!"

27 shrugs. Even if he didn't win that match, it's an easy enough question. *' Training. Fought a lot. Had to learn to win. '*

It's a bone-deep habit now, to pick apart not just the fighting style but the opponent's quirk and its drawbacks. As often as he saw familiar faces in the ring at the 8 Precepts, he saw far more new ones. He had to pick apart their weaknesses before the advantage took him down.

He probably owes all of it to Chisaki for giving him a more varied fare than he encountered at The Miasma's training room.

The Fluent One looks a bit wary until 27 repeats that he's excused from this training exercise. Whether his owner will fault him for that or not should worry him more than it does. He doesn't want to fight the Fluent One, even if he's curious whether there's a slight strength enhancement in his large frame. But if the Fluent One tried to use his quirk to have an animal to fight for him, 27 isn't sure if he would be able to fight it.

Izuku tries to make him take a break, *again*. 27 is fine, he's gone far longer and far harder without a break. The only break he really got at the 8 Precepts was when Rikiya wanted to torment a quirked underling, or if he lost a match. And that was never pleasant to deal with.

Izuku is pretty fast with that glowing speed enhancement, and he can tell by the blows he has to block that the strength behind it is decent, even at only 20%. He can also see that there's a strategy at work when Izuku's eyes seem a little more distant, darting in the wrong places. 27 can't help but grin, excited for the challenge.

"Air force shoot style!" Izuku calls, and 27 has just enough time to remind himself to tell them not to call out their attacks before his legs are blown from under him.

He catches himself on his arm, rolls away from a heavy stomp that he's proud to see, but the speed enhancement and quick flurry of blows never allows him to recover his footing fully. When he tries to turn on his heel, to get just a few seconds to steady himself, Izuku grabs the front of his shirt and pulls him into his bent knee.

Izuku grabs the knife, protected by his gloves, and twists to throw 27 over his shoulder. After the stinging pain from his back fades to a throb, 27 opens his eyes to see Izuku standing over him, fist ready to strike. But that quickly fades into panicked concern. "Are you okay?! I didn't really- that probably hurt a lot-"

"Fine," 27 cuts off, surprising himself. He hadn't hit his head, hadn't felt the mask pry open either,

but the word fell out of his mouth easy. He pulls himself to sitting, the ache in his legs troublesome enough to keep him from standing right now, and looks up at Izuku expectantly.

He seemed to have forgotten about his prize, until the other students start shouting to remind him of it. They throw in suggestions too, ranging from whether he liked the pizza to what he did at villain school. 27 can't help but laugh when Bakugo still demands to know what his quirk is. His interest in it seems to have been piqued by something.

Izuku looks pensive, fingers wrapped around his chin, before his mouth twists into a deeper frown, and he looks 27 in the eye. His eyes are startlingly green.

"It's okay if you don't want to answer this question, because it is kind of personal. But Kacchan told us about the picture that you took, and..." 27 finds himself looking away, teeth clenched tight. That *was* a question he didn't want to answer, and he wishes that he had gone a bit harder on Blasty during the match knowing what he knows now. "Some of us took it the wrong way. I think it would just be better to clear the air and-"

"Question," 27 cuts off. He's not in the mood for rambling, he just wants Izuku to ask it and get it over with.

"Who was that woman to you?" Izuku asks, his tone oddly softened. He looks like he regrets asking, maybe regrets asking the wrong question. 27 was sure that he was going to want to know how she died. Why she died. The gory details of it that even 27 doesn't know, even if he knows it's in the autopsy report. Even if he can imagine by remembering what 98 told him, friendly fire from her client when the drug deal was busted, when she startled them by doing her job to protect them.

27 flexes his hands, unwilling to try to speak it. He's not sure if he has the words. *'Good person. Kind. Not friend or mother. Better. Trained me. She was.'*

He feels that scar sting. It's a reminder, a bitter one. A bitter hope that he gave up on after her, but one that almost came true anyway.

'Escape.'

He listens to the Fluent One's translation, but barely hears it, running a hand through the hair on the back of his head. He pulls it away with too much sweat, it's a fight to pull himself to standing but he does it. He just doesn't meet Izuku's eyes when he recognizes that pitying expression.

He calls for a break, but tells them to run laps while he's gone. He wants them distracted, and he wants to take his time to gather himself. He should be able to fight each of them in the time allotted, even if he doesn't have a way to know how much has passed already. He left the phone in his room, knowing that he wouldn't touch it.

The water fountain by the changing rooms makes the water ice cold, and he spends longer drinking from it just to enjoy it. He should stretch again, pull the stiffness out of his limbs while he has a chance. Stress Bake, Sticky, Mask, Evil Cat Owner, Bird Boy, Floaty, and Momo.

He's definitely not missing Tail Boy right now. Not after Izuku.

He feels halfway recovered when he does force himself to go back to the gym area to resume the matches, but the way that they stare with that same pitying look makes him want to retreat. He'll just have to wipe that look off their face, and replace it with fear that he's starting to miss.

Stress Bake has a strength enhancement, and he's fought so many of those that it's a match he could win in his sleep. Joint lock, joint lock, throw. He almost went in for a sleeper hold, but

caught an elbow to his ribs for the brief hesitation. He mentions the lack of protection again, before he realizes that he didn't even try to use the knife to illustrate it.

Sticky improved a bit, and nearly caught him when he stuck the end of his tape on 27's arm while hanging from the ceiling from his other spool, trying to spin around to bind him. It becomes a waiting game when 27 pulls out the knife, considering throwing it to sever the tape that Sticky is hanging on, and Sticky gets scared of it enough to keep too much distance between them. The match takes too long because of that, but when Sticky tries to zip over his head to the walkway, he catches a foot and throws him on his back. Sticky argues when 27 mentions the distance fight, saying that he has reasons to be afraid of knives, but 27 hasn't given him any.

Mask has too many arms to lock, but only two legs. It's still difficult to get to them with that massive arm span and range. He looks a bit nervous when 27 asks if the webbing between his arms is more sensitive to pain, but there should be a way to protect it. Pain can be distracting, and with the mass of nerve endings he's sure are there to process the information from his quirk-produced sensory organs, it would be very distracting for Mask. Debilitating even.

27 doesn't feel like proving or testing it.

The students look a bit nervous when Polar Temperatures steps into the ring, and 27 can see why. His ice can immobilize at a distance, in seconds. It can be used for mobility, attack or defense. Fire is always dangerous to deal with on its own, even though 27 has gotten very good at dodging it.

"It's fine if you want to take things slow with Soba," Chilli says, before he bows for some reason. "But however this match turns out, we'll be friends at the end of it."

27 doesn't quite hide his disbelief, and considers throwing the knife in hopes that it doesn't miss. More than that self-assured way Halfsies says that, 'however it turns out' sounding more and more like 'when I win,' it's that irritating assumption that he can decide that they're friends 'when' he wins.

They're not friends. And that cat is still evil.

Todo is a distance fighter who knows how to use his quirk for it. He knows that 27 is short range with the knife and no quirk, and turns floes of ice into walls that 27 has to climb quickly before they trap him. But 27 isn't going to let him keep that distance, he fights tooth and nail to close it, and when another wall comes up, he digs the knife into it to pull himself over it, grinning when he sees that it becomes a half-dome.

That makes it all the easier to slip behind Chilly landing quiet enough for the sound to be covered when he shatters his own ice. 27 tests that guess, approaching from the left side, and is proven right when the back of the knife on his throat is what draws Todo to turn around and notice him, the flames flickering to life before he remembers that he already lost.

Chilly doesn't look like he likes losing, his eyes narrowed and frown firm.

"Why that side?" Todo asks, and 27 won't be cruel enough to say it. He holds the knife in front of his left eye, making Todo's widen before that frown turns to a near grimace.

That burn is odd, but 27 is sure that it was caused by some sort of heat. Todo can clearly see out of it, but probably not well. Eyes don't tend to deal well with heat that close to them.

But he offers up another explanation for the other students. "Shinsou says he was acting on the assumption that you could only create ice from your right side, since you didn't use fire. You used

your quirk to your advantage, but should have noticed that he was climbing your ice walls and made a full dome to get more distance. And...”

27 glares, but the Fluent One shakes his head.

“Shinsou, Soba really is very nice! He was just really scared when you met him!” the Fluent One lies, and 27 knows not to believe him. That cat is a demon wearing plush fur, and he’s seen it for himself.

He can admire it, but from a distance.

He hates Darkness. Poe Fanatic uses his quirk the right way, and he hates that smack-talking quirk. It keeps goading him, trying to grab him while it wiggles its creepy little fingers, chanting ‘I’m gonna get you! I’m gonna get you!’

Even Bird Boy seems to be irritated with it.

27 throws the knife, and when he notices that Bird Boy hasn’t noticed it, he raises his hands and points it out. ‘ *I didn’t miss. Distance fight, but you’re vulnerable. Pay attention.* ’

Nevermore looks at the knife embedded in the wall behind him for a while, probably taking in that it should have been embedded in his chest. He nods, then turns back to 27. “It is difficult to control Dark Shadow, and I admit that I was focusing on that aspect of the fight. Thank you for your instruction.”

Darkness whines, but before he can say something that will make 27 want to test whether it can be killed, The Crow pulls it back under his cape.

Floaty looks too enthusiastic, and 27 can’t help but feel a little bit of it in turn.

He can tell that she’s avoiding her quirk to test her sparring skills, and he has to say that he sees a huge difference. She was scrappy before, but she’s fighting a bit smarter, a bit quicker, and a bit harder too. He’s enjoying it, despite the bruises from his blocks.

She’s trying to grapple him, and he can practically see her running down a list of targets she hasn’t tried. He’s pretty sure if he left an opening for her, he could end the fight by letting her think she can take it, but he won’t. He’s hoping she’ll get frustrated enough to start using her quirk.

She makes a grab for his shoulder from too far away, and then he sees it. He grabs her wrist, other hand around her elbow when he shoves her backwards onto the floor, but he can’t stop staring at them. How did he not see this before?

He knows he’s staring, and that it’s probably a little odd. He touches one of them, too curious if he’s right, and he is. It’s not much of a difference, but they’re a little squishier than they should be.

He *hates* his quirk.

This is unfair. She has *toe beans*. She doesn’t even *need* toe beans for her quirk. She probably doesn’t even appreciate them. She probably doesn’t squish them, even if she has the opportunity to do it any time she wants.

“Uh...Shinsou?” Floaty is staring at him. She probably wants him to let go of her hand.

He gives the toe bean one more squish before he does. ‘ *Use quirk. Improving.* ’

One more. Momo.

He toyed too much with Floaty. He feels the ache and strain, but it's deeper now. He only has one more match, but he knows that it will be a difficult one. Even if he's trying to ignore it, trying to expect nothing just like he said he would, to recreate a real and blind fight, he's worried. She can create *anything*.

And the first thing she creates is a smoke bomb.

He covers his mouth, knowing that the point of it isn't just to obscure his vision but to make him give away his position too. She's just as blind as he is, but she's not as talented at moving silently.

He sees her back come into focus from the haze, and wastes no time to grab her from behind in a choke hold. He finds himself grinning despite the end of a metal pipe digging into his stomach. He hadn't even considered that she'd project items for close range offense.

He grabs the end of it, and pulls, noticing that it breaks off at that point while Momo makes an uncomfortable grunting sound. He swings it at her regardless, and she dodges to lob a tiny wooden doll that explodes when he hits it.

It's a *flashbang*.

He swallows the instinctive panic that rises when he can't see anything but white, he can't hear anything but the ringing in his ear. That was *good*, that was a good move. He has to calm himself down, dodging back to keep the distance when he feels her approach, but he can't do anything else.

He's noticed that the smoke has cleared when he regains a bit of his vision, still blurry. The ringing in his ears has died down to a whine. She's nearly backed him into the wall, spinning into a kick with something long and white in her hand.

He dodges the kick, but she notices that he goes low to avoid it, and swings that white thing against his chest and arms. It feels like putty, and it sticks to the wall. Sticking him to it.

He can't help but ask, even if he knows it's unlikely. "C4."

She looks hilariously horrified. "No! It's a similar plastique, but more elastic and durable, but it..." The growl from her stomach is loud, and it seems to be accompanied by a bit of pain judging by the way she curls her arms around it. "It's a bit more complex, so it...took a bit more effort to create."

That's particularly unfortunate, because it needs a specialized compound to break it down. And Momo can't make it now that she's drained.

He has to trust that Ashi is capable of very carefully melting it with her acid. He tries not to show any concern, but the other students gathered around have no qualms against it. Scotch Tape in particular is helping a lot. "So, Shinsou. Any last words before Ashido inevitably spazzes out? Because after she does, we'll have like 5 seconds to remember them before Aizawa-sensei kills absolutely all of us. Brutally. Painfully. With no legal repercussions. He *definitely* has a license to kill--"

"My last words," Shinsou says, a bit grateful that the mask is gone now that his hands are tied up. "Are fuck you. I'm mute."

There are some very interesting fumes coming from the combination of acid and plastique. Some very bright colored smoke and just a little bit of green fire before Izuku stomps it out.

Acid is out.

Stress Bake says he's running back to the dorm to get something for Momo to eat, but there's only 10 minutes left in that two hour timeframe. If Aizawa isn't aware that they left the dorm, and he doubts that he is, then he will be soon. And Sucrose Boy will probably earn a bit of a reward to point him in the right direction.

He'd...rather not be found like this.

They're running through their other options. Momo says that the plastique isn't likely to bend enough for them to pull him off of the wall. Todo ignores that and offers to create an ice barrier behind his back to pull him free, and the Mask has to remind him that it's more likely to crush 27's ribs than free him.

Blasty volunteers Izuku to smash in the wall, but luckily that plan is quickly vetoed by the rest of the group. Some worry that 27 might get a bit smashed himself, others are concerned that Cementoss won't be happy to repair the damage.

Izuku snaps his fingers after he figures out a new plan. "Wait! It's only covering Shinsou's shirt, so maybe if we cut it at the seams, he can slip out of it!"

They do have the knife, but this is not his shirt. A few other students must have noticed that, because they stare at Piston before he grants permission to destroy it.

Izuku unsheathes the knife, and though it gets a bit more difficult to avoid cutting him when he gets closer to his armpit, where his arm is trapped into a tighter angle, he does manage it. With both seams cut, 27 starts sliding down against the wall, nearly getting trapped by his head even when he turns it to the side, but luckily the collar of the shirt is wide enough and the plastique has just enough give.

When he stands up, he's reminded why he doesn't like showing his scars.

He knows it's not pretty. It's a history of fights and punishments and losses recorded in his skin. He can't even remember half of the boring slash wounds, but the more interesting quirks he's faced have left their mark. Like the dip under his collarbone from the underling who could vomit bullets from a pistol-like object in her throat. Or the guy with a tiger quirk who nearly tore out his right hip.

Chisaki *could* have repaired the damages so it wouldn't scar. But he didn't.

There's more scar than skin at this point, and the worst of it is on his chest. He probably should have died from half of them. He did die from a few.

But he only stayed that way until Chisaki took off his gloves.

"Ask," 27 says, even if he could sign. He doesn't want to wait for a translation, doesn't want to look at Genesis either. He feels the mask shut as soon as he says it, he feels it in his jaw stronger than ever. He wants her to ask so he can leave, so he can go to the changing room and put on his shirt. So he can hide. He knows he's hiding, he knows it's cowardly. He wants it too much to call it that.

"I don't...." Creation trails off, she doesn't even *know* what she wants to ask. There's too many stories on display to pick from. Maybe she'll ask which one hurt the most, and it's hard to say. Definitely a Bug scar, but it's hard to pick one of those. The longest one when he was sold, when he was sure he was going to die. The first one, that bitter escape attempt foiled. The second,

another escape that he barely thought about, he saw the client and only thought of Honzo, and ran. A test failed.

The ones on his stomach.

“Your quirk,” Blasty says, too quiet but still angry. Even angrier because it’s quiet. He doesn’t even feel like laughing. “Shitty Hair said you could have killed people-”

“I didn’t-” Crimson Rodeo starts, but cuts himself off with a wince.

Oh. That’s what it was.

They had been acting different. More wary. It wasn’t just fear that he was going to hurt them, that his owner might have instructed him to prior to their arrival. It wasn’t just a punishment.

They were afraid of him. Afraid of his quirk.

Even Blasty.

“Did you and Eri enjoy Shichi-Go-Sa-”

‘ *Quirkless. Never going to use it,* ’ 27 signs, and he doesn’t care that Creature Conversation’s eyes go wide at that. ‘ *Never killed anyone. Never will. Promised 50.* ’

He nods at Manufacturer before he leaves, and doesn’t care if he’s translated.

He’s grateful that they don’t follow him, not when this swelling and childish irritation overwhelms him. He pulls on the hoodie with quick and jerky tugs before he lashes out and strikes a locker with the heel of his fist. He doesn’t even know *why* .

He’s a criminal. Of course they would think that. It’s better that they do, that they know to expect the worst. He wanted to prove to them that every fight needs to be taken seriously, that it could always be a loss that they don’t walk away from. They need to stop acting like children if they’re going to be heroes, because heroes face people like *him*.

But even *Blasty*.

He scoffs, the irritation hot in his veins runs cold. He doesn’t care. It’s better if they don’t.

He doesn’t need distractions.

*

Aizawa can’t help but roll his eyes, tucked into a corner of the rafters at Gym Gamma while he observes the training going on below. He mentioned the exposed pin as a concern, but did Bakugo listen? Did Ashido listen when he pointed out the lack of protective gear *everywhere* , and especially on her hands?

He sighs when he sees another update request from Hizashi. His husband seems to have high hopes for Shinsou’s friend-making abilities, sure that his students and ward will be able to get along swimmingly in the course of a movie marathon or some other normal adolescent activity.

But Shinsou doesn’t seem to *like* normal adolescent activities. He has not only an interest, but a drive for finding ways to get injured, which is why Aizawa had to slip out of a window on the 6th floor of the 1-A dorms and follow his charges to Gym Gamma, not at all surprised that the first thing Shinsou wanted to do was *fight his students*.

And *beat them*.

Aizawa won't say that he's displeased by this exercise. His students seem more receptive to Shinsou's criticisms than his own, and watching the matches allows him to not only see how his students react to an opponent like Shinsou, but how Shinsou fights as well.

He knows that none of them are fighting to their full ability. His students are wary of the knife, and wary of injuring the ward holding it. And the ward is handicapping himself quite a bit. He knows Shinsou is avoiding cutting them to even the shallowest degree, and pretending he doesn't know their quirks puts him at a larger disadvantage than most villains in a fight. That's the drawback of the entertainment industry's involvement with pro-heroes, a hero's quirk is synonymous with their name.

It's more than a little worrying that Shinsou calls himself a villain. It's hard to say if it was a shortened sign, intended the way that Koda translated it. But if more of his students were fluent in JSL, then this exercise might have been all for nothing.

Shinsou isn't making it any easier for them to believe that he's not a villain or murderer, when his first idea to take advantage of the free reign he has over Class 1-A is to start swinging a knife at them.

When Shinsou pins Iida, Aizawa snaps a picture of it to send to Hizashi.

Shou: *Image attached*

Shou: It's going great so far.

Zashi: I...have concerns

Zashi: Y ARE THEY FIGHTING???? AND HAS SHINSOU HAD THE TALK???? Shou what if he hasnt had the talk r we allowed to do that????

Shou: The fighting is Shinsou's idea. And I'm going to say no, we're not.

Zashi: babe that pose is a lil.... Im calling kayama, she can do it 4 us

Shou: Shinsou has been through enough. He doesn't need the slideshow. Or the puppet show. We're not doing this.

He's worried when he doesn't get a reply.

Jirou also worries him. While he's pleased to be proven right by how easily Shinsou spotted the aux extenders running from her shoulders to her speakers, her quirk wasn't as easy to dodge as the previous students'. While Shinsou did seem to get a bit injured, he shook it off, and as the fights went on, Aizawa felt the rising urge to cancel his student's quirk and end this training session before Shinsou was seriously hurt.

The Problem Child in particular had him worried, but when Shinsou is no worse for wear in defeat, he breathes a bit easier. Until the questions roll in.

And he finds an answer that he hasn't even been given himself. '*Escape.*'

Furokage Mizuki had been older than Shinsou. She had lived on the right side of the law for 19 years before the Nomu Organization. She saw a child who had practically been raised in the darkness, and tried to get him out. And she didn't live to see it.

He's not surprised to see Shinsou leave, and finds himself tempted to follow. To make sure nothing would come from the vulnerability that answering that question had brought to him, that topic still too raw.

But his students have had their question answered, in a roundabout way.

"See?" Ashido says, turning to glare at Bakugo. "Aizawa-sensei was right, Shinsou didn't kill her. Even if he had to go to Villain School, he wasn't happy there. He didn't *want* to be there!"

"Shitsei isn't saying anything else," Bakugo grumbles, and Aizawa finds himself raising an eyebrow. He hasn't heard that little nickname before. "We still don't know-"

"It doesn't matter, Kacchan," Midoriya interrupts, standing firm against his peer. "Shinsou is a good person. I really don't think that he did anything bad, and if he did, I don't think it was his choice. Don't tell me you don't see it too."

"He's pushing us to succeed," Iida says, adjusting his glasses. "This training exercise is for our own benefit, and we should take it seriously. His criticisms seem to be well-founded, and useful for our careers as future heroes."

With that, the laps begin, and when Shinsou returns, the matches resume. Aizawa worries that Sero will see him, but luckily he seems to go into a panic at the sight of the knife, and the possibility that it will be used on him.

Asking if Shoji would be in a debilitating amount of pain if he were stabbed in the webbing between his arms is *not* a good question to ask, but Aizawa is past the point of being surprised that it was.

Todoroki is not a good match up. Even if he doubts that Todoroki will use his quirk to its full ability, he doesn't have to in order to hurt Shinsou. But when he sees that Shinsou not only dodges the ice that tries to trap him, but also climbs the barriers meant to keep the fight to Todoroki's advantage, he starts hoping that the fight doesn't turn out the way it should.

And it doesn't. He has no idea how Shinsou could have pinpointed that, something that took Aizawa weeks to notice, in the course of 15 minutes. But he's impressed.

And he finds himself wondering how much this rivalry with Todoroki's cat is something that Shinsou means and how much of it is purposefully antagonizing Todoroki.

Tokoyami shouldn't have been so distracted in the fight, and he's beginning to wonder where that distraction came from. Whether he was one of the students who believed that Shinsou was a murderer, but didn't admit to it outright.

The fight with Uraraka is a good one. He can see Uraraka putting what she learned from her internship to good use, and he can see that Shinsou is enjoying it. He still seems confident in his ability when measured against hers, and that's proven when he takes her down in a loose pin, in a split second.

Aizawa feels like covering his face with his scarf when he recognizes that look in Shinsou's eyes, when he realizes what inspired it. The pads on Uraraka's fingers where her quirk activated did have a...similarity. He shouldn't be surprised that it would bring out that side of Shinsou.

It's not exactly a good one to show.

Yaoyorozu seems to be inspired to take the training exercise seriously. She starts off strong, so

strongly that he doesn't see what happens until he sees that tell-tale flash. That's a bit *too* serious.

But the smoke dissipates enough that he can keep an eye on Shinsou, and intervene if necessary. Shinsou was still able to retreat from Yaoyorozu, likely moving from instinct, but he seemed to recover enough to try to dodge her first attack. The second surprises even Aizawa.

Aizawa can't help but smirk at Shinsou wry assumption, though he becomes increasingly concerned as time goes on. His students have found themselves once again in a situation in which they need to alert an adult, and yet again, they *won't*. That might be due to how few seem to take Sero's assumption as anything other than fact, and that surprises him. He might be purposefully strict, but there isn't a single hero that has a *license to kill children*.

He nearly climbs down to intervene when he starts to see the tell-tale signs of a chemical reaction, but luckily it isn't necessary. But the intervention may have stopped the fall out.

He can see that his students weren't prepared to see the scars. He wasn't either, but he knows well enough to hide that reaction. He expected that if anything could be offered as evidence that Shinsou was an unwilling participant in his own history, this would be it, but he's surprised to see that Bakugo's clenched fists aren't solely from the sight of the scars.

He sees that split second of shock on Shinsou's face before his expression hardens, when he pieces out the reason for this exercise that Aizawa *didn't* want him to find out. The tension guarding his vulnerability was already present, but it doubles, it almost looks like Shinsou is shaking in anger as he signs.

' Quirkless. Never going to use it. Never killed anyone. Never will. Promised 50. '

And with that, Shinsou retreats. Aizawa finds himself a bit shocked at that revelation, that Shinsou believed he was quirkless, that he was rejecting his quirk that thoroughly. That Furokage Mizuki had to instill that lesson in Shinsou, when she had died when he was 9. She was concerned that Shinsou would need those words at that young age, or even younger.

Ashido tries to backhand Bakugo in the face before he catches her hand. "*Why would you tell him that-*"

" HOW THE FUCK WAS I SUPPOSED TO- "

Aizawa rappels down with the capture scarf to break the two students apart before it could truly come to blows. "*That's enough.*"

He sees the shock on his students' faces, that not a single one of them recognized that he had been watching them. It was pointless to allow them to believe that he trusted Shinsou that much, to allow him unsupervised access to the students while he was armed. Even if he did trust Shinsou, he knew his students were never at risk.

Shinsou was the one he was worried would get hurt from this. And he was proven right. "25 laps and 200 pushups. 30 laps and 300 for those of you who suspected Shinsou was a murderer and did nothing about it. Iida will supervise."

Iida might finish 30 laps faster than the others, but he wanted all of them to stay away from the dorm for the time being. He had enough to worry about with Shinsou.

He hears the slam from outside the changing room, but forces himself to wait outside. To keep any well-intended but ultimately ill-equipped students from trying their hand at reassuring Shinsou. To give him the well-deserved opportunity to gather himself.

To find himself feeling ill-equipped to deal with this too.

This was poor planning on his part, and he doesn't feel like he can handle the fall-out. Shinsou barely seems to trust him, and certainly wouldn't with this. Not with this fresh and isolating betrayal, on top of barely hidden grief.

Aizawa nearly texts Hizashi before he hears the door opening, and leans against the wall to create the impression that he knows nothing about the situation. That he has no concerns about it, but is open to Shinsou revealing his own worries.

Shinsou looks a little surprised, but his expression is back to being guarded. No more eager smiles or flashes of irritation that his students saw. It's not promising, especially when he finds himself wondering how often he's taken that neutral mask as calm. How often he's been fooled by it, and blind to a well of pain beneath the surface.

"Did you like being in charge of those idiots?" Aizawa asks. The question doesn't betray what he knows, but it's an invitation.

He's not surprised to see that Shinsou doesn't take it, even if he is surprised to see a flicker of a smirk with that shrug. ' *Fine. Pointed out some things. Hope it helps.* '

Aizawa realized that Shinsou's idea wasn't entirely his own. He mentioned it *once* , and hasn't approached Shinsou about his students after that, but Shinsou decided to hold an impromptu training exercise to help him train his students. He certainly never intended for Shinsou to be involved like that, only to observe and offer those observations. To talk to him about a shared interest, in something that Shinsou was confident in. To see that confidence for himself.

But Shinsou fought nearly every single one of his students, had incurred minor injuries because of that, to *help him*. The revelation of his students' distrust was not just a result of his poor planning, but because Shinsou felt the need to *help him*.

"Tell me about it," Aizawa says, unable to say what he really means. Unable to say that Shinsou *shouldn't have*. That Shinsou shouldn't see himself as a tool for Aizawa to use, that he should be wounded to measure his students' abilities. That he shouldn't throw himself into another pit fight after Chisaki had thrown him into too many.

Aizawa doesn't say any of that, because he knows that Shinsou wants to feel like his efforts weren't in vain, and that Aizawa appreciates them. That he's proud of him.

And despite himself, despite how much he wants to separate Shinsou from his past and from the training that was drilled into him from a young age, from those fights that Shinsou never should have fought. He is.

Shinsou took down the majority of Class 1-A, and he's proud of that.

A Spoonful of Sugar

Chapter Summary

Class 1-A tries to apologize, and Shinsou and Aizawa try to talk. Shinsou tries to make breakfast the day of his scheduled interview at the police station, but ends up upstaged.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Phantom body sensations related to torture observed but not described, mild anxiety attack

Previously on Wards of UA: After 'training' Class 1-A, Shinsou found out that most of the class and in particular Bakugo thought that he had killed 50. Shinsou's hand doesn't shake as often, but often does when he recalls something that occurred at the 8 Precepts of Death, and Aizawa knows that Shinsou was forced to fight in thousands of matches with the 8 Precepts members. Ojiro and Hagakure were left with Principal Nezu to decide what to do with them, after Hagakure sneaked into Aizawa and Yamada's dorm to spy on Shinsou and unintentionally made him convinced that 127 was there to kill him. Ojiro was included because he was the only other member of Class 1-A who was aware Hagakure was planning to do that. Tokoyami did not previously admit that he also suspected that Shinsou had killed someone when Aizawa first asked Class 1-A who did. Shinsou signed that he was quirkless before he left the training session with Class 1-A. Aizawa assigned his entire class to do 200 pushups and 20 laps, and assigned another 100 and 10 respectively to those that suspected Shinsou was a murderer. Shinsou used his quirk to steal books for himself and Eri at the 8 Precepts, and Aizawa was supposed to investigate the theft two months before the raid took place. Aizawa had previously asked Shinsou what Boss' name was, along with where The Miasma compound was located, and more recently asked about Memory who had poisoned a drug dealer connected with 50's little brother. Shinsou knows Mind Slice as 'Kenma' through a conversation he overheard while living at the police station. Shinsou has a collection of recipes from Mrs. Midoriya that he wants to cook to see if he can imitate a 'mother's cooking' for Eri. Eri lost her first tooth and now whistles when she tries to say words with an 'S' sound. Shinsou and Eri got pet fish at Shichi-Go-San, but while Shinsou named his fish 'Fishio' when asked, he wanted to name it 'Ten' after a member of The Miasma. Eri usually picks out Shinsou's clothes. Eri can say 'Chisaki' if she says 'Fuck Chisaki.'

Aizawa almost didn't take the class rosters, but he finds himself glad that he did. "Don't tell my students about this, but I want to know how you think they'll do on their Heroics Midterm."

Shinsou pulls himself a little closer where he's sitting on the cot, interested to know what the papers have written on them. His eyes are locked on them, until he glances to the door with a pull of a frown. ' *Won't. Don't have phone.* '

Aizawa nods, wondering if he would be tempted to use it if he did. Even if Class 1-A had been convinced that Shinsou wasn't a threat, they had probably succeeded in driving Shinsou away from them. If he had considered any of them friends before, knowing that they suspected him of murder and considered his quirk well suited for it, he wouldn't try to connect to them again.

Despite how well that benefits the investigation, Aizawa feels unsettled to know that. Isolation, no matter how beneficial or nearly necessary in this instance, was a difficult thing to wish on someone like Shinsou.

"The Heroics Exam will be a team-based exercise with Class A facing Class B, usually comprised of teams of four decided at random," Aizawa explains, pushing his chair backwards so that both he and Shinsou can look at the two rosters in his hand. "With Class A having only 19 students rather than 20, one of my students will have to fight two matches, which will also be decided at random. In the past, a promising member of Class C might have made an appearance, but that hasn't happened for more than a decade. And I certainly didn't see anyone worth inviting this year."

Not a single member of Class 1-C even *finished* the foot race for the Sports Festival. Once they saw the minefield, they stopped and waited with the management students for the time to run out. As a former member of General Studies who had used the Sports Festival to force his way into Class 2-A, he was disappointed. Even more so than the years that he watched a handful of Class C hero hopefuls break into the second round before they gave up or were defeated.

"Kan focuses on team building exercises more than I do, since most Class B graduates find themselves in sidekick positions longer after graduation. It's usually a toss up whether skill or cooperation decides the victory, but depending on which students work together on a team, I'm hopeful that my class will win," Aizawa says, though 'hopeful' doesn't convey how desperately he wants to win this year.

To the victor go the spoils, and the spoils are to make the loser a slave for a day. Aizawa wouldn't say he's truly taken advantage of that. He's made Kan do all of the paperwork that accumulates from both of his jobs, and on one occasion made him clean up a few investigative leads on his docket.

Kan, on the other hand, was a bitter, disgusting little man who took far too much joy in making Aizawa clean his apartment, bring him snacks and drinks, and then go out for a night of karaoke with Ectoplasm. He's grateful that he's a lightweight when it comes to alcohol, and after a few drinks that Hizashi slips him, he hardly remembers anything of that night. Even though there's plenty of evidence that Hizashi and Nemuri threaten him with.

He has a sneaking suspicion that Kan's goals are different this year. It might be paranoia, but it might not be. Just the way that Kan's grin pulled a little tighter around his fangs, revealing more of them when he asked if Eri liked getting horseback rides from her designated hero. The way he looked at her at the birthday party, the way his eyes follow her on the few occasions they're in the same vicinity. Eri is *not* part of this little pact that formed on an ill-placed bet, and he won't let her be involved in it.

Shinsou's eyes narrow before he leans backwards to reach into his bookbag, taking out a notebook and pen. He looks up at the rosters several times, before he shows Aizawa a list of teams from both classes where their quirks would best compliment each other. Aizawa notices that Shinsou has already taken into account that quirks related to detection, or other support-oriented roles, need to be balanced by a strong and in the best case scenario mobile offensive quirk user. He also notices that his handwriting becomes steadier with some names and not others.

He takes note of those names, and wonders if he could find out which members of the 8 Precepts

had their quirks. If he could make sure that they face justice for using their quirks to fight a child in a pit fight.

“Monoma will be a difficult opponent,” Aizawa muses, nearly wincing as he looks at which team from Class A he would be facing in Shinsou’s scenario. “Whether he copies his teammates’ quirks to keep Class A at a disadvantage, since they haven’t faced most of them, or copies Class A’s to negate those students’ abilities... Having multiple quirks at play from a single opponent effectively makes him a cohesive team on his own.”

Shinsou raises an eyebrow in a flash, before he signs. ‘ *Multiple.* ’

Aizawa nods, looking back at the roster. Only the bare description of their quirks was next to their picture, not the limitations. “Monoma can copy three quirks at once, though there is a time limit for how long he has them. Kan has been working with him to increase his stamina as much as he has to increase his familiarity with different quirks, and strategies to use them.”

Shinsou nods, staring back at his matches. Even if Monoma only copied Midoriya and Kirishima’s quirks, he could rocket around the exam site as an indestructible and unstoppable bullet.

“When I was selecting my class at the beginning of the year, I nearly moved Monoma to my roster,” Aizawa says, though his reasons not to have not only remained unchanged, but have become more and more evident. “I try to select students who not only have the most potential as heroes, which means not only a powerful and useful quirk, but a selfless drive to help others, and talent for cooperative missions. Monoma didn’t strike me as a student who had the last two.”

Before he decides, he tallies how many times a student will say a certain word during their interview portion of the entrance exam before he measures it against their scores, and reads the notes from examination supervisors. He watched Monoma’s interview, but found himself doubting his sincerity every time his tone lightened when he mentioned a heroic ideal that had put him close to the cut. Whether Monoma truly believed in helping others and making a positive difference was beside the point, if he was uncomfortable enough with those ideals not to speak them plainly, he was in no position to uphold them.

Shinsou nods, and draws up another set of the worst case team matches. Aoyama is the student selected in two matches, and the lines are not only drawn so that the teams are unbalanced with their quirks’ specialty, but with students who don’t seem to spend much time together. Their cooperation would be difficult to create.

Aizawa finds himself checking his phone again, to see if Ojiko and Hagakure’s fates have been decided yet. Their positions would be difficult to compensate for, and Kan has already complained enough that his class roster should be an even 20, just to make things simpler. Having 17 students instead of 19, and the change coming a day before the exam, would likely incense Kan more.

He doubts that even Principal Nezu would expel them. More than their obvious potential, there’s a deeper level of sadism to keep them enrolled at UA, and subject to more of Principal Nezu’s machinations, for longer.

Between checking his phone and glancing at the monitors, Aizawa tries to draw out more of Shinsou’s observations and opinions about his students. But Shinsou seems distracted and signs shorter responses as the conversation goes on, and Aizawa begins to doubt whether this was a good conversation to have. If Shinsou’s guard wasn’t ready to be lowered, he might be getting less enthused about the conversation because it was a reminder of what happened prior.

He catches Shinsou glaring at the monitors and looks back to see Bakugo raising his phone to a

camera he shouldn't have found, and shouldn't have been able to reach as it was mounted on the ceiling in the common room. The brief sight of Uraraka looking up at the camera from the ground explained how he managed that.

If Uraraka was helping Bakugo pass along this message to Shinsou, that could only mean that all of his students were intent to communicate with Shinsou. And Shinsou not having his phone would not stop them at this point.

Aizawa pulls his hair into a loose ponytail, considering his options. The first is to hang a sign on the Safe Room door threatening to expel any student who knocked on it to talk to Shinsou. It was the simplest solution, though it did seem immature. He could also text Iida to carry across that same sentiment, but when he catches a glimpse of Iida standing next to Uraraka with the same pensive expression, he realizes that it might also be ignored.

He finds himself wondering if he could have Shinsou escape out of the same window on the 6th floor that he used to follow his students to Gym Gamma, before he notices the procession on the stairwell. His students were predictable if not insufferable in their determination.

Shinsou doesn't seem to be aware of it, frowning at his notepad before Aizawa speaks. "My students are likely coming to apologize. Would you like me to turn them away before they get here?"

Shinsou always takes too long to answer questions, especially when Aizawa asks them. Aizawa keeps a watch on his students out of the corner of his eye while he waits, finding himself more and more inclined to head them off whether Shinsou answers or not. But he's surprised to see that small shake of his head, before he closes the notebook and sighs. Though Shinsou seems just as enthused as Aizawa is, he's also just as aware that his students won't be easily stopped.

The knock comes soon after, and both of them answer it.

"WE'RE SORRY," Iida, Bakugo, Kirishima, Sero, Jirou, Aoyama, Sato, Shoji, and Tokoyami declare in unison before they bow, and Aizawa wonders idly if they rehearsed. If Shinsou's impassive face is any indication, he's not impressed with the show.

Iida rises first. "Shinsou, we should have brought our concerns regarding your behavior to you directly, rather than letting those concerns fester into an unbecoming suspicion. We may have been wrong to have them in the first place, to doubt the kind of person that you are, that you have shown yourself to be. It doesn't matter what actions you have taken or what quirk you have."

Bakugo hisses behind his teeth, casting a glare at Iida before he levels a less threatening one at Shinsou. "You have a quirk, dumbass. You're not fucking quirkless, even if you can't use it 'cause of the mute shit."

"Look, it's..." Kirishima hesitates, rubbing the back of his head while he looks away. "Your quirk really isn't that bad. You shouldn't give up on getting it back, you know? That's like giving up on a whole part of you."

Shinsou's hand rests on the door, as though he's tempted to close it. He's certainly not willing to address the students, though Aizawa is surprised that this display hasn't managed to make a single crack in that blank expression.

"You stand before us as one cloaked in mystery, though some of us know you better than others," Tokoyami says, hands folded behind his back. "But what we have seen from you is ill-suited to our assumptions, and for that, we deeply apologize."

Shinsou is still unmoved, and with a glance in Aizawa's direction, Aizawa turns to his students. "Climb all six flights of stairs 10 times to remind yourselves that this floor, and this door, are only meant to be accessed in cases of emergencies."

He sees a pained wince cross even Iida's face before Aizawa reaches over Shinsou's head to close the door.

When Shinsou sits back down to turn back to his notepad, Aizawa spares a glance to his students bickering on the stairwell before he speaks. "Do you consider yourself to be quirkless now?"

He sees a flash of a grimace before Shinsou runs a hand over the back of his neck. *' I dislike. I would rather. I would like to be. '*

He's surprised that Shinsou answers honestly. Even if Aizawa has suspected it long enough, knows that Shinsou's mutism might be a mixture of trauma but also rejection of his quirk, Shinsou has never admitted it so plainly. "Eri has the same feelings towards hers."

He's surprised that Shinsou seems shocked at that. His eyes widen with it, and that expression for once doesn't fade back into indifference.

"She asked me if it was possible for me to take her quirk away permanently. It's understandable that she would want that, with the pain that it has caused her," Aizawa says, watching shock draw into a grimace, into what he knows is blame. "She calls your quirk 'The Safe Place.'"

Surprise crosses Shinsou's features again, before he grimaces. *' Not safe. Could have hurt her. Could hurt anyone. '*

"I doubt it," Aizawa says, folding his hands in his lap. "I doubt that your quirk could cause Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, that you would ever use it with the intent to harm someone. I've only ever seen you use it to help others. To protect Eri, to control her quirk. To get the workbooks necessary for Eri's education."

Shinsou's eyes widen in terror at that, as though he thought Aizawa didn't know about the bookstore theft. Aizawa tucks his chin into the capture scarf, unwilling to reveal how he knew. That he was supposed to investigate it long before the raid took place.

"I doubt that you've ever used your quirk for a criminal act out of your own free will. Even if your quirk is powerful, even if it would be easy to be used for criminal intentions, you are the farthest thing from a criminal that I've ever met," Aizawa says, and he means it.

It doesn't matter if Shinsou had kidnapped people, if he had done worse. Shinsou has likely never done anything out of his own free will, has only been forced to survive in circumstances far beyond his own ethics.

What he's seen from Shinsou only proves that he is worthy of having that powerful quirk. Even if it has brought him pain, if his circumstances were different, Aizawa doesn't doubt that he would never have taken advantage of it the way that most people would expect.

Shinsou's quirk could be used in nearly every criminal act that could be imagined, but he knows that Shinsou would have never used it that way. There is a surprising kindness inside Shinsou that is almost painful to know exists, to know that it exists despite the abundance of reasons why it shouldn't. That Shinsou has hardly known kindness from others, has never seen it demonstrated for him, yet had it in himself regardless.

Shinsou stares at the notepad in his lap, before he takes the pen in hand again. Aizawa doesn't

know if he has something to say that would take too long to sign, or use too many words that would have to be fingerspelled. But he's surprised to see that it's neither when Shinsou hands the notebook to him.

'Poisoner - Memory. I only know Boss' name as Boss.'

Aizawa nods. He's not sure if the change in subject is a way for Shinsou to avoid the conversation, if anything that he's said has had an impact. But with the interview tomorrow, he can't afford to turn away this opportunity to gather this information, especially when it was offered so freely. "Can you tell me anything else about them? Their quirks, if not their names."

Shinsou nods, taking the notepad back, writing another quick note. He hesitates, pen hovering over the paper, before his lips tighten into a grimace, and he hands the notepad back. 'Memory - sees history of objects if she touches them.'

Aizawa turns around to face the monitors, pulling up the portal to the police database to see if he can identify this 'Memory' with the details of her quirk. He hopes with Shinsou willing to disclose it, that he can also identify which result for that search would be 'Memory.'

Identifying one of the members of the Nomu Organization. That was almost better than a lead into how they operated. If they could find living family members, connections that they had on the outside, if they could capture that live operative when they visited them. They may be able to infiltrate the organization.

It could convince The Commission that they were making progress on their own. That the organization that had injured Endeavor was going to be taken down without their 'help.' Shinsou didn't need to suffer, and whatever they had planned for him would only put the investigation into jeopardy.

There are 134 results for a black haired woman younger than 50 years old, with a quirk that can view the history of an object with an area of effect being 0 meters. Aizawa switches places with Shinsou so that he can scroll through the results, looking at the pictures from each woman's identification card. Aizawa finds it hard to keep an eye on the live feeds from the dorm. Even when he sees Ashido and Kaminari pulling a mattress to the stairwell to try mattress surfing *again*, he doesn't intervene like he should.

He watches Shinsou scroll past the results at a glacial pace, his anticipation rising the further down he scrolls. There has to be a record. Even if it's possible that Memory is another undocumented foreigner, even if it's likely, he can't help but hope that a record still exists. A trail. A reason to offer The Commission.

Shinsou reaches the bottom of the page, staring longer than he should before he shakes his head. '*Not lying. Not fighting.*'

Aizawa feels the urge to put his hand on Shinsou's shoulder, to quiet that anxiety that causes his eyes to widen and hands to shake, but he ignores it. "I know. She may not have a record if she wasn't born here, or if she's not a documented immigrant. It's fine."

Shinsou bites his lip, looking back at the monitor warily. '*Removed. I-N-F-O-R-M-A-N-T. Japanese.*'

If Shinsou was right, then this conspiracy digs even deeper than police stations and hospitals. It could infect at even the highest levels. Removing all the records associated with a Japanese resident wasn't something that a police officer had the power to do.

Shinsou looks back at the notepad lying beside Aizawa, as though he wants to try again. He wants to offer another piece of information, another lead. Aizawa hands it to him with the pen, hopeful that it could be simple. It was as easy as just writing down the organization's name.

Shiori has cracked cases on far less. Glitzy could make a phone directory out of every name that she's overheard, or listened to a criminal brag about belonging to. Names are simple to track down, it's easy to know where their influence is by where that name is spoken the most.

Shinsou has made the effort this far, but Aizawa can tell that this piece is more difficult. He watches one line drawn, shakily, before Shinsou covers his mouth and bends forward, his other hand fisted in his shirt in front of the scars on his stomach.

Aizawa takes the notepad back, turns the chair for Shinsou to face him before he gets lost in the memory of something more brutal than Aizawa wants to imagine. "Shinsou, it's fine. It's enough."

It's not. 'M.E.' wasn't worth anything, and 'Memory' was worth even less.

But Shinsou was worth more.

*

Aizawa wants him to sleep. He can't.

There's another meeting at the police station tomorrow, and his owner didn't even tell him about it until now. His owner doesn't know who he'll see, but 27 knows it won't be Chisaki. It might be 'Kenma.'

He can't write Bug's name. He can't tell his owner anything about her. He can't give him The Miasma's name, it's the only anchor he has. It's all that he's worth.

Aizawa knows that he knows it. But he doesn't ask. 27 doesn't know what that means, what Aizawa means by that silence or what he means by what he says.

The farthest thing from a criminal... He *knew* that he was. He knew *exactly* what 27 had done. Everything he did at The Miasma, everything he did at the 8 Precepts. He used his quirk to fight, to steal, to kidnap people. It was easy with his quirk, and that's why he's a criminal. It's why he was sold. Shark Dude was right, his quirk was part of who he was, and it was the worst part.

He doesn't understand why his owner wasn't angry about that. Aizawa is a *hero*, it's his job to hate criminals, to bring them to face their crimes. The way he talked about his shoplifting, about what he did in the vague way that he said it, wasn't entirely neutral, but it wasn't angry.

It was almost like it was sad. Pitying.

Aizawa asked if he'd rather go back to Yamada and Eri, if it was difficult to sleep here. 27 shook his head, it wouldn't help. He can't sleep, or else he'll dream. He'll dream of his mother, of 50, and he can't afford to think of the dead.

He tries to answer the questions on his tests, the ones that were in the office that Yamada finally handed over. He knows some of the history questions already, he knows a lot more of the science ones thanks to 10's medical textbooks. Even if he skips around, he manages to answer some that are on the back pages of that test.

Questions and answers and tests. There's too many of them here, at UA. He's been tested, and he will be tested again. He's failed, and he'll probably fail again.

But he's never punished for it.

*

Hizashi isn't happy that Aizawa chooses to wait at the dorm until Class 1-A leaves for their English Midterm, but it's easier to avoid his students and keep them separated from Shinsou by doing that. When Aizawa interrupts the exam to collect Eri, Shinsou remains in the hallway, just as determined to avoid seeing Class 1-A.

But it isn't until they're back at the dorm that Eri explains exactly how incensed Hizashi was. "Zawa, what are you making for breakfast?"

Aizawa looked up from grading his essays, reminded that Shinsou hadn't eaten yet either. He hadn't even thought to check the refrigerator for leftovers. "I'll see what Hizashi left us to work with."

He left a sticky note that read 'Oops! Your cook was just soooo busy worrying about HIS WARD that he forgot to make breakfast! And it looks like you're out of cereal :p'.

Aizawa glowers at the note, finding that streak of spitefulness never more ill-placed. They had *children* to take care of, that shouldn't be involved in this. They shouldn't go hungry, and even if Shinsou didn't seem to mind the taste from his jelly pouches, he knew that Eri would refuse to eat one.

Aizawa scours the cupboards in vain, picking at a can of oatmeal before he shoves it back. Eri didn't always like oatmeal, and he knew Shinsou didn't. He wasn't going to attempt to make something that they wouldn't eat, and he wasn't cruel enough to force them to eat something that they didn't like.

He...might have burned oatmeal a few times too.

Aizawa has long accepted that he's not a good cook. Frankly, he's cursed. Hizashi doesn't want to believe that, but he's been offered enough evidence to prove it. Hizashi sat there and *watched* Aizawa fail to make one of the simplest dishes known to man - scrambled eggs. Despite being careful when he cracked the eggs, he still found fragments of shells, and despite stirring constantly, there were parts that were burned and parts that were still runny.

And Hizashi didn't tell him he was supposed to season it until after he took a bite.

Aizawa has many skills, and it's rational that there would be things he's not meant to be good at to offset that. It might be irrational to some, especially Hizashi, but he's perfectly fine with being unable to cook if that means he can excel in more important areas. Hizashi says that if he wasn't a good cook, then Aizawa would live off of jelly pouches alone like it's a *bad* thing. He would be perfectly fine with that, and probably be more efficient at his jobs if he slimmed down the time he ate from minutes to seconds.

But that leaves him wholly unequipped to feed the two children he's responsible for.

It also makes it all the more humiliating when Shinsou hands him a recipe for tamago. ' *I want to try. If okay.* '

Humiliating. "That's fine."

Shinsou still looks up at him from time to time as he sets out the ingredients, as though he's asking for permission to use them. Or if he's waiting for Aizawa to offer to help, to explain why he's

simply standing in a corner of the kitchen and watching.

He can't help. Anything he touches turns to ash when it comes to cooking. But he can't just sit on the couch and wait for his ward to cook something for himself and Eri.

He realizes that he's probably making Shinsou more nervous when Shinsou nearly knocks over the bowl of egg yolk, and looks back to Eri watching TV just to avert his stare. He could go back to his grading, and probably should given the deadline and the massive stack of essays looming over him.

But Shinsou has never cooked on his own. He's helped Hizashi enough times to be a little more familiar with it, but he might need help.

Not that Aizawa would be able to help him.

It's frustrating.

"Why tamago?" Aizawa asks. He's not usually a conversational person, and not one to ask pointless questions, but he feels like he needs a reason to hover, and a conversation provides that.

Shinsou looks between the recipe and the mixing bowl, as though he's wondering if he made a mistake in picking that recipe, before he gives a small shrug. *'Looked easy. Sweet. E-R-I might like.'*

Aizawa finds the corner of his mouth tilting up at the thought of that. It was something so simple, so small. Despite what he knows about Shinsou's attachment to Eri, the darkness in which it was formed, that small gesture was so innocently familial.

Less like a child trying to raise a child without the tools to do so, but more like an older brother making a simple recipe that he knew a little sister would like. Aizawa knew that it would take a long time for their bond to truly wane to something simple like that, something more acceptable than 'Mom' and child. But given that they could be separated and suffer no ill effects from it, that Eri only took Shinsou's hand and didn't demand to be carried back to the dorm, it seemed to be waning.

Eri never consistently referred to Shinsou as 'Mom' either. It was much like how often she called Aizawa or Hizashi 'Dad.' Worrying enough when it happened, but it didn't seem to happen often.

After mixing up the eggs with soy sauce and sugar, Shinsou sets out and oils a pan, slowly adding the mixture. The confidence he had at first is beginning to wane as he picks at the edges, waiting for the rest to cook enough to start folding. It tears in the middle, and Shinsou pulls a face at it before adding a bit more of the mixture to repair it.

Aizawa noticed that he didn't pull out the rectangular pan that Hizashi uses, but figured that it wouldn't make much of a difference. It seems to make it more difficult to roll the omelette. Shinsou frowns, picking at the omelette gently on either side, but it doesn't roll up symmetrically. There's a bulge in the middle already.

When Aizawa sees the tremor work back into Shinsou's hand, he nearly offers to help, and should have helped in the first place. It was irrational, he could at least *roll* it for Shinsou. Surely that wouldn't invoke the curse.

For once, he's glad to hear the sound of the door bursting open with that irritating smirk that he can hear with his back turned to it. "*Shouta*, are you not feeding your wards properly? I could hear two growling stomachs from next door!"

“Nemmie!” Eri cries, and Aizawa turns to look over his shoulder at Midnight with her arms laden with take out bags. Bags that Eri is already interested in, beaming when she recognizes the waffle shop that Hizashi took her to once. She didn’t stop talking about those waffles for *days* afterwards.

Midnight’s grin falls when she notices what Shinsou was doing. “ *Shouta.* ”

She didn’t have to say it. Her narrowed eyes said it all, and promised that she *would* say it, *loudly*. But not in front of his wards. She sets the bags on the table, pulling out several containers of variety styles of waffles and toppings, before she sets out a few plates for Eri to pick from to set. Shinsou keeps working on the second set to roll, the tremor gone, but his enthusiasm seems to have died with it.

“Shinsou,” Nemuri says, leaning against the counter with a hand on her hip. “You are a sweet young man who doesn’t deserve to live with this feral excuse of a caretaker. Wouldn’t you rather live with me instead?”

Apparently, she *would* say it. *To* his ward.

Shinsou takes a long time to answer questions. Aizawa has to keep reminding himself of that, with every glance he gives to the tamago. Shinsou just takes his time to answer, it doesn’t mean he’s *considering* saying yes.

Shinsou glances at Aizawa with a hand curled around the back of his neck, before he signs. ‘ *She has cat.* ’

Humiliating.

Nemuri might not know JSL, but she seems to know what ‘ *cat* ’ means. She gives Aizawa a Cheshire grin before slowly wrapping her arm around Shinsou’s shoulders, and that’s just another humiliation in itself. Shinsou barely seems to flinch, a far cry from any touch that Aizawa tries to initiate.

Aizawa would like nothing more than to pull out his sleeping bag just to hide from all of his inadequacies being so painfully shown to him, but instead he just watches and simmers in it. Until he sees Shinsou pull away, signing. ‘ *Joke. I like here.* ’

“It was a logical ruse!” Eri declares, her tooth still whistling on the ‘ruse.’ He turns to see her arms held above her head, triumphant in some con pulled over him. “Yama told Nemmie to bring waffles and for me to act hungry to trick you Zawa! Did I trick you?”

He would rather Hizashi have waited a few years before he started involving Eri into his cruel pranks, but he finds himself impressed that she actually managed to pull it off, smiling at her. “I had no idea.”

He turns back to glower at Nemuri for her part in this, only to see her helping Shinsou finish the tamago. She seems to have taken over the rolling, but praises him for his efforts so far, since *someone* should have told him that there’s a pan better suited for it.

He ignores that jab in favor of helping Eri pick out utensils and put back the plates that she doesn’t want to use. It makes him *feel* useful.

Tamago and waffles aren’t exactly a winning combination, and despite Nemuri’s efforts, there’s still a bulge in the middle. But when Aizawa notices that Eri pulls a slight frown at her slice of sweetened egg, he fears for the worst. He just hopes she doesn’t say anything about it.

She does. “Yama’s roll-y eggs are different.”

There’s a grimace that Shinsou doesn’t quite hide, though it’s clear to see that he’s trying to. “I used a different recipe. And I haven’t made them before. Sorry.”

Shinsou stares at the half served roll like he wants to throw it away, and Aizawa reaches out to take a slice. Only for his chopsticks to click against Nemuri’s, clearly intending to do the same.

And there’s something in her narrowed eyes as her chopsticks click against his that he perceives as a challenge. ‘ *It’s fine. It’s bad.* ’ He’s not going to *lose* to Nemuri.

She tries to pull a dirty play, to yank the unsliced tamago roll off the plate after pulling away from where he had her chopsticks pinned, and while that might have worked for her when they were in high school, he’s had plenty of time to train. He snatches more than half of it while it’s still in the air, and pulls it to his plate victoriously. Not that he’ll show his victory as smugly as she would.

When he takes a bite, he can see what Eri meant. It’s not as sweet as it should be, and the soy sauce flavor is overpowering. There might have been a mistake with which measuring spoon to use, a mistake that even Hizashi has made during some of his more demanding work weeks. But he’s not going to show any indication of it, nor will Nemuri.

“It’s so fluffy!” Nemuri praises, holding a hand to her mouth as she chews. “It really melts in your mouth!” It really doesn’t, and he’s sure that Shinsou knows that.

“It’s very good,” Aizawa says, a less detailed lie that Shinsou might not detect. “Hizashi will be happy to know that you took to cooking so well. He’ll also be jealous that he won’t be able to have any.”

There’s a flicker of relief at those words, and just the barest hint of a smile. But it’s enough for Aizawa to feel victorious, in a way that barely seems to involve Nemuri at all.

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27 notices that Eri is staring. Not quite at their fish, even though it is entertaining to watch them dart around and gulp the little bits of fish food. She looks at him with her head just slightly cocked to the side, like there’s something that she wants to say but she’s not sure if she should.

It was easier when he could just ask her what’s wrong. “You’re thinking.” He doesn’t want to say something’s wrong, and doesn’t want to say everything’s fine. She’s definitely worried about something.

Eri nods. “Twenny, what makes you feel better when you’re scared?”

27 feels guilt pooling in his gut. He wasn’t here last night, and she must have had a nightmare. He drew himself away selfishly this week, and fruitlessly trying to give Aizawa information last night. He wasn’t there for her, and she was scared. “You can tell me, or Aizawa or Yamada. Or anyone. They’ll make you feel better about the thing you’re scared about, because they can protect you from it if it’s real. Or tell you why it’s not.”

Eri furrows her eyebrows in a half pout. “M’ not scared, Twenny. I was talking about you!” She leans her arms on the kotatsu when she hops to vent her frustration, insulted that he took her words the wrong way.

He doesn’t know how he slipped, how he showed that to her, but now that she’s upset about it, it will only make it harder to convince her it’s not there. “I’m not scared, Eri. I’m fine. I’m watching

the fish eat.”

Ten tries to eat a piece that Fishie steals once he notices Ten’s interest, and 27 doesn’t know how to fix that. If Fishie eats all of Ten’s food, Ten might starve, but if he puts more food in for Ten to eat, Fishie might eat too much and die. “Twenny, it’s okay that you’re scared. You’re supposed to tell someone when you’re scared.”

He doesn’t know which one should live. It’s unfair that it can’t be both, but he can’t look away from it now. He can’t ignore it. “I’m really not scared, Eri. You’re being silly.”

There’s two now, but there can only be one. He can’t have both, he might have none. His owner and Aizawa. 27 and Shinsou Hitoshi. One has to die, one has to die today, he can’t have both, they won’t let him. He doesn’t even know how they’ll do it, it’ll be a surprise and that’s the worst part. He can’t predict it. “Twenny, you’re lyin-”

“Eri, I’m fine,” 27 says, breathing out when he realizes his tone is getting too sharp. He breathes in, his chest feels too tight but he needs it to widen. He needs to pull in enough air. “I don’t know what you’re worried about, but I’m fine, oka....”

Deeper breath. He needs to breathe deeper. He just needs to get enough air. He just needs to put it out of his mind, he’s here. He has a few hours. He needs to keep them. He just needs to work his mind around pretending, pretending he has more. That it isn’t happening. That he’s here.

He’s here, feeding the fish with Eri. His owner and Witching Hour are talking outside. It’s fine. It’s fine, he has fish now. He has a pet. He’s normal. It didn’t even happen, he doesn’t have to leave, he’s Shinsou Hitoshi as long as he doesn’t look down at his scarred hands.

“Twenny,” Eri whines, and he flinches with that, almost loses himself. He feels like something is shaking loose, like his entire mask is shattering. If she wants him to break so badly, he feels like he has to, just because she asks.

But she doesn’t. She walks around the kotatsu and curls herself into his lap. She’s heavier, Yamada says she’s grown 2 centimeters since she came to live with them, but she must have gained more weight than that. Weight that she needed, from food he couldn’t provide.

She’s distracted by the fish again, looking at them while she plays with the string from his hoodie. She didn’t pick it out for him, and he wonders if she’s upset about that. “Twenny, it’s okay if you’re sad. Or if you’re scared. Bad things don’t happen here.”

They don’t. But he’s leaving here. She doesn’t need to know that, doesn’t need to worry that it’s Chisaki. He pulls his arms around her before he checks the door, listens for the sounds of the conversation to make sure that it’s still going on. “Chisaki’s dead.”

Eri looks up at him, afraid. Afraid that he’s lying, that he might have even summoned the mobster just by saying his name without the word ‘Fuck’ in front of it. But he nods, and the fear melts away into curiosity. “Did the Tooth Fairy do it?”

He almost laughs, before he remembers that she might as well have. The Tooth Fairy was as likely to be caught as 127. “No. He just died, because he was a bad person. Now he’s gone, and he can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

Eri rests her head on his chest, still looking up at him. “So don’t be scared of him anymore, Twenny. I won’t be scared either. We’re safe!”

He smiles back at her, back at her excitement. She’s safe. Chisaki’s dead, and that makes her safe.

He's not. Chisaki's dead, and that makes him even less safe.

He wants Chisaki's death to be a relief, to feel like revenge, but it doesn't. If anything, he finds himself *appreciating* what Chisaki did. That he took 27's blood so that The Miasma couldn't pull him back so easily. That he loosened the mask and let him speak, that he brought him to Eri. That all of that brought him here.

He wanted to be the one to kill Chisaki. He remembers the feeling of hives under his fist, and he wished that he could have made them burst. That he really could have made Chisaki bleed.

If Chisaki was alive, he would know what to expect, and he doesn't. He doesn't know what will happen at this interrogation, but he knows that it won't be simple like it was before, with the police officers. His owner seems to know that too.

He's scared.

Poison

Chapter Summary

After Endeavor was attacked by a Nomu, another interrogation for Shinsou is called for. The Commission's plans for that interview have been kept secret, leaving both Aizawa and Shinsou on edge.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Implied Suicide Attempt (There's another reason offered, and the POV of the person doing it isn't given), Sensory Flashback, Unintentional self-harm by scratching (self-harm not being the purpose of the scratching), Sexual humor (Given that Wards has been almost PG in some aspects, just thought I'd give warning before we crash a fetish ball), Ableist comment bordering on eugenicist that's immediately argued against

Previously on Wards of UA: Midterms are broken up into days during which a teacher in charge of a course supervises the exams throughout the day, and Friday's Midterm is English. Shinsou is not allowed to go off campus without a police escort, and Sansa has been that escort. Aizawa knows that Shinsou feels guilty for using his quirk to steal books from the bookstore for Eri. At the Chisaki interview, two representatives from The Commission of Wardship Affairs were present. Aizawa and Yamada were kept outside of the interrogation room at the Chisaki interview. Shinsou tends to trade questions, answering one if he has one that he wants to ask, and set this up as a formal 'Question Game' with Aizawa. Aizawa asked why Shinsou wanted to make Tamago in the last chapter, as an attempt at casual conversation. After Shinsou tried to burn off Nemoto's tattoo, Aizawa signed 'Good' when Shinsou approved of the cat drawing covering up the tattoo. Shinsou was conditioned to answer to '27' as his name when he first arrived to The Miasma, being locked in a dark room for weeks on end until he behaved according to Bug's instructions. When Shinsou was absorbed into Chisaki, he was only aware when Chisaki tried to use his quirk, which Shinsou referred to as 'stealing his voice.' After USJ, Aizawa has to wait for a recovery time to elapse before he can use his quirk again. Aizawa believes that he only needs the name of the Nomu Organization to use his informant network to find them. At the beginning of Shinsou's wardship, he would only eat or drink something if Eri handed it to him. Shinsou is still legally dead, and thus wouldn't be able to get a passport. Yamada mentioned getting a forged one for him the night before the Chisaki interview. Shinsou made a name sign for Aizawa on his birthday, and Yamada complained that he shouldn't have to wait for his birthday to get one. When Shinsou's quirk was developing, his head would itch when he wanted to use it. Ectoplasm said that he would talk to Yamada and Aizawa after Mirio left class to be with Shinsou the day of the Chisaki interview, about how much Aizawa and Yamada rely on Mirio to help watch over Shinsou. Shinsou avoids asking questions to Eri after slipping and controlling her unintentionally once. 1-A still hasn't been able to talk to Shinsou after the training exercise where he found out they suspected he was a murderer. Eri lost her first tooth and has a slight lisp as a result. Mirio called Yamada 'Dad' to help inspire Eri to do it, after she admitted that she thought of Yamada and Aizawa as her fathers. Mirio asked for his father to not visit

him in the hospital after the raid, and hasn't told him that he lost his quirk as a result of it.

Yamada had Midterms. He can't be here. He couldn't drive 27 and his owner to the police station either, which meant that the cat officer drove them instead. His owner was oddly insistent about sitting in the backseat, behind the cage where criminals sit, and the cat officer makes plenty of jokes about that. Apparently, his owner has a habit of sleeping in dumpsters and that could be cause for trespassing if he's not careful.

The cat officer makes plenty of jokes at his owner's expense, and 27 can't find a single one of them funny.

The same woman in the suit met them in the hallway before the interrogation room. It's still the same room, the same one that 27 lived in for a month. He can see through the window that it's empty, and it wasn't before. Last time, that man in the suit was sitting in there already, but the room is empty for 27 alone to sit inside. Before someone else comes in.

She opens the door, and Aizawa follows 27 inside. 27 ignores that, ignores that his owner might have lied to him. That he might be the interrogator, and he might have lied about it all along, just to catch him off guard. 27 sits in a chair he's sure is the same one he sat in for days on end, what felt like years, and folds his hands in his lap, staring at the table he's sure hasn't changed.

Aizawa pulls the chair from the other side of the table and sits beside him.

"Eraserhead-"

"It's protocol for a hero to accompany their designated ward as long as it doesn't compromise the ward's security," Aizawa says, his tone nearly neutral, but beneath it is something that is very *not*. "Unless there's a risk, I'm going to be following those protocols."

Very not. The woman bristles, crossing her arms. "You're not his designated hero. I can ask you nicely to leave, or I can remove you."

Aizawa looks up before he leans forward, folding his hands on the table. " *Try*. "

She doesn't, rolling her eyes before she storms out, door slamming after her. 27 tries to keep his grin on the side of his face that Aizawa can't see, unable to turn away to truly hide it. It's nice.

It doesn't feel like he's fighting alone.

It starts to feel like he wants to. They're both waiting, and as tedious as it was to wait alone, there was something more irritating about waiting beside someone else who was waiting.

27 watches the clock, remembering that the police officers would sometimes change the time when he wasn't looking. When he was sleeping despite how hard he tried not to, when he was out of his own head. They tried to make him think that he was unaware for longer, that he was more vulnerable than he was. They didn't need to do that.

Aizawa leans back, seems to melt as he slumps further, as time goes on. He's probably bored. Or irritated. Irritated that he's bored, that it's taking so long. 27 watches the clock, making sure that it keeps ticking. That days won't pass by and they won't know about it.

By the time an hour passes, his owner looks like he's nearly asleep. 27 wonders what happens if he does, if they'll move him so carefully that he doesn't wake up. If that's what they're waiting for.

27 stretches out his leg so that it looks like he just kicked the table accidentally. His owner's eyes open, glancing at him, and 27 waits so that the kick just seems like coincidence. That he didn't really need his attention, but now that he has it, the thought occurs to him naturally. *' Question game. '*

He doesn't mind if his owner is the interrogator anymore. It might be better if he is. "You can ask questions. It doesn't have to be a game."

27 shrugs, looking away. He doesn't really have many questions that he wants to ask, he's just trying to keep both of them occupied. Alert. Ready. *' Why not T-A-M-A-G-O. '*

Aizawa pulls himself up straighter, even though he's still slouched a bit. At least he's not practically laying down. *' No reason. Curious. '*

Aizawa doesn't sign like Yamada does. There's an eerie kind of fluidity in the way his hands move. He's sure that it has something to do with his scarf weapon, that he uses certain muscles more than others, maybe there's a certain way of throwing it that he does often. When Eri says that 27's hands look pretty when he talks with them, he's pretty sure she means that they look like his.

His owner waits, leaning a bit further back before he signs again. *' Saw part of training with students. Not in trouble. Why use knife? '*

He's not in trouble, his owner said it himself, but 27 still feels like he might be. He could have injured the students if he wasn't careful, but he was. He stole the knife from his owner, so his owner must know that he was being careful. His owner didn't intervene, so he must have seen it.

He might not be in trouble.

' Emotional R-U-S-E. '

He wondered if his owner would find that funny, or flattering, if he would see that it wasn't really mocking. He's not sure which exactly it is, but he sees a flash of a wide grin before Aizawa turns his head to the side, tucking his chin deeper into the scarf. *' Good. '*

27 used to think that was a training word. It still feels like it, but in a different way. It isn't fear that drives him to a response, because there isn't a response that was ever expected. It feels oddly nice, though. Powerful in the same way.

Aizawa turns back with narrowed eyes when the door opens, and an older woman wearing a more casual button-up walks inside. "I'm sorry about delay, you like a drink?" She has an odd accent, her words almost slurred by how softly they're spoken.

"Ma'am, we haven't heard from-" The first woman in the suit tries to come in, but the older woman holds up her hand to stop her. She's higher ranked.

"Coffee, black and a Mocha from the shop down the street," Aizawa says, the same way he talks to his students when they've only slightly irritated him. It's not a tone that should be ignored, and he wonders if the higher ranked woman will answer to it.

The higher ranked woman looks to the younger one and tilts her head sharply. The younger one clenches her fists and storms off with a rapid stuccatto from her heels. The older woman doesn't address it, simply closing the door before she walks forward, pulling the lone chair against the wall

to the table. She's on the other side, but angled so that she's closer to his owner, her posture loose with her arms resting on the table when she sits. "Sorry about her. Missing brother, *not* professional! But understandable."

Aizawa clenches his jaw at that, crossing his arms. 27 doesn't know enough to know whether that woman should be concerned, if The Miasma would be interested in her brother's quirk. He doesn't know if he would tell her even if he knew.

The woman smiles at 27, so saccharine that he wishes it were fake. "Nice to meet you, I am Jun. Will ask a few questions, very boring. Wait for coffee first, very boring in here."

Very boring. When 27 doesn't try to answer, she looks at Aizawa and notices that he won't either. That smile doesn't seem to really fade like it should, and she nods to herself.

After a few minutes of silence, she gets to leave, saying that she'll be right back. Aizawa glances at the clock before he pulls out his phone, the corner of his mouth pulling down. "If they waste our time any longer, Hizashi will be here demanding to know why. Loudly."

27 would like that. As nice as the glares and silences were from his owner, he imagines Yamada could make these people regret calling for 27 to come here even more. Maybe they'd stop trying to interrogate 27 here at all.

That's a nice dream, but it's absolutely ridiculous.

It's his turn, but 27 doesn't have any safe questions to ask. Why his owner is sitting here with him, why he hid the face masks. How he found 50. Why he didn't tell him Chisaki was dead.

What a 'Nomu' is.

The Number One hero was attacked by one, and somehow that's related to The Miasma. Or at least, his owner thinks it is. If it's not, that'll end even worse for 27 than if Chisaki found out he overpaid for 27 by over 27 million yen.

He hopes that's just what they call Numbers. Maybe The Miasma stopped using Numbers, maybe they started calling them 'Nomus.' Maybe someone got caught and tried to tell them about Numbers, but got pulled back by Boss in the middle of the word. He's never been pulled back while he was talking, but he imagines that pull would distort the words spoken.

Maybe he's just trying to lie to himself.

The woman comes back in with the two coffees. Aizawa takes a drink from his, and 27 waits to make sure he drinks the right one. They're not labeled.

And then he waits, because he can't convince himself to drink it.

He took a sip from the first Mocha, before they got to the police station. It was nice, it was sweet but only barely so. It was everything he liked about those Mocha cookies, but warmer. But once he stepped into this room, he couldn't drink any more of it, couldn't drink it after he left either, even though Yamada kept it for him.

It's not poisoned, he knows that. He knows.

But he talked about Memory. He gave away her name, and she might know that. The informants were everywhere, his owner might have told someone and let her know. She could have used the expensive poison, just for him, just to make his skin peel away from him in a way that would make

him wish for Bug.

His owner takes the lid off of the Mocha and takes a drink of it, before he puts the lid back on and leans back. ‘ *How long?* ’

27 looks back at Jun, who’s still rustling through the stack of papers she brought in a folder, making them messier while she does. He looks back at his owner before he looks at the clock. ‘ *10 minutes.* ’

His owner nods, and 27 finds himself looking at the clock again. He tries not to, he doesn’t want Aizawa to think that he’s waiting for him to die. That he’s anticipating it, excited about it. He’s *not*.

He should have just drank the coffee. If it was poisoned, it would be 27 that died. Now his owner might be poisoned, and it’s his fault. It’s murder. He murdered him. He murdered Aizawa and Eri is never going to forgive him for that, Yamada will never forgive him, Yamada will probably *kill* him.

Aizawa pushes the coffee towards him with the back of his fingers, and 27 looks back at the clock. 10 minutes passed while he was staring at it, and he didn’t even notice. Forgot how to read the numbers written there.

He looks at Aizawa, making sure that he’s fine. Not flushed or sweaty, not deathly pale. He’s fine.

27 takes a sip. He’s fine.

It tastes sweeter this time.

Jun finds the paper she was looking for, and smiles before she begins. She asks the same questions that the police officers did, the same words that have probably worn themselves over the paint in this room. What’s the name of the organization, how big is it, where is it, who runs it, what do they do there, are there people there that aren’t willingly there, doesn’t he want to help them get out too? Doesn’t he know that they’re hurting people?

The Miasma hurts criminals. Someone did something stupid to try to take down the Number One hero, and Bug has long since finished them off for that. There’s a huge insurance fee for any client that runs a risk of running into a hero, and they always send a Number who’s on their last legs for the job. A Number that wouldn’t be missed, their value already plummeting. Replaceable.

27 looks at his owner with every question, and his owner looks like he’s ignoring the questions too. Almost like he’s falling asleep. It makes it easier to ignore the questions, to take Jun’s words and her accent to be more like music on the radio. He doesn’t look at her smile, or how it twists into pleading sometimes. He drinks his coffee and bites back the urge to tell her that he’s mute.

He drinks it quickly, as though he needs to have a reason not to answer her instead of the one he already has. The grounds at the bottom are weird, it’s even sweeter, and it’s weirder because it’s somehow *slimy*.

He wants to spit it out, but he can’t, so he just swallows and tries not to show it. Maybe that’s how Mochas are, maybe there’s something at the bottom that’s weird. Maybe the chocolate at the bottom changes somehow.

It’s been 40 minutes and his owner still doesn’t look poisoned. If anything, he looks even more bored.

He catches Jun looking at him, and she's not smiling anymore. Her eyes seem sharper, more dangerous than he ever thought they could. "What is your name?"

"27."

He can see out of the corner of his eye that his owner sits up straight, that he expected that as much as 27 did. He can't move.

He can't move.

The mask fell off of his face, he doesn't know *why*, but it's not there, it's holding his entire body shut, *he can't move*. "Why '27'?"

"It's my name. I have to answer to it. If B..." He chokes on her name, at least. *At least*. He doesn't feel them in the scars but he feels one in his throat, he feels like the mask is keeping him from breathing. Then, it releases, and he *doesn't want it to*. "B-b-bad. D-d-d. I-i-it's my n-name. It's mine. I a-answer to it."

He can't move. They took his body but left his voice, playing with it. Making him use it. Making him answer. *Stealing his voice*.

The hold over him releases and he bends forward, barely catching the sight of the woman's surprise. He holds himself with his arms, tries to stop shaking now that he can, tries to shut his mouth even if he can't breathe, but he *can't*.

Dark. *Dark*. They'll make him talk about the *Dark*.

He feels too small just thinking about it, too cold already, too cold and small to even flinch at the sight of his owner standing next to him, his hair standing on end and eyes glowing red. His quirk activated, and trained on that woman. "Stop this. *Now*."

Jun just folds her hands on top of the papers, all of the questions that she'll force 27 to answer. That saccharine smile melted, much smaller and more honest now. Colder. "You will blink, Eraserhead."

27 can already see the red lines creeping over white, his owner's eyes more bloodshot. Strained. "I'll erase your quirk before you finish the question."

The younger woman opens the door, holding it open with her arm stretched out. "You're impeding the investigation." The door is held open for his owner to leave through it. She wants him to.

He still doesn't blink.

"Mind Slice will be here on Tuesday, 11 AM sharp."

He blinks.

27 can't move anymore, the hold of the quirk wrapping him up tightly. Severing any control he had over his body, leaving only his mask open. They *shattered* the mask while it was still attached, he can't get it back. He can't even look up at his owner, only knows he hasn't sat down and hasn't left because he hasn't heard him do either.

He sits down.

His eyes must hurt. They must hurt so bad that 27's hurt too. They sting.

“What is the name of the group that brought you to The 8 Precepts of Death?”

They sting a lot. “The Miasma.”

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Aizawa clenches his fists against his thighs, tight enough to feel them shaking. 27. *It's my name.*

It *wasn't*. The kid had gotten out, he's *gotten out*, his name was *Shinsou Hitoshi*.

He's never heard anyone sound as afraid as Shinsou did when his voice broke, when even the quirk couldn't compel him to speak. *B-bad*. This group, this *Miasma*, had done something to Shinsou to make him reject his name. To fear it, even if he hid that fear well enough.

He's going to find them. He's going to make them *pay*.

He's going to make The Commission pay as soon as he gets the opportunity. As soon as Shinsou is out of their line of fire. Mind Slice would *kill* Shinsou, and even if he wants to stop this, *aches* to cancel this woman's quirk and throw her and the Commission rep into a wall, he can't.

He can't let them kill Shinsou.

“Is The Miasma working with the League of Villains?” Jun asks, her accent still present, her unfamiliarity with Japanese more apparent by how slowly she reads the question. The Commission might have paid for her flight, paid for all the accommodations a foreigner would need just to interrogate Shinsou like this. Just to force him to answer.

“I don't know.” Shinsou's tone is even, unnaturally even, the same way it was when he said his name was ‘27.’ Robotically. Soullessly.

“Who does The Miasma work for?”

“Anyone with money. With jobs. Criminals,” Shinsou answers, still unmoving. Still hunched in on himself, his hands fisted tight in the sleeves of his hoodie. Apparent fear frozen in place, while his voice is still forced out.

“Who works for The Miasma?” There's a long silence, a slight tremor that builds in Shinsou's shoulders before Jun clicks her teeth, looking back at the page. “What are the members' names?”

“Te...n. 127. 98. 88. 58. 56. 148-”

“What are their real names?”

“I-I don't k-know,” Shinsou answers, the trembling returning. Aizawa clenches one fist tighter, enough to feel the bite of his fingernails in his palm, and rests the other on Shinsou's arm. Even if he can't pull away, even if he doubts this hollow gesture is any comfort, he feels Shinsou stop trembling.

“How are they picked?” The rep demands, her tone sharp and riddled with that unsaid panic. She repeats herself slowly with a glare aimed at Jun. “How. Do they pick. Their Members.”

Jun repeats the question, obediently. The theatrics over the coffee order were exactly that, an act. Something to make Jun appear less threatening than she was.

“Memory finds them. Volunteers. Debtors. Orphans,” Shinsou answers, his mouth opening around another word before it closes, before he speaks again. “Unwanted. With useful quirks. If they

make it.”

“Make it through what?” The rep asks, her voice now strained with worry. Jun sighs, complaining in a language that Aizawa can’t place, answered sharply by the rep in that same language. Her brother had a useful quirk, and was cast out of society in some way that Shinsou listed.

Shinsou wasn’t a volunteer. Wasn’t a debtor. Wasn’t an orphan.

“How are the members made?” Jun asks, flexing her fingers again. Aizawa can’t tell if it’s a part of her quirk or a personal tic, but watching them move only inspires him to want to *break* them.

He feels Shinsou shaking, nearly cancels her quirk then, and he wishes that he did. “ *Dark,* ” Shinsou nearly whimpers, his voice too small. Too young. “Dark, *darkdarkdark* answer. 27. Go back won’t-”

His eyes burn, he’s been able to ignore the sting for this long, been able to ignore the pain and unable to show it. His recovery time hasn’t elapsed yet, it’s a wonder he was even able to activate his quirk again. His vision blurs slightly, but he knows he can last longer, he’s not going to blink again, he’s not going to let them-

Jun’s eyes widen in horror, Aizawa looks down to see Shinsou with his tongue between his teeth, and he knows what he’s trying to do.

He won’t let him.

He doesn’t even blink, not until his hand is pressed over Shinsou’s mouth, forcing his tongue back inside and forcing that desperate act not to happen. He’s not surprised that Shinsou still bites down, that he bites down hard, and the wince is what closes his eyes.

Naomasa comes in, one question too late, and the representative has spun into hysterics. “He’s impeding the investigation, remove him-”

“You have a name,” Aizawa growls, barely keeps from shouting. Shinsou is still biting down, still shaking but when Aizawa sees his eyes water, he looks away, glaring down the representative. “That’s *enough.* ”

“We have the mother,” Naomasa adds, and that’s what makes Shinsou still. His jaw loosens but Aizawa doesn’t pull his hand away. Doesn’t trust it. “Interpol has her in custody. We’re working on the extradition now.”

The representative takes a shaky breath, staring at Shinsou coldly. “We have him now-”

“No,” Jun says, shaking her head before she waves her hands in front of her. “No, no. No more.”

Naomasa meets his eyes, his own widened in concern. In pity, but he doesn’t look at Shinsou. “The protocol-”

“What *about this* is protocol?” Aizawa snaps. He’s not going to let Naomasa do that, to give Shinsou another mask to hold his tongue in place. There wasn’t a single place that they could take him to, it wasn’t *transit*. It was *pointless*.

Naomasa persuades the representative to leave, to sign off on the documents needed for the extradition. Jun follows quickly, not another glance in Shinsou’s direction.

Aizawa only spares a glance at his hand, twin indents that broke skin, not deep enough to bleed.

He'd rather it be his hand than Shinsou.

He sits, he makes himself smaller, less threatening. Shinsou stares blankly ahead, not lost. Not entirely here either. He imagines that he doesn't want to be. "Shinsou, it's alright."

"S-S-stop," Shinsou says, his voice breaking into a whisper. The shaking starts in his hands and moves upwards, shivering despite his arms wrapped around himself. "S-s-s."

His voice fades, that stare into nothing breaks in a shaking gasp. Shinsou tightens his arms around himself, curling deeper into himself with it. Everything about him is tense, trying to hold himself together, to make himself smaller. Aizawa sees the tears start to fall and can't help but reach out, his hand on Shinsou's shoulder despite the flinch. "It's over. It's not going to happen again. *Ever.*"

He has a name. He's going to make sure of it.

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Aizawa waits until Hizashi comes into the interrogation room. Shinsou can't be left alone, and Aizawa made sure that Hizashi was aware of that before entering. That he prepared himself beforehand, that nothing would be a surprise.

"Let's get you home, Shinsou," Hizashi says, struggling to smile, his tone barely lightened. He knew that it would be impossible to shrug it off, knew that Hizashi likely didn't think to steady himself before coming in, too insistent on being there as a presence for Shinsou now rather than a better one later.

Shinsou still doesn't move but for his trembling, and Aizawa lifts his hand to stand, walking out without another look in his husband's direction. Unwilling to know what look would answer him.

He was supposed to protect Shinsou in Hizashi's place.

He meets Naomasa's eyes only to get his attention before walking to the detective's office. He doesn't care to know if he's immediately followed, and doesn't speak until they're in the second office. There's *nothing* that he wants to say to Naomasa that doesn't concern the investigation. "Records for the name."

Naomasa shakes his head, sighing. "Nothing. It's too deep." The police had nothing, but Aizawa would make sure to *get* something. It's what he does. "Sansa is on his way to see Glitzy. I'm going to see Listo, then the Hotos. Shiori works best with you, or Sansa."

"Me," Aizawa answers. Shiori refuses to work with Naomasa because he 'smells analog,' and while she will work with Sansa, it takes too long. They both get distracted. "They have Shinsou Ui in custody."

Naomasa nods, frown deepening. "Her passport was caught as a forgery when she tried to board a cruise ship bound for Thailand. They questioned her about her son's disappearance. She's sticking to the kidnapping story."

She won't be able to keep it. Aizawa will make sure of that. "Did they cut us *both* out?"

Naomasa's nostrils flare, a clench in his jaw before he turns to look at Aizawa. "They put a villain and a victim together in a room *in my precinct*. What power do you think I have, Eraserhead? I've lost every favor I've ever been owed, I don't have any more friends to call, and they still...."

Naomasa looks away, hand splayed on his desk before it becomes a fist.

“We have four days before Kenma gets here. We need enough for a counter operation before they call him off.”

Aizawa *won't* let that happen. “The representative’s name. Her brother’s name, whatever you have on that-”

“Nothing,” Naomasa says, throwing his hands up. He already knows, and has already tried. “We don’t receive their names, I don’t even know where to begin in Missing Persons. This is still *Endeavor* we’re talking about-”

“She doesn’t give a *shit* about Endeavor and I don’t either,” Aizawa cuts off. He absolutely means that, has meant it since Endeavor became a pro hero and has only found that feeling deepen since the beginning of this school year. There are quirk accidents and there are *burns*, and Todoroki has one of them. He’s always known that. “I doubt even the Hero Commission is putting the pressure on like this.”

Hawkes is younger, more marketable, especially with the scar that won’t be erased. The stain on Endeavor’s career. Hawkes is more stable because he’s young, because he’s farther from the wrinkles and aging that were cause for concern even before All Might retired. He’s a new future. He’s a better investment.

And Naomasa’s silence is all the more telling of that.

“They need to stop the production of Nomus,” Naomasa says, a simple statement. Detached from what that means for Shinsou, and while Aizawa was able to do that at one point, he can’t anymore. “They’re considered a hostage situation of the worst kind-”

“They’re *dead*,” Aizawa grates out, staring at the detective but in the back of his mind all he sees is dead eyes, exposed brain matter, *drool* leaking from its beak. “Don’t tell *me* what a Nomu is.”

“Most of them are,” Naomasa answers, again, too detached. Aizawa envies that now. “The one that fought Endeavor spoke. It planned.”

It was alive.

And that hardly means anything to Aizawa. He shoves away the disgust, the pity, the pitch black feeling in his gut that forms when he wonders if he would have killed it too, when faced with that. It was the cruelest hostage situation, to kill a victim to save others. To weigh a life against another when it was a hero’s duty to save them all.

He has another hostage that’s closer to him, just like the representative does.

That’s why he needs to see Shiori.

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Yamada’s car has a fantastic heating system. It never takes long to get to the hottest setting, and the seats all have heating as well. He’s often wondered if he could cook things in the oven that it makes.

He’s got everything on full blast, because Shinsou is still shivering. He doesn’t know if that makes a single *fucking* bit of difference.

Shinsou wasn’t talking, at all, and Yamada expected that. He tries to talk for him, tries to ramble, but the stories and words keep dying on his tongue. There’s not a single *fucking thing* he can say or

do to make this right, and he's absolutely desperate to get home just so he can pretend he can keep Shinsou safe.

They made him *talk*. They used a damn quirk to force him to talk. He can't find it in himself to blame Shouta, he doesn't have the time or energy to do it when his mind is whirring around intangible ideas to help Shinsou, still pulling nothing. But if Yamada was in that room, he would have used his quirk too. And he would have *stopped it*, consequences be damned.

Shinsou shivers more when they step out of the car, arms still crossed over his chest, and he can hear his teeth chattering behind his lips. He pulls the kid's hood up to protect him from a little of the biting wind, and ignores the flinch. He knows it will be a while, but he has to do it, to keep Shinsou a little warmer for the walk back to the dorm.

Eri doesn't like the weighted blanket, it's a little too heavy for her and Yamada thinks she likes getting spoiled by borrowing something of Shouta's, but Yamada pulls it out of the closet and nearly sprints back to Shinsou where he's sitting at the kitchen counter. He drapes it over Shinsou's shoulders and those shaking hands take the edge of the blanket to pull it around himself.

The kid hasn't said that he's cold, and Yamada hasn't asked, knowing the kid has had enough questions to answer. He just knows that chills and certain flavors of shock are treated the same way.

Yamada's mind is still whirring, still coming up empty when he starts making some tea. He picks a citrus blend that's almost too sweet for him, and makes sure to add honey to it. The sweet flavor, the powerful citrus smell, tiny little comforts can't do enough right now.

Yamada can't do enough. He can't talk to the kid, he can't make the kid talk right now, *the kid tried to bite off his own tongue*. He needs to be in a *hospital*, and they can't *fucking* do that.

If Yamada's hands shake when he stirs the honey into the tea, he makes sure that they don't when he hands it to Shinsou. "Here we go! Jeez, it's so cold outside. Still no snow, but it shouldn't be too long. It's too bad we won't get snowed in like we used to, we'd have to get a blizzard to roll in for classes to get cancelled. Even then, I'm pretty sure Principal Nezu has an army of robots for that too."

He's talking about the *damn weather*. Because there's absolutely nothing that he can say to Shinsou right now that will make this right. Shinsou just stares at the tea, still just shivers, his hands still clenching around the edge of that blanket like it's the only thing that's keeping him here. And it might be.

Yamada holds his mug too tightly when he takes a drink, just in case his hands want to shake. In fear for Shinsou, in *anger*. He can't even begin to think like that, not until he has Shinsou a little closer to an even keel. Until he gets *somewhere*. "It would be nice to just stay in, though. Drink some hot chocolate, curl up under the kotatsu and just laze around all day. Drinking something warm really fights off the cold, makes you feel warm from the inside out."

Shinsou's mouth twists into a grimace, still staring at the tea before he shakes his head. Before he lays his head on the counter, still shaking, his fingers twisting and clawing at the blanket before they clench again.

That woman was the one to bring in the coffee. She recovered the use of her quirk quicker than she should have. As though her quirk wasn't just from her voice, the quirk factor wasn't just in her body.

There are villains who can only use their quirks after someone ingests their bodily fluids. Spit, usually. Or blood.

Yamada runs his hands through his hair, the gel breaks and splinters but his hair won't lay flat until he washes it out. He doesn't even care about that, doesn't care how ridiculous he looks, he *doesn't know what to do*.

He's not sure if even *Eri* could convince Shinsou to eat and drink anymore.

Nemuri said she'd watch Eri for another hour, but Yamada knows if he asks that she'll watch her until her dorm shift for 2-A. That gives him 3 hours and that's not *nearly* enough time. There's no amount of time that ever would make this right.

"Shinsou, I'm sorry," Yamada says. He can't not say it, he can't help but feel it far more than he says. Shinsou was his *ward*, and *he* was his designated hero. He should have left 3-A to their own devices on the Midterm and damned the consequences, argued with Principal Nezu more beforehand. Maybe he shouldn't have trusted Shouta with this. "It's over. It won't happen again. I won't let it happen, and Shou won't either. He's going to close the investigation, and you won't have to go back there anymore. You're just going to stay here, with us, and I'm going to keep you safe."

Shinsou shakes his head, still hiding his face. Yamada knows that's as dangerous as leaving him the knife, not being able to see his mouth. But forcing Shinsou to reveal more than he wants to of himself seems worse.

"I am. I didn't, but I am," Yamada says, before he pulls out his phone, anger shaking him. "Shouta's getting a forged passport for you. They can try to hunt us down, but I don't *care*. We're going to America, and Disneyworld, and *I'm not letting them* -"

"I..." Shinsou speaks in a choked gasp, flinches afterwards. His fingers twist in the blanket again before he pulls one hand away, under the counter. He hears a sniff, and despite any attempt to hide that he was crying, it's still clear on his face when he sits up. It's even clearer that he can't even make his face fully blank, that he just looks hollow and *exhausted*, his eyes still too red. ' *It's fine*. '

His chest aches because he knows Shinsou wants him to believe that. That his ward is the farthest away from fine that he could possibly get, and he still wants him to think that 'it's fine.'

Shinsou hides, and he hides well, but he can't hide that from Yamada. Yamada never should have let him, never should have taken Shinsou's favorite sign, 'It's fine,' to mean that it *ever was* .

It's not fine. "It's not fine, but it will be. We'll make it fine, okay?" Yamada promises, and he's still sending that text message to Shouta to make *sure* of it. "Still feeling a little cold?"

Shinsou nods, pulling the blanket closer again. He shouldn't be, he should be sweltering with the jacket and that weighted blanket, but even though they're talking he's still shaking a little. Just a little bit less.

"Well, let's tuck under the kotatsu and pretend there's a blizzard outside. Jeez, you can really see my blonde showing. We have this whole table with heaters underneath, perfectly made for warming you up and I make you sit at the kitchen counter," Yamada rambles.

He takes his tea, but not Shinsou's. He walks close, but doesn't lay a hand on Shinsou to guide him. To reassure him. He really *can't*.

Shinsou wraps the blanket fully around him, tucking it under the kotatsu and over his legs when he sits. He really shouldn't feel that cold, and that's worrying, but they have no idea what that woman's quirk has really done to him. It might be a side effect. "So, I haven't gotten to see you all day! Makes me hate Midterms even more, if I'm honest. I try not to take it so personally, but every time I see one of those herolets scratching their heads over a question I *know* I covered well enough, it kinda stings. I don't know if I'm angry at them for not getting it, or myself for not covering it in a way so that *they* get it."

He knows that Shinsou isn't ready to talk about it. That he likes distractions to put some distance and time between things. Yamada can do that.

"Kaminari is one of those that are really frustrating. I mean, he gets *so* much and I've tried to work with him a lot to make up the rest, but it's like hitting a brick wall. I've bought fidget spinners - and let me tell you, that was *not* a good week for me when the rest of Class 1-A got in on that. I try to work with him on his study guides, on how he studies, but he goes and just tells me he *doesn't*. He tells *me*, his *teacher*, that he doesn't study at all. And I know it's a bald-faced lie, but still! I'm trying to help him and he's not letting me," Yamada sighs, running his hands through his hair again, trying to tug it down but there's enough of a hold still at the base of his hairstyle that it just looks like a long yellow balloon that hasn't been inflated enough. "I don't get *why*. I'm not as scary as Shou, and I really don't think I'm scary at all! I'm plenty approachable, if I don't say so myself!"

' *Can help*, ' Shinsou signs, still staring at the top of the kotatsu, not even glancing at the fish or Yamada. ' *Taught Sparky A-S-L alphabet. Can help. Can teach.* '

Yamada smiles at that, that little reminder that Shinsou was just a bit more advanced than Class 1-A on English in some areas. That little reminder of the way Shinsou couldn't entirely hide how proud he was when he got something right on the chalkboard, how eager he was to learn more from Yamada. "That might be fun! Could get you set up as a little tutor for the herolets, my own little TA! Between you and those meme videos, we'll have Kaminari up to aces in no time!"

Shinsou looks up at him, finally, his eyes still a little too wide but they're focused. He nods, lips pulled a little tighter just like Eri when she wants something so badly that she's worried that she won't get it. ' *Can help. Can stay. Stay to help.* '

Yamada knows he doesn't hide it well, the worry that rises with that. That Shinsou feels like he needs a job here, a purpose other than staying safe. Or that the end of the investigation worries him as much as it does Yamada. "You're going to stay here, Shinsou. You don't have to do anything to earn that. It's my job to keep you safe, and the only job you have is staying safe. That's all there is to it, kiddo."

Shinsou shakes his head, eyes going a little wider. Confirming Yamada's worst worries. ' *Can help. After investigation. Can stay. Can.* ' Shinsou's eyebrows twist and furrow, close to pleading and close to tears, and Yamada can't bear to see either.

"You're staying," Yamada says, the words sounding even weaker the more he hears them repeat inside his head. He's never said it out loud, never dared to, because right now it's so big that it's *enormous*.

This is what Shouta was talking about.

They've known Shinsou for weeks, and those weeks haven't been pleasant. For every grin he's pulled out there's pain behind it, there's *always* been pain underneath it that he can't suss out, that Shinsou won't open up about. What Shinsou wants and what Shinsou needs can be two different

things, and Yamada can't say he can be both.

The certification course said that wardships were transitional. Heroes guide wards to the end of a painful chapter in their lives. And the story goes on without them. It's a little easier sometimes because of that, because there isn't a reminder of the investigation for the wards.

But Yamada can't bear the thought of that. Eri without Shinsou, Yamada without Shinsou. That bedroom emptied out, the stash box packed up. Eri's 7 year old Shichi-Go-San portrait without Shinsou beside her.

What Yamada wants and what Shinsou needs might be different right now. But he can close the difference. He has to.

"Shinsou," Yamada says, folding his hands in front of him on the kotatsu table. Shinsou is still looking away, still trying to hold back the tears, and Yamada just *wishes* that the kid would let him see it. To let him help. "I know you're not okay right now. We don't have to talk about it, but I want to help."

Shinsou shakes his head, fingers twisting, his mouth in a grimace, but it breaks in a gasp. He covers his mouth with his hand and ducks his head, but the tears still fall, the shivering stops but his shoulders shaking more for it.

Yamada can't sit on the other side of the kotatsu after that.

He moves slowly, as slow as he can manage, and still manages not to throw his arms around the kid despite how desperately he wants to. He just sits next to him, close enough, hand gentle as it can be on Shinsou's shoulder. He's not sure if he even wants Shinsou to feel it, to startle with it, but Shinsou startles him completely.

He curls in towards Yamada, head knocking against his shoulder, and that's all it takes. Yamada pulls him in and holds him, feels every wracking sob against his chest more than the warm plush of the blanket.

He busies himself with running his hands over Shinsou's covered arm, trying not to squeeze too tight, trying not to cry himself but a warmth blooms in his chest, keeping him from it. Shinsou needs him to hold it together, and he can do that. He can do that.

"It's okay, it's okay," Yamada mutters, voice still feeling tight. He knows it's not, he *knows* it's not. "It's okay, kiddo. You're here. You're safe. It's all over."

Shinsou shakes his head, another watery gasp spilling out of him before he twists, pulling his legs closer. Even when the kid cries, he's too quiet, still holding himself together with white knuckles even if some things still spill out. Even if it's too much for him to really do it.

Yamada holds the rest. He holds Shinsou through it, muttering over and over that he's safe, that it's okay. He's going to keep Shinsou safe, he's *never* going back to that police station again, and he doesn't care how he keeps that promise. But it's not okay, it's not even slightly okay, this is the *farthest fucking thing* from okay because Shinsou wasn't even this rattled after *Chisaki* and Yamada knows why.

Yamada had hated his quirk, had been so utterly terrified of its power that he refused to speak, he refused to risk it. If someone had forced him to talk during that time, if someone crawled under his skin and made him talk like a *goddamn puppet*, that would have been enough to shake him. But it's so much more for Shinsou, this wound is unfathomably deep, and he can't just let it fester. He

can't let Shinsou try to hide it.

And he can't make him talk about it either.

' *Dark*, ' Shinsou sign whispers, hard to see with how tightly he's curled himself into Yamada, but Yamada won't pull away to see it any better. ' *Cold. Still there.* '

Yamada pulls at the weighted blanket, pulling it tighter around Shinsou while keeping his hands free, before he starts rubbing at his arm and back with a purpose. He knows the kid can't possibly be cold, between the heat turned on, the kotatsu on full blast, that heavy blanket and the hoodies that he always wears. But he's going to shake off whatever memory that Shinsou's caught in, whatever is lingering from the station even in his living room. "You're here, alright? You're here, at UA, with me. Bakugo teach you how to ground yourself by picking things out of the room?"

He gets a nod, small and shaking, and Yamada lowers his arm so that Shinsou can see the room better. To see that it's lit, that it's warm. That he's here.

"Let's see, 5 things we can see. We can see two little fishes, Fishio and Fishie. A TV, and I'm not sure which of those is Eri's favorite right now. She could probably watch those fish for hours. It's pretty soothing. We've got a beaten up old couch behind us that Shou is just *wrong* about keeping. He picked it up off the street when he was single, and who knows *what* it's been through. And..." Yamada trails off, glancing around. He's picked three things to remind Shinsou of Eri, one for Shouta. Things to remind him that he's here at UA, and that he's the farthest away from that dark and cold place that scares him so badly. "And you can see this."

Yamada pulls his hands away, needing them to sign. He watches Shinsou watching him, but still finds himself glancing away as soon as he's done, running a hand through the hair on the back of his head while he curls the other around Shinsou's shoulders.

"Found a sign name for you," Yamada says, unable to admit that he's been holding onto it for almost two weeks. It's not a big deal, not nearly as big as what he's promised to do - to smuggle Shinsou out of the country and flee from the law if The Commission tries to hurt him again, and not as big as what he wants to do, what he's promised, the details of it still too much to think about. *Adoption*, he can barely even imagine the word, the paperwork he's vaguely familiar with seems oversized when he pictures it.

Sign names are almost casual on the surface, but if they're done right, they're not. Two signs, two gestures and two meanings coming together to spell out everything that a person is, exactly how the name maker sees them. And it's hard to sum up what Shinsou means to him.

' *Shin Amaze*, ' Amazing Mind. It seemed almost too casual at first, just summing up how smart Shinsou was. That he absorbed every bit of information he could, hungry for more. That he comes up with knock off hero name signs that more than once made Yamada cackle, as long as it wasn't his own. Shinsou was smart, but that wasn't all that he was.

He was amazing. There was something inside him that refused to give up despite everything that he had gone through, a fire that wouldn't even *flicker* even if the rest seemed to turn to ash. Shinsou came away with scars but he *endured*, he came out on the other side, and Yamada would make sure that the other side turned out better the farther they got away from it.

And he knew that Shinsou would amaze him even more, if given the smallest chance.

Shinsou sits up, still sniffing, though he's wiping away his tears. He takes in a deep breath and fixes Yamada with open eyes, and Yamada can almost see that fire inside them. The blanket falls

off his shoulders as he signs. ‘ *Sunshine Da.* ’

Yamada finds himself smiling too wide, his chest too warm and full while his mind is spinning over too many meanings, too many thoughts. “It’s not even close to my birthday, ya know?”

‘Hizashi’ meant ‘Sunshine,’ and while Shouta’s name sign for him was ‘Yama Sun,’ a mountain of sunshine referring to either his positive personality or his Present Mic hairstyle depending on when he asked, ‘Sunshine Da’ could mean so much more than that. More than a ‘field of sunshine.’

Shinsou probably knows enough English to know that the way ‘Da’ is pronounced can be a way of saying ‘Dad.’ And knowing how carefully Shinsou selects his name signs, he didn’t doubt that he would tie in a bit of English in that meaning. That Shinsou would make sure to tie in everything about their relationship, condensed and only hinted to in those two little gestures.

And Shinsou didn’t hesitate to sign it, signed it fluidly. He’s had this name for a while.

Yamada can’t stop himself from pulling Shinsou in for a hug, even if he moves slow, even if he keeps his arms around the blanket and hopes it’s not too much. He doesn’t even feel a flinch, and he breathes so much easier after that.

He can do this. He can be ‘Sunshine Da.’

*

Yamada won’t leave him alone, and he knows why. It’s fine, he won’t try it. He won’t have to.

27 goes to the bathroom to blow his nose, rinse away some of the stinging in his eyes. He still feels tired, too tired, and he can’t be. He can’t take too long either, but he lets the water keep running in the sink so that Yamada thinks he’s just taking his time to wash his face.

He pulls both hands into his hair and starts scratching, trying in vain to drive the itching away. He wants to tear it away from his scalp, but his head just keeps *itching* . It’s pins and needles and tiny *insects* crawling around, their tiny legs pressing the feeling even deeper.

He almost growls in frustration when he turns off the faucet, turning it back on when he sees blood under some of his fingernails. He *did* tear it away, he feels the sting of it now, and that tiny bit of pain starts to make the itching fade away.

He knows what it means, and that’s all the better for it.

He needs his quirk back now.

*

Aizawa climbs the fire escape of a decrepit apartment complex, something ill-fitting for this side of town. It’s not the ‘bad’ side of Mustafu, and not the good one either, but one of those little neighborhoods in the middle. There’s a trendy restaurant two blocks away and a thrift store that should be a historical landmark across the street. The thrift shop looks more run down as though the owner is aware of that and doesn’t want to make any changes because of it.

Shiori says it has low rent and high speed internet, and the fact that most delivery runners will actually make it to her door without getting stopped by a villain is just a bonus. But Aizawa knows it’s low profile, but not so deep that the people Shiori works against will be living next to her.

Like Shiori, it’s grey.

He doesn't bother to knock on her window, throwing the bags in first as an apology to the swearing he can already hear. "Fuck, I don't *do* walk-ins, Eraser! Scared the shit out of me 'til I saw those boney hands."

Aizawa pulls himself inside, taking in the hovel of a bed and various food debris, littered with electronics and parts and electronics that just look like parts. Despite the numerous take out boxes and wrappers that he's sure have bits of food left to culture, all he can smell is the cheapest cigarettes on the market.

Shiori is still sitting at her desk, 10 computer monitors scattered on top or mounted haphazardly on the wall, her legs resting on the desk between more electronics with her keyboard between her knees. Despite no evidence of it, he's *decently* sure she's wearing shorts or underwear underneath the bright green hoodie. This time.

Her legs are as hairy as his, and her long black hair lost its usual frizz in the sheen that's all oil. Despite how much he hates cheap cigarette smoke, he's sure that both this apartment and Shiori smell worse. The bags under her eyes and the two cigarettes tucked into the side of her mouth hint that her other job is demanding a great deal of time and attention, but the cigarettes nearly fall out of her mouth as she eyes what might be her payment. "Holy shit, you went grocery shopping."

That's because Shiori *never* makes it simple to pay her off. Everyone else wants cash and convincing, quick and simple, but Shiori is *never* simple. He sets out all three boxes of jelly pouches, enough to feed her for a few months, and two cartons of her favorite cigarettes. Barely more than 3500 yen, but Shiori is also *never* cheap.

But she's good, she never fails when she wants to help, and when she sighs and runs a hand through her hair, he knows that she will. "I wasn't looking forward to burning my eyes with kiddie porn tonight, but if you're asking nicely-"

"I need help with two things, and that's neither of them," Aizawa says, and doesn't dare hope that it will be that easy. "I have a woman whose brother is missing. I don't have either of their names or any information about them, but I know where she would be found on a street camera."

Shiori groans, her head falling over the chair as she whines. "Eraser, that's *so* much work. It's almost impossible."

But he knows it's not impossible.

She huffs, letting one cigarette fall out of her mouth to scatter ash and burn her hoodie before she plucks it up and tosses it into one of the many energy drinks on her desk. "I'm outsourcing it, so don't expect anything soon-"

"I need it soon," Aizawa says, "Tonight."

He earns a glare, but the central computer minimizes its programs through the command of her quirk, a new box popping up to fill with text before it closes. "Expedited. My agent for that is better at it than me, so you better hope I don't have to take over. Because I *hate* watching street cameras, scrolling through social media, seeing all those *people* ."

He's heard. He's heard that a lot.

He's worried that he's used up everything he brought for this trade, but he's willing to do whatever Shiori asks. He knows she won't fail him, and she seems to be in a more generous mood than he expected.

“The Miasma,” Aizawa says, and he sees a very promising scowl. “Anything you have-”

“Dark,” Shiori growls. “Darker than black, and I don’t *do* that shit, Eraser.”

She says that, and she’s said it before. But she’s also done it when he needed her to.

And she knows it, and already knows that he needs her to, rolling her eyes. “Analog-”

“If they were analog, you wouldn’t know they were darker than black,” Aizawa reminds. Shiori lives online, in some of the darkest corners of the internet, and with the spread of technology into nearly every facet of society, that makes her invaluable. He knows that The Miasma isn’t offline, that it’s not analog, because Shiori knows it.

Shiori glares, plucking the cigarette out of her mouth to take a drink from one of the many open on her desk. He hasn’t been keeping track, but he hopes it isn’t the one that she used as an ashtray. He’s seen her make that mistake, and not react to it at all. “*They’re* analog. But I know the name.”

She knows more than the name, and he knows it. “I need everything that you have-”

“I don’t want to hand it over,” Shiori says, and he’s concerned by how hollow that sounds. Shiori is always angry, always grumbling through every effort that she makes and swearing because she has to make it. She’s helped him with things that are darker than black, but The Miasma seems darker than that.

But whatever she has, he needs it. “This is important,” Aizawa says, and he doesn’t want to say more than that, but he forces himself to. “This is the most important request that I’ve ever come to you with. Please.”

He bows, and he hates it. He knows she hates it more, and that’s why he does it.

Shiori tries to demand too much, tries to goad and tries to threaten, and despite what she does or where she lives, or how she lives, she’s gray. She’s a criminal with good intentions, even if he has to force them out of her. But it’s all the more telling that a plea like that is what makes her cave every time.

He gets that sigh, the one he was waiting for, before he rises. “I figured. With all the goodies, I knew it was either kids or cats, and I should just be thankful I’m not searching for cat rapists.” He knows not to trust that her goodwill extends that far, and he isn’t surprised to see her eyes cut to him with that same grave expression. “Dick pic.”

That’s her price. Not a usual one, but.

It’s happened. He neither knows nor *wants* to know why.

He starts walking to her bathroom, despite how it’s wholly irrational and only makes him want to take a shower afterwards for a more logical reason, before she stops him.

“Seduce me one. I’ve got enough angles of yours anyway,” Shiori says cryptically, as she tends to be at this point in the negotiations. He doesn’t know *why* she needs multiple angles of it, and he doesn’t want to find out. He’s reasonably sure this is somewhere between humiliation and a power trip, with a bit of her issues with social interaction in the mix. It’s irrational, but it’s never seemed sexual.

Hizashi is aware of it, and seems too amused to do anything but approve. That’s why he needs payback.

Shou: Send me a picture of your dick. Shiori needs it.

“I need a passport too-” Aizawa starts, before he notices his messages with Hizashi mirrored on Shiori’s central monitor.

“I said *seduce* , you can’t just-” Shiori cuts off in a scream when he wraps the monitor up with his capture scarf, ready to break it against the wall. She folds herself before she jumps to her feet, trying to threaten him with what looks like a long computer chip with wires dangling off the ends. “If you *fuck up* my hardware I will fuck your mouth *through your asshole* , Eraserhead!”

“Delete. *Whatever* you did to my phone. Or I will bring you in for it,” Aizawa threatens, and tries to mean it. Despite how powerful an asset Shiori is, he has information on that phone that she can’t have. Texts from Naomasa relevant to the investigation, pictures of Shinsou and Eri. There’s ways of tracing the location where those pictures were taken that Shiori knows, and despite her being gray, he’s not willing to risk it.

Shiori hisses between her teeth before she sits back down. “I’ve told you not to connect to unsecured networks, it’s your own damn fault.” He watches a dialog box fill with indecipherable words and symbols before he feels his phone vibrate in his hand. It’s only then that he pulls back the capture scarf.

But he wants to throw it back when he sees what appears on Shiori’s screen.

“ *Oh* , I guess asshole to mouth fucking is what works for you,” Shiori says with a chuckle, pointing at the picture that Hizashi sent. “Got some interesting *hardware* there.”

He glares, and another dialog box opens up. This time, he watches his phone to see more text scrolling over it before a program that he didn’t notice deletes itself. “The passport-”

“Outsourced, but covered,” Shiori says, kicking a leg back on top of her desk, knocking over two drinks and one dribbles out soda that will only become sticky residue. And she’s *not* wearing underwear. “Who’s it for?”

“An 18 year old male with purple eyes, purple hair, 177 centimeters tall. I’ll send you the picture, but you can make up the rest,” Aizawa says, ignoring the smirk that he earns. It’s a criminal act, done for a good purpose. It’s gray. “The Miasma.”

Shiori sighs, her head rolling back. “Analog.” Her eyes remain closed, but her lips close around the cigarette, pulling in a breath just to blow the smoke out of her nose before she speaks again. “Have you ever heard of Yelp?”

Aizawa fights not to roll his eyes. “How *old* do you think I am?” He might not be the most technologically inclined person, but he knows the basics. He *knows* Yelp, and even *Toshinori* knows Yelp.

Shiori hums, rather than answering. “Have you ever wondered how those little rent-a-goan operations happen? Maybe you hire a guy as a look out just to find out he’s near sighted, where *exactly* can you bitch and who can you bitch to? Not the cops, of course.”

He thought it was word of mouth, but that’s analog. “There’s a villain Yelp?”

Shiori doesn’t nod, but she repeats a phrase he’s heard a few times, a promising one. “Pick a number.”

“All of them,” Aizawa says, and he doesn’t care what he has to do for that. “This is important-”

“This is my *goddamn* life,” Shiori growls back, glaring at him. “I’ve seen those pages go dark, and I’m not going to 404 my servers for you, Eraserhead. It’s darker than black and I shouldn’t have let you get this far.”

He knows. He knows it’s unfair to weigh a life against a life. And knowing that he probably could make her go farther, if he pushes enough, makes it all the more heavy.

But Shiori sighs, staring at the central monitor like it will silence her itself, grave but focused. “Pick *two* numbers.”

“Memory-” Shiori cuts him off with an imitation of a buzzer from a game show, and he frowns at that. Memory seemed to be the most useful. “127.”

He hears the printer in the corner start whirring to life, each page spitting out promising, but knowing 127’s career involves murder taints that. People died as a result of those pages. “And?”

“27,” Aizawa says, even if he shouldn’t. In terms of the investigation, it’s the most useless number to ask for because supposedly, everything he would want to know about the person it represents is within his reach. But he asks because he hopes that Shiori will cut him off, that the printer will stay silent.

The printer whirs to life again.

*

Shinsou was close enough to an even keel by the time Nemuri asked if she should take Eri to her dorm shift, and when Eri walked through the door, it seemed like the storm had finally settled. Shinsou still had the blanket wrapped loosely around himself, even if the shivering was gone, but the heaviness of his eyelids seemed to suggest that he might want to use the blanket to take a nap. Especially with the perfect little cuddle buddy reunited with her ‘Twenny.’

Yamada has learned to divorce that nickname from ‘27,’ and he thinks that Shinsou has too. Shouta told him enough to know that the interview was *successful*, that Shinsou might be a little more vulnerable to anything that reminded him of that dark place. Shinsou told him a little bit of that too.

Shinsou opened up, just a little. Even if it seemed like he was trying to defend himself, trying to reason that he didn’t want to keep talking and that he wasn’t trying to bite off his tongue for any other reason. Shinsou did talk about it.

He said that the place he was before the 8 Precepts was cold. That he was in a dark room until he answered to his ‘name.’ That he felt *every inch of that* under that woman’s quirk, and couldn’t shake it off easily. That he didn’t want to feel that way, didn’t want to be under that quirk, *ever* again.

He wouldn’t. Yamada listened and felt every sting of betrayal at that, faced every bit of pain that Shinsou shared. He still knows that’s not all of it, and despite Shinsou’s loose reasoning, he’s still not going to be left alone for a while.

But while Eri recounts her time with Nemuri, cuddled close to a Shinsou that seems to be getting closer and closer to sleep, he steps into his bedroom again, but this time to return one of the 17 phone calls his hero manager has left him.

“Yo, Minooru, whatever you want, it’s not happening!” Yamada promises, tone jovial for now, but he knows his hero manager well enough to know that he will be *tested*. One of these days, he’s going to have a little ‘quirk slip’ with a casualty count, and his radio station manager will have to

manage the fall out with the fear of god in his eyes.

“ Present Mic, you work like a goddamn part timer and that’s not what your contract says! This wardship business doesn’t cover that, you lazy pile of- ”

“Rip it up, little man,” Yamada growls, and means every *syllable* of it. He has three jobs and he can handle dropping to two, thank you very much. And if not, there are *plenty* of agencies willing to work with a part time hero who has two kids, *especially* when that hero is number 98 on the Hero Rankings.

And he’s been over this with his hero manager, he *knows* it, and that’s why he earns a scream that blows static through the phone’s speaker. *“ Listen! There’s a planned weapons deal that’s going to go bust, two other agencies planned it but they need a heavier offense hero! I don’t give a shit what you plan to do, but I’m sending in your sidekick to respond! ”*

“Byte *isn’t* offense!” Yamada argues, before he realizes what his manager means, narrowing his eyes at the closed door when he wants nothing more than to be in his manager’s office to better *convince* him not to. “You dirty little-”

“ If I didn’t have to pull teeth to convince you to save lives, it wouldn’t come to this, Mic.” And his manager *isn’t* allowed to call him ‘Mic,’ and they’ve gone over this. They’re not friends, they’re not colleagues, and even at the best of times they barely tolerate each other but those glory days are over now. *“ You want to rip up your contract? Stop pretending to be a hero? That’s fine with me, come on over and we can seal the deal! But my office is closed, so you’re going to that raid. Unless you want your sidekick flying solo. ”*

That dirty, putrid, *vile* little man hangs up like the *coward* that he is, and Yamada seethes. His thumbs work fast, trying to get in touch with Shouta and trying to convince his sidekick to risk her job instead of her life. But he gets a chilling reminder in that conversation.

Bytey: This arms deal is big, Mikey. There’s a lot of guns going into the wrong hands. We need you here for it.

Shinsou needs him, and so does the mission. A hero doesn’t weigh a life against a life, but they do. They have to.

He calls Shouta three times before he walks out the door to check on his ward. Shinsou is still just drowning despite Eri’s best efforts, curled up against his side while she watches the fish swim. Shouta still isn’t picking up, likely chasing after a lead from Shiori with dogged determination, leaving both his dorm shift for 1-A and both wards to Yamada.

He texts Ectoplasm and gets a response that he knew he was going to get. Ectoplasm gets a little abused thanks to his cloning quirk, and Yamada and Shouta have abused him quite a bit even before Midterms week. He’s done, it’s his day off, and no one is going to convince him to face Class 1-A tonight. Toshinori is covering his 3-A dorm shift to accommodate that, and that leaves Yamada with no other options from the staff list.

Ectoplasm’s suggestion was probably just a reminder of that dressing down that frankly, was deserved, but Yamada’s desperate enough to take it as inspiration.

It feels worse, knowing why Mirio agrees. Knowing that he’s excused from his Heroics exam tomorrow, and knowing that all those good luck texts that he sent throughout the week probably ring a little hollow given how much they depend on the kid.

But he tries to take Mirio's text to heart, to believe it.

Mirio: Don't feel bad! Duty calls for a hero! And I kind of wanted to take my mind off of tomorrow, ya know?

Mirio very rarely admits things like that, but it's becoming a little more frequent. A little more promising. It still feels like Yamada isn't doing enough. For any of his kids.

But duty calls.

"Hey guys, we've got a new plan for tonight! Mirio's gonna be watching over Class 1-A, and he's going to be taking you guys with him!" Yamada says, painting on a smile. It feels hollow until Eri's cheer brings a flicker of a smile on Shinsou's face.

"Yay! Sleepover with Mirio!" Eri says, looking back and beaming as she makes that smile spread a little further, Shinsou's arm holding her close.

"Mirio can't sleep, but it's still going to be fun, right?" Shinsou asks, and Yamada finds himself shocked that he does.

Eri nods, then answers with a "Yup!" like she catches that. Like she knows how important it is that Shinsou asked, that Shinsou risked that.

And Shinsou smiles a little softer, a piece that was out of shape that Yamada hasn't even considered seemingly falling closer into place. And he feels a little better about having three jobs when he has three of the most amazing kids to make it all worthwhile.

*

Shiori's 'agent' works fast, and frankly works miracles. Aizawa had barely read a quarter of 127's reviews, sitting on the police station's rooftop while he waited for either Sansa or Naomasa to return, when he got Shiori's text.

They found his name, his picture, his quirk, his address, his frequently visited locations in the last two months, and his phone number. Saito Hideo, the resemblance to his younger sister clear in their same brown eyes and hair though he looks 10 years older. His quirk is a paralysis quirk, activated by touch which could make him a dangerous weapon in Miasma's hands.

But Aizawa doubts that this Miasma operates out of BDSM bars or hotels, which is where Mr. Saito has been spending most of his time. Given that Mr. Saito is 'missing,' he doesn't bother to check his address, and instead makes his way to the nearest bus station to spend an hour and a half on public transit to Shibuya, standing outside of one of the gaudiest and most neon gay clubs he's ever seen.

It takes 30 minutes to find that Mr. Saito isn't there, and 10 more to reason with Shiori that he's not going to 'seduce' her a dick pic from one of the patrons. She gives in after he sends her a picture of himself sipping an overpriced drink with a phallic novelty straw, and tells him that he is in the right place. But he's probably not on the right floor.

Aizawa already needed a very thorough shower after all the things he's done so far, especially with that straw, but he feels like he needs two when he follows a man through an unmarked door and down the stairs.

He's crashed a handful of fetish balls in his career, so the people dangling from the ceiling in cages, from rope bindings, and from hooks aren't shocking. But there is a man kneeling on a table

with two apples inside him, and only one in his mouth.

It's *creative* to say the least.

Aizawa very clearly isn't dressed for the occasion, and though he's flashed the capture scarf's abilities on a few undercover operations into places like these, he doesn't feel the need to. He finds Saito Hideo easily enough, bound to a chair and completely restrained in a latex bodysuit that resembles a sleeping bag but for the more form-fitting elements of it. And the ball gag, of course.

Aizawa walks over and unbuckles the restraints across his chest and thighs, ignoring two other men who try to ask what he's doing and why. He takes advantage of the bodysuit to heft the man over his shoulder, reminding himself that this is necessary. Repeatedly. The sounds that the man is making, which might be protests behind the ball gag, make it worse.

It makes for a very interesting train ride to Tokyo, but a few selfies with Mr. Saito sitting next to him secures Ms. Saito's phone number.

*

Saito Hikaru probably thought that Aizawa would be intimidated by the security cameras at The Commission of Wardship Affairs' headquarters recording a wealth of evidence as to how out of line his actions are. But given the implications behind her brother going 'missing,' he's sure that she will be deleting any footage of Aizawa carrying the man still whimpering behind the ball gag.

Aizawa knows that the man likely needs to be freed from the latex bodysuit before it starts to endanger his health, but he knows for a fact that he's naked otherwise. He's leaving that task to his sister with no small amount of spite.

He already feels particularly vengeful when he deposits the man in an office chair, watching both siblings' eyes go wide. But Ms. Saito's fists shake in anger that's entirely misplaced. "How *dare* you-"

Aizawa knows there are better ways of removing a ball gag than ripping it out by one strap, but Aizawa doesn't care about any of them. Out of all the dicks that he's had to deal with today, the memory of *little* Mr. Saito pressed against his back makes him his least favorite.

"You sent this prick after me?!" Mr. Saito screams hoarsely, before he swallows the built up spit. "I told you, we're *done*, I'm going to live my own life and I don't give a fuck who you are or what you're doing! Just leave me *alone*!"

"Mr. Saito was enjoying a very eventful night with some choice friends, but he wasn't an unwilling participant in any criminal organizations," Aizawa says, pleased to see Ms. Saito's anger, an ill-fitting shield as it was, falling back away into utter embarrassment.

"How did you find him?" Ms. Saito asks weakly, still unable to look at her brother. "The police found nothing, he wasn't at his apartment or his job-"

"You stole me from my master over this?! I quit, I told you that! I'm not working for-"

"I found him," Aizawa interrupts, *more* than bored with the thought of hearing any more of this melodrama play out. "Now, you're going to cancel that appointment with Mind Slice and cancel every single interview that comes up afterwards. You're going to leave *him* alone, you're going to leave the investigation alone, and you're going to approve the quirk specialist that Naomasa requested weeks ago."

Mr. Saito nods at 'him,' but Aizawa doesn't mean him and Ms. Saito knows it. She doesn't want to do any of those things, clearly, and the cold glare growing colder makes him pull out a trump card.

"It would be very unfortunate if I had to mention names when I'm asked why I was riding two major train lines in my hero costume with a man in fetish gear sitting beside me," Aizawa threatens, pulling on a thread that both Saitos left hanging loose.

Ms. Saito has an agenda that doesn't involve her older brother being publically gay or in a hardcore BDSM relationship, and he couldn't care less whether it's political or personal. He doesn't give a damn about a single aspect of this twisted sibling relationship, but he will use it to secure Shinsou's safety.

Ms. Saito's glare warms, her nostrils flaring before she seethes. She walks to her desk, still not looking at her brother, and pulls a piece of paper from a seafoam green folio and slaps it on her desk. Aizawa fumes at the sight of it, the capture scarf rising and he doesn't feel the need to force it to settle, glaring at Ms. Saito hard enough to nearly activate his quirk.

"Kenma is hard to acquire," Ms. Saito says, crossing her arms and looking in the opposite direction from both Aizawa and her brother. "Don't think that he won't be approved when a civilian becomes a casualty."

"You threatened to kill a ward-"

"I didn't," Ms. Saito says sharply, insulted before she finds something to laugh about. "The risk of a coma is a *risk*, not a given. I'm not sure why I need to argue about the quality of life in this situation either. It's not like the kid is ever going to-"

He pulls the capture scarf tight around her arms and chest, dragging her forward to face his glower. In the back of his mind, numbness reminds him that he's assaulting a government official, but in the forefront all he sees is *red*. "*He will*. No thanks to you."

She purses her lips with too wide eyes, but he's not going to give her the chance to *act* like she can threaten him now.

"No more interviews. A quirk specialist. *Now*." Aizawa releases her, waiting and testing, and doesn't pull the scarf back to his shoulders until she huffs and pulls out a piece of paper from the same folder.

"It needs the signature of every member on The Commission, and don't think they all have skeletons in the closet," she mutters in a way she *thinks* is threatening, but he takes as inspiration. "I can't do anything about the interviews and you know that."

He knows. But he's going to make sure that she doesn't request them. "Jun's quirk."

She shoots a glare like she wants to argue that it wasn't part of the deal, but he knows well enough that deals made under the table like this aren't meant to be fair, they can't be enforced. "Truth Serum. We weren't sure if it would work, but it did. After someone ingests her spit, they become paralyzed and compelled to answer her questions truthfully. It works better when the target trusts her."

He knew before she said it. That the coffee was tampered with, that despite trying to prove to Shinsou that it wasn't poisoned, it *was*. He grinds his teeth before he asks. "What are the side effects?"

Ms. Saito leans against her desk, folding her arms. "A mildly sore throat if it's used for too long.

It's as minimally invasive as it gets with interrogation quirks."

"Chills? Feeling cold and shivering despite being warm?" Aizawa asks, all the more incensed to see her chuckle.

"Sounds like the kid is getting sick. It's flu season, you can't pin that on us." He can't, and the face masks still hidden in the office become all the more guilt-inspiring because of that.

He starts walking away as though he'll leave that simply, listening to Ms. Saito sigh and start muttering about how embarrassing this situation is for her. That's when he turns around and makes it all the more embarrassing for her, smirking about how perfect the picture comes out. Ms. Saito leaning over to start unzipping the latex bodysuit, her expression soft and caring despite the history he's sure of. It makes it all the easier to paint it in a different light.

She's not at all soft or caring when she notices, eyes flashing in anger.

"No more interviews," Aizawa reminds, placing his phone with its hefty insurance policy in his pocket. "I'm going to close the investigation without your help."

He's only read six pages of the reviews and has three leads, three named criminal organizations who dealt with Miasma, who contracted a killer from them. He, Naomasa, and Sansa will have their hands busy contacting all of them, all the names he knows and the ones he knows will be mentioned deeper in.

He still hasn't read Shinsou's reviews, and he's not sure if he wants to. If he can stomach the words from the criminals that used him, knowing that he was 12 years old at the oldest when those reviews were written. He doesn't want to know if Shinsou was *good* at those jobs or not.

He hopes that he doesn't have to, because he's good at his own job, and likely won't need anymore leads to pursue for months. Months where Shinsou can be divorced from the investigation, and kept safe at UA.

*

Shinsou is *dead* tired, and Mirio knew that immediately. Yamada told him enough, that it was a *really* rough day in the worst possible way, and Mirio knows the hero protocols to manage that. He knows that it should be easy, even with the dorm shift that promises to be an exciting one, because Shinsou should fall asleep within minutes once they get to the room.

Shinsou still jolts when Present Mic starts yelling loud enough that everyone in Class 1-A can hear him, whether they're in the common room or not. "LISTEN UP HEROES! MIRIO IS IN CHARGE AND MIDNIGHT WILL PUT YOU ALL DOWN FOR A LITTLE NAP IF YOU MAKE ANY TROUBLE FOR HIM, AND THEN I WILL BE VERY DISAPPOINTED IN YOU BEFORE ERASERHEAD EXPELS YOU ALL!" The students in the common room either cover their ears, stuff their heads into the couch cushions, or both. "GOOD LUCK ON YOUR EXAM TOMORROW!"

Yamada thanks him for what has to be the 30th time before he ruffles his hair then Eri's, and claps a hand on Shinsou's shoulder.

"You guys be good too, I'll be back before you can say 's'mores.' *With* some smores! That's always a great sleepover snack!" Mirio doesn't doubt that Yamada means it, that he will be bringing back some smores after the mission, but he's sure that Shinsou will still be asleep by then.

As soon as Yamada is out the door, Midoriya tries to make that harder for him. "Sempai, is it okay

if we talk to Shinsou for a-”

Shinsou turns and starts walking towards the stairwell, and Mirio gave a wincing shrug. “Not the best time for that, sorry. You guys should really catch some shut eye though, that Heroics Exam is a killer!”

“Good luck!” Eri cheers, but as soon as they turn to the stairwell, she gets distracted by the promise of smores. It’s one of the many things on a list that keep shrinking, of things that she’s never eaten before. “Twenny, have you ever eaten smores?”

Shinsou is probably a little more used to that cute little tooth whistle, but Mirio finds himself hoping that Eri’s fascination with that treat stays around for a while because of it. “No. I’ve never eaten anything like the stuff we get to eat here. It’s nice.”

Mirio’s going to start making a list for Shinsou. “It is, isn’t it? Lunch Rush can make anything, so there’s a lot of stuff at UA that’s hard to find in other schools. Between him and Yamada, I’m sure you’ll be an educated foodie in no time!”

“Yamada,” Shinsou repeats, and Mirio almost misses a step when he hears it. Shinsou has only said a few words to Mirio, other than that time when he was too mixed up on Aizawa-sensei’s death coffee to stop talking. Every time that Shinsou has talked to him, it’s either rushed or nervous, or just heartbreakingly quiet and shaking.

That word was steady, was slow, and it almost sounded a little angry in a way that Mirio can’t quite place. “Oh, yeah. Yamada said it was okay, I’ve just been talking to him a lot. I still call him sensei in class though! I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea-”

“Mirio is Yama’s son, ‘cause Mirio called him ‘Dad,’ and that made Yama really happy,” Eri says, and Mirio feels his cheeks burning just from the memory of that. It’s a little bit worse because Eri doesn’t call Yamada ‘Dad’ very often, making it feel like that all of that was a little pointless.

But Yamada is a really great guy, in ways that Mirio never really noticed when he was just his student. He’s funny and he can be loud, but Mirio never really noticed how attentive he could be or how caring. And even if he imagined that he’d be more comfortable calling him ‘Present Mic’ after dropping the ‘sensei’ when he graduated, ‘Present Mic’ doesn’t really fit.

It’s not really ‘Dad,’ and Mirio feels guilty just thinking like that, thinking about a couple text messages that he hasn’t responded to and more phone calls that weren’t honest. But it’s definitely not ‘Present Mic’ either. It’s closer, and it honestly might be a little closer than ‘Yamada.’

He doesn’t know what Shinsou thinks of that, and it’s probably not a good time to ask. As soon as they get to the surveillance room, Shinsou lays down on the cot and practically melts into it. Mirio feels bad for having to keep all those computer screens on to make sure Class 1-A doesn’t make too much trouble, but he turns off the light after turning on the bathroom light just in case Eri doesn’t feel like sleeping yet.

And she doesn’t, even if she looks a little tempted with those glances in Shinsou’s direction. “Mirio, can I watch Sailor Moon?”

And Mirio hopes he doesn’t get too distracted from his job watching over Class 1-A to accommodate her. “Of course! In the name of the moon, we’ll pull up Hulu!”

He tries to keep it down for Shinsou’s sake, but he and Eri have a habit of singing along to the intro. Luckily, it doesn’t seem to bother him, and that’s good.

Shinsou definitely needs some rest, and Mirio's sure that even a tiny thing like a good night's sleep will help put an end to that awful day he's had.

Talk

Chapter Summary

27 lost the piece of information that kept him safe, that gave him an anchor at UA. They knew The Miasma's name.

He knows what they're going to do next.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: 50 mention, Character accepting death

Previously on Wards of UA: When Shinsou was fused with Chisaki during the raid, he felt that Chisaki was "stealing his voice," and felt similarly when he was compelled to talk during the interrogation. Yamada was called to a mission to stop an arms deal. Shinsou is on Suicide Watch after trying to bite his tongue during the interrogation. Shinsou has not used his phone since he found out that it was worth more than his mother sold him for. Midoriya compared Shinsou to Link from Legend of Zelda, because Link saves a princess (Eri) and is fanonically considered mute. The participants in the raid on the 8 Precepts knew that Shinsou's quirk activated after a vocal response, and Mirio told Midoriya more about it after the day they watched Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats together. Midoriya and Yaoyorozu were the only two students that beat Shinsou in a training exercise. When Yamada made tea for Shinsou after the interrogation, he put honey in though he doesn't usually, and Shinsou refused to drink it. When the group chat for 1-A was first created, all the students listed their quirks along with their disadvantages and other information. Yamada and Shinsou traded name signs after hugging, and Yamada promised that Shinsou was staying at UA after the investigation. Shinsou promised 50 that he would never kill anyone. Eri told Aizawa that Shinsou's mother 'gave him away,' and Yamada accidentally told Shinsou that, leading Shinsou to believe that they thought he was worthless. Midnight was not considered as a designated hero for Shinsou because he has resistance to sedatives. Shiori hacked Aizawa's phone previously, and removed that trojan program when he visited her. Todoroki (maybe?) thinks that Shinsou's quirk allows him to transform into a cat, and thus should be treated like a feral cat. Hagakure and Ojiro were nearly expelled for breaking into Aizawa's dorm and being aware of it respectively. Shinsou has observed that 'volunteers' to criminal organizations are treated better than he is, as he's always been sold to the organization. Shinsou went to school with Ashido before he was sold, and knows he used his quirk on her, which caused him to worry that she had Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome.

Mirio knew that Shinsou probably had nightmares. He knew that they might even be worse than Eri's, because despite the awful things that her young imagination can whip up, Shinsou probably

lived through enough nightmares to not need that imagination.

He's never heard Shinsou have one, but tonight he's up to three. And they're only getting worse.

The first time, Shinsou just jolted up, startling Mirio and Eri both. Eri seemed worried enough, and Mirio didn't want to make it worse by making a fuss. He offered to bring some warm milk up from the dorm kitchen, but Shinsou just shook his head, and Eri gave up on Sailor Moon to lay down with him, promising that it would be okay.

The second time, he sprung up and backed himself against the wall, breathing too hard until Mirio breathed with him. Mirio asked if he wanted to talk about it, and Eri told him that it would help, almost begging him to, but Shinsou shook his head. By the time he did lay down to fall asleep, he seemed more irritated than scared, and Mirio hoped that maybe he would get too tired to have any more nightmares.

The third time was louder, Shinsou woke up with a strangled yell and his hand curled around his mouth, turning away from Eri to face the wall. She woke up from that, worry working into her voice even through the haze of her own sleepiness, and Shinsou slapped his hand against the wall before he flinched. "It's fine," Shinsou said, over and over again. 'It's fine,' and 'I'm sorry,' whispered over and over even when Mirio offered to get that warm milk, even when he did go downstairs to make it. When he tried to hand it to Shinsou, promising that it would help, he just got another shake of his head and his own 'I'm sorry.'

He still tried to talk to Shinsou, tried to help him relax. Despite how hard it seems for Shinsou to stay asleep, he still definitely needed it. Somewhere in the middle of a story about Mirio and Tamaki staying up all weekend to beat a video game, Shinsou's heavy eyelids fell closed again, and Mirio hoped that this time they'd stay that way.

"*Stop stealing* -" Shinsou shouted, jolting up just to put both hands over his mouth, just to fold in and start shaking before Mirio even looked to check on Eri. She was quickly waking up, quickly working herself into tears while she clung onto Shinsou's arm.

"Twenny, it's okay! Don't be sad and don't be scared 'cause we're safe, and it's a bad d-dream just a b-bad dream!" Eri said, shaking her fists clenched in Shinsou's sleeves, her voice getting more choked up. "D-don't be scare-ed Twenny-y!"

Shinsou started shaking his head, eyes still too wide. "It's fine, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry*." Mirio grabbed the mug of milk again, this time determined to convince Shinsou to drink it. Four nightmares in a row wasn't normal, there was definitely something wrong, and Mirio knew that even that tried and tested method of fighting them off might not work.

Class 1-A luckily seemed to take Yamada's warning to heart, most of them tucking in at a reasonable hour and the others didn't make any trouble. But now it's 3 AM and Yamada still isn't back from the mission, that text that Mirio sent still not answered. Aizawa-sensei hasn't answered either, and while Midnight-sensei offered to help, Mirio really didn't think that using her quirk on Shinsou would help things.

Mirio really thought it would be easier than this, that he was an expert on 'Eri Troubles' and catching on pretty quick for 'Shinsou Troubles.' But this was really getting out of his hands, especially with 'Shinsou Troubles' stirring up some 'Eri Troubles,' which was only making the 'Shinsou Troubles' worse.

So when Mirio heard a knock on the door, he really figured that he didn't need anymore troubles to deal with. "Hey Midoriya, it's kind of not a good time--"

“I know, I should be asleep but I really can’t because I think I broke my bed?” Midoriya answers, still wide eyed and flustered, seeming a little unsure about something he *really* shouldn’t be. “I think it was a quirk slip, I was having a dream and then I woke up and my bed was broken. I just didn’t know if I should tell you or wait to tell Aizawa-sensei or-”

“Yeah, no, I’ll let him know! Thanks for telling me, but...” Mirio trails off, glancing behind him to see that not even Midoriya’s voice was enough to inspire Eri to pull away from Shinsou. Not that he really imagined it would be, but Eri could be a little clingy to Midoriya on some occasions. “I don’t really think there’s a spare bed laying around, but maybe you could sleep on the couch? It’s not the best, though.”

“It’s fine, I feel okay and I usually only get five hours of sleep anyway!” Midoriya says, a bit too cheerfully at that. While Mirio has had some lean nights, he’s never tried to make five hours ‘*usual*’ for him, and he’s a little worried about his underclassman because of that.

“You definitely need to sleep *way* more than that, but I guess that’s...good?” Mirio says, at least reassured that it wouldn’t affect Midoriya’s Heroics Midterm later today. But then his mind caught on an idea that he really wasn’t sure about.

It was kind of like that game with a fox, a chicken, and a bag of rice, trying to get all three across a river. Midoriya was the other side, another possible option, but he really didn’t know which ward should go with him. Shinsou and Eri definitely needed to be separated for a little bit, just to keep from spiraling deeper into their own worries with each other as inspiration, but Mirio couldn’t keep them separated in the same room.

Eri needed to sleep, and Shinsou’s nightmares were keeping her from that. She also probably needed a little TLC to come down from that, and while Midoriya was fun to be around and definitely spoiled her, he tended to spoil her in an exciting way. And he’s seen a grumpy Eri who hasn’t slept enough, and he doesn’t really want to cause it.

Shinsou needed to sleep, needed to relax to do that, and really couldn’t be left alone after what Yamada told him happened. Shinsou didn’t seem to want to talk to Midoriya earlier, but maybe Midoriya’s cheerfulness could wear him down a bit, to a point that he could forget about whatever was bothering him. Shinsou seemed exhausted enough to not really care whether the couch was comfortable or not, and Mirio was pretty sure that once his mind got out of the dark place it was in for long enough, he could probably sleep for days no matter what he was laying on.

But there was a chance that Shinsou wouldn’t sleep if he went with Midoriya. There’s a chance that Midoriya wouldn’t know not to let Shinsou be alone, that with this horrible day still not over and the frustration building from lack of sleep, Shinsou might do something desperate if he’s given the opportunity.

But there was a way for Mirio to always keep an eye on him. “Are you going to be hanging out in the common room or your room, since sleeping’s kind of out for now?”

Midoriya looked a little confused at first, then scratched his head. “Oh, I don’t know, I’m fine with either really. I should probably hold off on my morning run until a little later, and I’ve already cleaned up everything as best as I could in my room-”

Mirio raised a finger to tell him to hold that thought before he closed the door, unable to fight that desperate grin while he still just *hoped* this plan would work out. “Hey, Shinsou, do you want to hang out with Midoriya for a little bit? Just to get your mind off of things-”

Shinsou nodded, surprisingly, seeming as desperate to get to sleep as Mirio was to help him stay

asleep. Mirio turned back to talk to Midoriya, who still seemed confused by the closed door.

“Do you want to hang out with Shinsou for a bit? Just, you know, hang out and have fun, keep things chill, you know?” Mirio says, and hopes that Midoriya catches what he means.

Midoriya’s smile, not quite as excited as it was when he first mentioned Shinsou’s name, told him that he did and he wasn’t too disappointed in that. “Yeah, that’s fine! We can play some video games in the common room so you can still keep an eye on things.”

And that was absolutely *music* to Mirio’s ears. Just enough relief to his singed nerves to make him forget that he doesn’t like all-nighters, and that out of all the all-nighters he’s pulled, this one will still be the worst. But it might get a little bit better. “Thank you, Midoriya!”

Shinsou had gotten Eri closer to calm, even if her worries were still pretty clear, but she relaxed a little bit more at the hand resting on her head and the smile Shinsou tried to give her. “It’s fine. Yamada will be back soon, and he’ll bring you some smores. It’ll be nice....” Shinsou trails off, that weak smile wavering even more for a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Twenny!” Eri says, holding onto Shinsou’s hand with both of hers, trying to paint on her own fake smile for his sake. “Yama’s gonna be back soon, and we’ll get smores, okay?”

“Okay,” Shinsou agrees, raising his hand again before he pulls away. “I’m sorry.”

Mirio has heard Shinsou say ‘sorry’ a lot, especially tonight, but he could swear that Shinsou was trying to say something else with that last one.

*

Midoriya really isn’t good with not saying what he wants to say, especially with how bad he wants to say it. There’s a lot that he wants to talk about with Shinsou, there’s a lot of things that he’s worried about and Shinsou not being on any of the chats all week has made it a lot worse.

But everything that he wants to say is not really ‘keeping it chill,’ and he knows that Togata had a reason to ask for that. Even if Midoriya doesn’t know it himself, he can see that Shinsou probably doesn’t need to talk about anything that Midoriya wants to ask him about. Shinsou just looks really, *really* tired.

“This is one of my favorite Legend of Zelda games,” Midoriya says, loading up Breath of the Wild on the common room’s console. He and Sero are the only ones who have a fully completed save file including all 3 DLCs, and Kacchan has a bad habit of loading up someone else’s file just to eat all their food and leave them in a mob infested area to keep it that way. “The animation is so cool, and the mechanics are really interesting! Link has a Sheikah slate that can unlock new abilities from shrines, and some of them are kind of like quirks, like freezing water or being able to control metal with magnetic forces. The shrines are a little easier than the usual dungeons, but....”

Shinsou doesn’t really seem to be listening, just staring at the TV, and Midoriya remembers that he rambles a bit too much sometimes.

“Sometimes, I just like to play it and use the glider to fly around. It’s kind of relaxing, to just kind of float through the air and pick wherever you want to land. The music is really nice too, it’s really quiet when you’re gliding but the closer you get to the ground, it picks up. Kind of like you’re coming back to earth after getting above it all, for a while,” Midoriya says, teleporting to one of the highest mountain peaks to demonstrate it.

He explains all the buttons to push to make Link jump and pull out his glider, and Shinsou does

turn to watch him do that. Then Midoriya sails off, sailing towards the Kokiri Forest even though it's impossible to reach it, even at the highest peak. He spent too long trying to when he got frustrated with the forest maze.

When he lands close enough to an outpost to hear the flutes and drums, he teleports back to the shrine at the peak and hands the controller to Shinsou to try it out. Shinsou remembers the controls to start gliding, but after sailing just a little bit, he drops the glider and Link falls to the ground with only three hearts to spare on his health bar. "Oh, sorry, you have to hold the button for-"

Shinsou teleports back to the shrine and starts again, this time circling back to the mountain's face before he lets the glider go, and Link ragdolls to his doom. Shinsou selects to restart at the death screen and starts sailing off again.

Midoriya doesn't say anything, because Kacchan does the same thing whenever he starts a new game. It seems really morbid, but knowing every possible way to kill your video game character *is* useful. It's just a little too meanspirited for Midoriya to ever try it.

Shinsou notices the green stamina bar start to go down after he tries to drown Link in the river nearby, and figures out how to kill Link by running it out. He ignores the Lizalfos that were attacking him on the riverbank during the drowning experiment, but on the next restart he stands right in front of one while it chips away at the maximum hearts until Link dies again.

He starts gliding again, but Midoriya knows he's probably testing if there are other ways to kill Link, and he gets lucky to find a wandering Guardian's attention. The next time, he lands too close to a town and finds nothing, but when he notices the townspeople he starts attacking them to test if they're hostile, only earning that animated flinch and scolding. "Um, the bombs also do damage if you stand too close-"

"When are you going to do it?" Shinsou asks, still staring at the screen.

"Huh-"

*

27 nearly sagged in relief after he pulled the string, running a hand through his hair. His quirk was still weak, the string not as strong as it should be. But not as weak as that frayed thing that he controlled Eri's quirk eruption with either.

He closes his eyes for a moment to block out the light, a dull and fading throbbing in his head, but pretends to keep playing the video game. He knows that the cameras in the common room wouldn't detect Midoriya's whitened eyes and his blank expression might be overlooked. He had to move fast, but he had to test it. "Scratch the back of your head with your right hand."

He obeyed, easy as saying it. As easy as saying it used to be.

He had been trying to force Midoriya's hand, trying to work the words past the mask at the same time. He felt the irritation building and swelling, red until it turned as black as that death screen. Just the sound of Midoriya's voice, the fact that he could just *say* things so easily, as easily as he could use his *quirk* was the push that he needed.

And Midoriya was stupid enough to *answer*. He was in the raid. He talked to Mirio about his quirk. He *knew* and he was blessed enough to be able to survive this long despite being that *stupid*.

"Stop. Put your hand down on the couch," 27 orders, and it feels *right*. The mask might not be gone, but it's open, and it's better that way. He still has the mask, but he can also use his quirk. It

almost feels too easy to talk now.

27 rolls his neck, finding himself in the same habit of loosening his jaw and pulling it side to side, despite the real mask being gone for months. It's so *easy*, and it's so *right*, and they're all just so *stupid*.

"You're really the worst one they could have picked for this," 27 mutters, though he's not sure which one they should have picked. His owner said that he watched part of the training, and probably picked Midoriya because of that. Because Midoriya beat him. "Momo must have been too busy. She could make it cleaner, but I guess you heroes don't know about cleanup."

He fights a laugh, but still winds up with a smile.

"That's right, I've heard it's irritating when I talk without a command. Some of the underlings said it feels like they're vibrating in their minds. Trying *so hard* to be useful," 27 spares a glance at Midoriya, trying to see if there's any flicker of that, any weakness in the string, and there's not. Just that blank expression, still nauseating to look at. "Don't worry, you will be. You'll probably be better than Momo anyway."

27 stands up, and orders Midoriya to do it too. To follow him, as he starts walking towards the front door, and his nerves start singing because he *knows* it won't be this easy. But he has a useful tool, the perfect little puppet to throw away.

He's leaving, and Midoriya is going to make sure that happens.

The plan nearly fails when the stairwell door opens up forcefully, nearly clipping Midoriya's arm to wake him from the brainwash, but it doesn't. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees who opened the door, but he already knew it by the way that it opened. "Oi, corpse-face, where the fuck are you going?"

"Where do you think?" 27 asks, *hoping*. Two would be good, two would be better than good, and Blasty is too loud and stupid to resist it.

There's a pause, probably seconds but he feels every inch of it crashing over him, telling him to bolt for the door and hope that Midoriya doesn't get singed. "The fuck did you do to Dek-"

He pulls, *he pulls he pulls* and it fucking *snaps*.

27 presses his hands hard to his temples, grinding his teeth and willing the pain away, willing it to become just dull enough to ignore before he ignores it anyway. He turns to see Blasty blinking slowly, Midoriya still too close to his line of fire, still stopped because there's no motion to follow, and 27 pulls again, this time on a command he's already placed.

He runs and rips open the door, hears footsteps behind and he knows there's too many. The sun hasn't risen yet but it will, the sky gray and the air cold enough to bite in his throat even if it's relief on his face and head. When Mirio starts shouting he spins on his heel, he doesn't need that kind of attention, and Midoriya obeys the implicit order that 'following' means staying behind him.

Bug always told him that it was risky to leave things vague, to not be specific, but there are times that it works. "Hey kid, you need to go back inside-"

"The *fuck* I will! What the *fuck* are you doing to Deku, you shit faced bastard?!" Blasty fumes, hands curled at his sides threateningly. Two heroes so far, too much attention because of that, but 27 has failed to escape enough times to know that two isn't too much. Especially now, now that he

has to.

Mirio tries to pretend he doesn't know, like he's just smiling like that to calm 27 down like he *cares*. Like he's *worried*. Yamada told him to do it, probably. His owner told Yamada who it would be and Yamada told Mirio to make it happen. Mirio might be the fall guy if they need one, but they probably don't. "Hey, Shinsou, I don't really know what's going on but you're not in trouble, alright?"

That's a lie so ridiculous that he can't even laugh at it. "Activate Full Cowl at 5%." It's just so *useful* that they name their attacks like that.

He sees the weak glow at that, Blasty lunging before Mirio stops him with a hand on his chest, his face pulling in fear at last. He knows he failed now, he knows that 27 knows. If they want to do it, they'll have to earn it fairly. "Shinsou, I know you're probably really scared, but--"

"Scared," 27 repeats, and then he finds it in him to laugh. "I'm leaving. You failed, picking *Midoriya* of all people. The milk was probably poisoned too, Yamada should have told you it wouldn't work."

Mirio looks confused at that, and he's convincing at least. "Shinsou, I didn't *poison* it! Why would you think that I--"

"10%," 27 orders, and sees the glow grow just a little brighter. "He can't handle more than 20% at Full Cowl. He'll probably explode at 100."

27 doesn't need to explain himself, not with fear crossing even Blasty's eyes. "What the *fuck* are you on, Shitsou? You're acting like a fucking--"

"Villain?" 27 asks, even if the reminder that it didn't work the first time is still sharp behind his eyes, he'll bait Blasty for another chance. "A criminal? A murderer?"

Blasty hisses, and that's not enough of a response, even if he tests it. Mirio's isn't either. "You're not any of those things, Shinsou. You're just feeling a little mixed up about some stuff right now, and we'll probably laugh about it later, but I really need you to trust me right now and let Midoriya go. You're safe, even if it doesn't really feel like it, but I promise you that you're safe."

27 narrows his eyes. They *all* said that, as though that was enough. 'You're safe, you're safe, you're safe,' *all of them*. They knew it, they probably had time to plan it. His owner was just so sure that it would work, that they would get the name and get rid of him that quickly. As though he'd make it *easy* for them.

He almost did. Even if Yamada couldn't have been more insultingly obvious, stirring the poison in so noisily, he almost took it anyway. Just to feel warm, and wasn't that just clever of them? To put him back in the Dark, to make him feel cold and feel small and want that poison bad enough to drink it. To think that he'd be warm with 50 after that.

He pretended to be. He soaked up every lie so greedily, knowing that it was all lies. He was just that pathetic. He just liked being lied to that much, and Yamada was *so good* at lying. Despite that name sign he prepared beforehand, despite every smile and story afterwards, he wasn't *perfect* at it. *You're staying*, he couldn't manage that much. He couldn't promise it because he already knew he wouldn't. That he wasn't supposed to last the night.

But he wonders. He's wondered too often, and no matter how this turns out, he wants to know.

"Tell me how much I'm worth," 27 demands, crossing his arms. Yamada made him hand over the

knife and he took it back when he wasn't looking, but they don't know about that. It's better to keep secrets, and it's better to keep them from knowing that he's cold.

Mirio paints on a smile, so *fake*. "You're worth a lot, Shinsou. You're everything to Eri-"

"How much he *paid*," 27 corrects, a more muted form of the irritation that made him break Chisaki's nose boiling up. If Mirio were any closer, he'd make *sure* he wouldn't speak Eri's name. The *idiot* tries to play dumb, eyebrows furrowing so convincingly. So fake, *so fake* it's insulting. "Tell me how much Aizawa paid for me."

Even when he says it, he's too stupid not to hope. It might be a lot. It might be hard to throw him away if he proves himself, if he proves he can still be useful. He can use his quirk, he can be *useful* again.

He knows he's lying to himself. But he hopes.

Mirio just stares, looking stricken. Did he think he wouldn't figure it out? Did he think that he'd *believe* that it's different? "Shinsou...."

It's not different. The food is better, his bed is softer, he has things but they're always taunts. The laptop, the phone, his books - all of them reminders of how little he was worth to his mother. He wasn't worth as much as any of them, and his owner wanted him to know that. Even Chisaki couldn't make a play that good.

"All this time, you never believed you were rescued," Mirio mutters so softly, almost like 27 isn't meant to hear it. That's a good act, Mirio is convincing. "Even when you were next to Aizawa-sensei, you really thought that he-"

"20%," 27 commands. He's tired of this. "You're not close enough to know, then. It's fine. I'm leaving . "

Blasty charges, and Mirio tries to tackle him, and that's all the better. The two of them trapped between conflicting orders, no further instructions to guide them or clear the path for them. It's *perfect*.

"Deactivate your-" 27 turns to get the distance he needs, commanding Midoriya as he goes, but a wall surges forth and blows him off his feet. He instinctively raises his forearms against it, tiny pinpricks of debris on his face, before he lands on his back in the lush grass.

He pulls himself up, the knife in his hand before he even considers it, and looks at Midoriya panting and heaving with clear green eyes. His first two fingers are discolored, pointing at the crater left in the sidewalk while they twitch.

27 knows this won't end well. Three heroes alerted now, but more will be coming. No puppets to pull, no hope for escape.

But he's getting out of here.

He feels more like he's pulling his body after him as he runs, and he runs dead straight between two of the other dorms nearby. He knows he's not taking the way that he planned, he doesn't need to hear that near-electric sound of Midoriya's quirk and the sound of house slippers slapping on brick to remind him. He knows it's hopeless.

Near hopeless, he pulls himself over a low wall and keeps sprinting, nearly hearing Bug's voice when he checks to make sure he's been breathing properly for this kind of exercise. He needs

enough distance, he just needs a chance, he needs to not hesitate when it comes.

He holds the knife tighter and clenches his teeth when he knows he won't do it. Eri likes this hero, even if 50 would understand.

He makes it to an academic building, at least somewhat safer, before he sees an electric green streak soar faster than he could, Midoriya kicking off the wall in front of him to head him off and embarrassingly enough 27 nearly slips on the grass, but catches himself. "Shinsou!"

If he's calling for more heroes to help capture him, he should have done it sooner.

"Shinsou, I can't let you leave," Midoriya says, hands up in placation though he winces when he tries to move his two damaged fingers. "Shinsou, are you really going to leave Eri like this?"

27 narrows his eyes, caught between screaming at this hero to keep Eri's name out of his mouth, or throwing the knife to *ensure* it, but when his mouth drops open the words and his breath catch in his throat.

Quirkless. Again.

He only has the knife, and that's not enough. Midoriya caught him and he has him, and he can finish the job here with no witnesses. Clean. Simple. Eri won't know a thing about it. They'll tell her that he ran away, because he made it so *easy* for them.

Maybe that's what he wanted. Maybe he already knew it was hopeless. Both the heroes and The Miasma were going to hunt him down and kill him. Maybe it'll be easier knowing that Eri wouldn't know.

He waits, he doesn't know whether to go loose or stiffen. Which will hurt less. Midoriya will beat him to death, and that's not a fun way to go, but it's not the worst. At least it's not the worst.

Midoriya looks like this is his first job like this. Like he doesn't know what to do either, eyes too wide, regret for taking the job and pity because he hasn't trained himself not to think like that. "You can't talk anymore?"

He can't, and it's the perfect time to strike. Not that it really would have mattered if Midoriya tried to before. His quirk is just his voice, he's quirkless without his voice and he's quirkless everywhere else even when he does have his voice. All Midoriya had to do was not answer, but he did. He gave 27 a chance but it doesn't matter anymore.

Midoriya cups his chin with his hand, tapping the side of his face for a few minutes. He's taking *way* too long, it's insulting enough that it's *him*, it's insulting that he had to point out that he was mute again, but wasting his time by making him wait is even worse.

He wanted more time, desperately enough to try to escape. To leave Eri. Now he just wants it to run out. He's tired, his head hurts, and he's *tired*. He just wants it to be over. It's supposed to be peaceful after that.

"Shinsou, I'm sorry," Midoriya says, taking a stance and activating Full Cowl. It's nice, it's nice that he says that. He doesn't have to. "You can talk if you use your quirk, or if you're fighting someone, and I really need to talk to you. I can't let you hide those painful feelings anymore."

27 doesn't know what he means to say, but he knows it isn't what he says. Midoriya isn't making any sense, and 27 doesn't care to try to make sense of it.

He settles in for another fight he'll lose, and holds the knife but only thinks of 50. He doesn't know what will happen, but he wants her to be there. After the nothingness, he hopes that she's there.

Midoriya is fast, but not as fast in pajamas and house slippers as he is in his hero costume. He kicks and throws punches, 27 deflects and guards and doesn't even know *why*. There's no point, he should just give up, make it a little bit easier.

But 27 doesn't know how to make things easy.

He sees an opening, Midoriya jumping away but jumping back too slowly, that kick so ill-timed, and 27 takes it on instinct. He pulls the knife forward to swing for it, catching the loose shirt but hardly any skin, if any. Midoriya just steps back and swings a fist forward again, teeth clenched too tight.

"I'll kill you," 27 warns but he makes it sound like a threat, he's getting tired of fighting and is just ready to lose. "You're not good with knives." No protection, no hardening, just speed. Just dodging, and that's another endurance game full of chance.

"You won't," Midoriya bites out in a gasp, not pacing himself well and he should be better trained than that. "You promised 50."

27 narrows his eyes, they must have been planning on that. They'd even use *her* to kill him. "You don't know a *damn* thing about her!"

Midoriya jumps back at another swing of the knife towards his stomach, which is good, because it hurts worse when the cut is that wide across too much skin. He pushes off the ground to try to kick 27's head, but it's so off that 27 just leans a little bit away to avoid it. "I don't, but I know she's a good person! She's a good person, like you! You don't really want to do this and I know it!"

Then he could just *stop it* and make it *easier*. "Because Eri told you? Because you think that she knows me, that *anyone* knows anything about me?" Midoriya is getting smarter, because he doesn't answer. "You have no idea what I've done, and what I can do. You have no *goddamn* ..."

It's not the usual mask, it's just *anger*. He bites down on his words but still carries them in a charge that Midoriya has to spin away from, but he still chases after that, only half numb to it now. Half afraid that Midoriya won't dodge the next one, but that red rage still shakes around the knife.

"You're just that *blessed*, aren't you? Your quirk, your family, everything you have. You have no *goddamn idea* what it's like," 27 sees the glow flicker and acts before he thinks about it, drawing a line of blood across Midoriya's arm that both terrifies and *angers* him. "What do you even see?"

Midoriya backs far enough away to slide to a stop, trying to charge past his left to avoid the knife, and earns a fist to his side for not using his quirk fast enough. He still makes it past and skids again, 27 turning to keep his eyes on him, not letting him have the opening of his turned back

"Why are you doing this?! What the hell do you see?!" 27 doesn't know what answer he's looking for, mind stumbling faster and his words falling out like water. It feels like falling out of his head but he feels it too much all the same, feels the hard press of the handle against the hand that's gripping it too tight. He sees red, he feels red, it's so hot now that he wishes that the air were colder. "Why can't I stay?"

He's not pacing himself well, those words coming out too choked. He feels dizzy, he feels too much, he feels not enough when the anger starts to recede. "You can stay, Shinsou, we're trying to convince you to stay! You're safe here-"

“I’m not,” 27 says, feels almost nothing when he laughs. Midoriya jumps back in a panic, hands up and surrendering, and it’s *ridiculous*. “I’m not blessed, I’ve never been blessed. Never been good enough, even for them, not for any of them.” The hand on the knife is too loose now, and he just leans forward and lets it drop with his arms. He’s tired, he’s tired of fighting and there’s never been any point to it. “What do you see?”

He’s not even blessed to know the answer. Midoriya just stares at him, hands dropping to his sides.

“What do you see that she didn’t?” 27 asks, and he just wants to know. The throbbing in his head makes holding a string impossible, his mind impossibly fuzzy. But he clings to the sight of her eyes in that rear view mirror, but he knows better than to wonder what she saw. He knows exactly how much she saw looking back at her. “1,125 gold fish, a phone, that’s all she saw. That’s all I was worth to my mother.”

It was nice, thinking that he was worth more to Chisaki. Even if it didn’t feel like it. It was nice to think that he was worth more to his owner, but he knows that’s not the case. They thought he was given away for free.

He knew it when the police officer said they had his mother, that they knew. They knew he killed her by quirked her too much, they mentioned her as a code to say they had enough. That he was worthless now. Disposable. And he knew it.

He spent too much time dreaming, but it was worth it. “Shinsou...”

“Just do it,” 27 says, barely a whisper now. The heat and pain is just too much right now, leaking out of the corners of his eyes. “It was nice here. I wish I could stay.”

He knows Midoriya won’t do it. He’s too kind. So he helps.

He charges forward, takes the knife from the ground, knife pulled back to swing forward, to force Midoriya’s hand and get it over with. No more counting, no more worrying, he won’t even think about Chisaki stealing his voice when there’s no voice left to steal. When there’s nothing left of him that isn’t with 50.

But a hand grabs his wrist from behind before an elbow covers his mouth and nose, pulling him firm against a chest that’s burning hot. He watches Midoriya slump forward and fall as the sweet smell fills his lungs. “Sorry, kiddo. I heard that you needed a stronger dose.”

Witching Hour. He pulls at the arm wrapped around his head but doesn’t dig in his nails. He didn’t expect her, but it’s so kind.

It’s like 127 said, it’s just falling asleep.

*

Aizawa stares at the map before he rubs his eyes, willing all the other cities and criminal organizations that he’s already marked down to fall out of his head to make room for the others he’s trying to place. He *knows* where Pack Alpha operates, but he can’t remember it now, three cups of station brew coffee isn’t nearly enough for this.

The map doesn’t seem to be helpful either. Sansa started adding the dates from when the reviews were created, to see if Miasma might have moved their base at certain times, but it’s proving to be pointless. There’s no timeline that points to a central location at any point, there’s no pattern to this *at all*.

Miasma operates all across Japan, 127 contracted on one side of the country one day and the other side a few days later. The only pattern seems to be that it was harder to contract him starting two years ago, and his rates went up according to the reviews. Perhaps that was when Miasma's focus shifted elsewhere. Shifted to working with the League of Villains to supply Nomus.

That theory endangers Shinsou's safety too much for Aizawa to allow himself to believe it, and he places Pack Alpha's labeled pin back on the table to find another name, to try to find one that he knows and can remember in this state. He's exhausted, but he needs something. He can't leave this unfinished.

"Eraserhead," Naomasa calls, hand covering his cellphone raised next to his ear. "Present Mic has been trying to get in touch with you." Naomasa hands him his own cell phone, and Aizawa spends a moment wondering how Hizashi even got the detective's personal number, and why he wouldn't just call his, before he answers.

"Oh, THERE'S my little partner, my husband that I love so much! Did you lose your phone, sweetheart? Did you forget that when I call, I'm probably not just calling to talk your ear off, I'm calling because OUR KIDS NEED YOU," Hizashi's tone is too manic, can't pick between irritation and sweetness, and Aizawa worries because he also sounds a bit drunk.

"I haven't received a single call," Aizawa answers, looking down at his phone to confirm it. He hasn't received a call or a single text message from anyone other than Shiori since meeting with her. And now that he thinks about it, that's strange. Hizashi would have texted him when they reached the dorm, would have checked in on him intermittently when his mission to investigate Miasma was so vague.

He tries to call Hizashi and doesn't even get his voice mail or a busy signal, as soon as he hits the button the app closes itself in an error. Shiori. *"Oh, that's great. Don't worry, you're SO gonna get it when I get home, but I need you to get there first. Oh, and you have a whole Heroics exam in case you forgot, along with two wards that you need to take care of."*

Aizawa looks up as though he could see his husband if he did. "Why aren't you at the dorm? Hizashi, where are you?"

"In a hospital, have you ever heard of those? It's pretty neat, you can get real medical treatment in a sterile environment-"

"Why are you in a hospital?" Aizawa asks, unable to truly keep the panic from his tone. He considers it but knows that Shinsou wouldn't, no matter how desperate. He wouldn't attack Hizashi of all people.

"I had a mission, and you'd know that if you PICKED UP YOUR PHONE. It's fine, just got a little shot-"

"Which hospital?" Aizawa demands, already walking towards the door and completely forgetting that this isn't his phone until Naomasa starts to follow him.

"Babe, I'm fine and Shinsou is so not," Hizashi reminds softly, and Aizawa can't find himself agreeing easily to what his husband is telling him in those words. *"I need you to go home, I'll be there in a couple hours anyway, right as rain. You know, 'cause I'm trying out this neat thing called 'medical treatment from an actual doctor,' and not a home suture kit. Mirio called me a few times but he hasn't picked up, and that's not like him, so I really REALLY need you to go home, babe. Please."*

Aizawa refuses to let his imagination wander, holding the phone too tight despite that. "I'm on my way."

"Great! Let me know what's going on because I am SO not okay with not knowing right now, Shou," Hizashi says with a panicked laugh. "I love you."

"I love you," Aizawa answers, hanging up and throwing the phone back to Naomasa before he runs out of the station, using his capture scarf after a few blocks to take his usual route back to UA despite the ache in his limbs that reminds him that he hasn't slept at all for a few days.

He's lucky that route takes him past the Class 1-A dorms, where Nemuri shouts and waves him down, Mirio holding Eri in his arms beside her. And far more frightening than Nemuri's scowl is the fact that Shinsou isn't with them.

"Great! You remembered that you have an exam, and, you know, two wards to take care of-"

"Where is Shinsou?" Aizawa demands, too sharp for Eri's presence, but he can't settle the panic rising to the surface. Shinsou wasn't here, he was in a delicate state, Hizashi had been *shot*.

"Oh, he's inside," Nemuri says, pointing at the front door of the 1-A dorm, and Aizawa runs over to open it only to find it locked. Or sealed, now that he looks closer to see that the metal bubbles and warps to bind the door to the frame. "Right, and your class is rebelling."

Aizawa looks over his shoulder at Nemuri, who's incensed enough to not even be smug about that. She just folds her arms behind her head, stretching before she groans.

"Well, my work here is done, I still have my own class to manage. Goodbye my sweet little angel Eri!"

"Bye Nemmie!" Eri returns, waving before she wraps her arm back around Mirio's neck. And Mirio looks all the more anxious, despite how ill-fitting that is for him and despite how hard Aizawa is trying not to glare at him. He also looks slightly singed, from the blackened tips of his hair and a shoulder of a shirt burnt away to reveal skin.

"Uh, it was kind of an eventful night. I tried to text you and Yama-"

"My phone was hacked, he was sh.... Busy," Aizawa says, barely catching himself for Eri's sake. Mirio catches it all the same, that anxiety peaking as he began scratching his head.

"Oh, yeah. Shinsou... tried to run away, and got in a fight with Midoriya I think, but Midnight-sensei caught both of them, and then we got everyone inside but we both left at the wrong time and..." Mirio trailed off, glancing at the door before he looked at a few windows. Aizawa followed his stare to see a long black bar on the inside of each window that would lock the latch in place, making it impossible to open. "Sorry, they were behaving really well so I didn't think to-"

"It's fine, they're my idiots," Aizawa answers, but he's absolutely sure that they won't be his as soon as he retrieves Shinsou. "I'm sorry, but can you watch over Eri for-"

"Sure! Just Eri, just my favorite buddy who probably needs to get some sleep anyway, right Eri?" Mirio says, looking all the more shellshocked by the events of last night when he turns to look at the innocent 5 year old who at least had no part in that.

Eri does look a bit tired, her head resting on Mirio's chest with half-lidded eyes, but she tries to perk up when she looks at Aizawa. "Zawa, don't be mad at Twenny. He's just grumpy and scared."

Aizawa imagined that neither of those words truly encompassed what state Shinsou was in, to attempt to run away from UA in the dead of the night. But he wouldn't be mad at any reason that he found for it, knowing that there were few of them that weren't his fault. "I'm not mad at Shinsou. Don't worry."

Her worries assuaged, Eri yawned and leaned a bit more on Mirio, likely to fall asleep before they returned to the staff dorm. And if the under eye circles that Mirio wore were any indication, he looked like he would like to do the same. "Sorry about the dorm shift, but we'll see you after the exam! Good luck!"

Aizawa turned back to the dorm to pull himself onto the rooftop, a latched service door hidden for this exact purpose or one similar. And he doubted that there would be an exam to worry about.

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Voices. The babble of them becoming clearer as he woke, but 27 made sure to give no indication that he had. He kept his breathing steady, refused to move and listened until he could pick out the words.

"...s still a really bad idea, I really think we should-" A loud ripping sound cut that female voice off, and 27 felt an odd pressure on his ankles before he felt something wrap around them, but there was something in the way. A blanket.

27 brushed his elbow against the soft material that was wrapped around him, listening to the voices argue. They wanted to call his owner to deal with something, but others thought that was a mistake. That their plan was the best course of action, and it would be fine.

He risks alerting them, but tries to make it seem like his arm had just gone loose and fallen off the couch, outside of the bounds of the blanket, but the blanket didn't give. There was a band of pressure around his upper and lower arm that restrained him.

It was a mistake, but 27 opened his eyes and tried to sit up, only able to manage halfway before the tape binding the blanket around him like a reinforced cocoon stopped him. He looked around to find a gathering of Class 1-A in the common room, Tapey tugging another band of tape from his elbow though there were few places that needed it.

What the *fuck* were they trying to do to him?

Ashi leaned her elbows over the back of the couch, grinning at him. "Hey sleepyhea-"

"Let me out," 27 demanded, narrowing his eyes and ignoring the rasp in his voice. "Let me out or I'll kill you."

Half-Bastard shook his head, crossing his arms from where he stood at the end of the couch. "The 'purrito' isn't a punishment, but it's necessary as long as you remain aggressive."

"Speaking of," Adhesive Dispenser says, throwing a glance at Midoriya where he was sitting on another couch, his wounds being dressed by Floaty and Amphibian Fibber. "Can we just take a minute to appreciate that Midoriya got in a knife fight, was told that he was going to get stabbed, and then was just like 'What are you gonna do, stab me?' And got stabbed. *Lightly*, but stabbed."

"I'm pretty sure it was an accident-" Midoriya starts.

"It wasn't, *let me out*, " 27 demands. They're not here, they're not supposed to be here after he dies so he's not dead, he's still alive but that's *worse*. "Let me out and let me leave, or I will kill you,

kill all of you, kill everyone you care about-”

An explosion in front of his face cuts him off, and 27 turns to glare at Blasty, who only glares back, but too stern. Not entirely angry, and he *hates* it. “Stop putting it on, shit-face. We’re beating the shit out of your fucked up brain’s cognitive distortion bullshit, so fucking deal with it.”

Hell no. And at least Martial Monkey agrees. “We really should just leave this to Aizawa-sensei. There’s no way that he’s not going to expel us over this.”

27 bites back a laugh. “Exactly. Listen to Tail Boy, you’re acting out of line. He told Midoriya to do it, but he failed, just leave it to him. Probably Momo. Use C4 this time, it’s quicker-”

He gets another explosion close to his face, and the heat of it reminds him how cold he is. They should have used a thicker blanket, even if this one feels thick. “Listen, Shitsou. You’re not gonna die, Shitsei didn’t fucking *buy* you or some shit, who knows what the fuck you were muttering about goldfish-”

“Brainwashing,” 27 says, even if he should have kept it hidden, should have offered the deal before he offered the reward. “My quirk is brainwashing. I can control people by asking them questions. Now you know, there’s no mystery, *let me out* -”

He tries to pull off the couch but two hands hold his shoulders in place. Tapey starts taping him *to* the couch to make that unnecessary. “Shinbro, it’s okay. Just relax man-”

“You’re all going to die,” 27 bites out in a panic, his owner is going to *kill them* and he knows it. They’re acting so out of line that they’re disposable. “You’re all going to die, he’s going to kill you, let me out!”

Icyhot Bastard walks over to put a hand on his forehead, and 27 tilts his chin to see if he can bite it, but Chili frowns. “He’s overheating. The ‘purrito’ shouldn’t be used this-”

“Aizawa-sensei is here,” the Masked One calls as he exits the stairwell, the webbing on his arms still decorated with ears and just the tip of one half-arm holds a mouth. “He’s on the fourth floor.”

“Tooru, we really should leave,” Extended Vertebrae whines, seeming worried. He should be, they all should be. “We really can’t afford to get mixed up in this when we’re already on thin ice.”

The clothes standing next to him bounce in a hop. “No way! We’ve got to prove it to Shinsou that he’s safe, right?”

“We might be risking expulsion, and our futures as heroes,” Provost Piston says, and he seems to pale more at the thought of that than all the other students gathered. “But we wouldn’t be heroes if we can’t reassure the people closest to us that they’re safe.”

‘Safe.’ He might be part of the plan. This might all still be part of his owner’s plan. A backup. But it’s just too *ridiculous*.

Sparky grins at him. “So, you know that Heroics Exam-”

“Never heard of it,” 27 deadpans, wishing that Polar Temperatures would get his icy hand off of his face. He’s so damn *cold*, it’s not even torture, it’s just rude.

Zappy looks like he’ll explain it before Beat Dropper cuts him off. “We locked up all the entrances and told Midnight-sensei we’re not going to it, and that we’re holding you hostage. Aizawa-sensei would probably want to kill us over that, right?”

For *far* less than that. His owner was already worried that they wouldn't do well, but if they intended to not do it at all? He'd kill them all the slower. "He wouldn't. You're volunteers, you're not like me. You're just acting stupid."

The hands still resting on his shoulders start patting them. "Don't worry, Shinbro! Aizawa-sensei's pretty used to us doing something stupid." 27 looks up at Kirimson Shark's toothy grin, and wonders how long it will last before the realization of death sets in to rattle him. "Alright! Operation Prove Shinsou Wrong is a go! Let's get ready, guys!"

They retreat from him to start moving to the stairwell, Floaty and Amphibian Fibber convincing Midoriya to stay put, and Ashido chiming in that she's staying too. When Momo passes, he tries to reach out for her only to remember he's restrained, grinding his teeth before he works the words past a closing mask. "Momo, don't do this. At least not you. Don't you care about Eri?"

Momo whips her head around to answer him, but Beat Dropper covers her mouth. *Damn them.*

Sticky starts pulling off another piece of tape before Blasty slaps his arm. "It's fine, just don't let him get a cheap shot like that, Deku. You too, dumbass acid wash."

"It's fine!" Ashi cheers, patting his covered chest with a smile that said she was either overlooking the fact that he was bound, or delighted in it. "Shinny, me, and Midoriya, the fluffy hair squad is on the case!"

There is no case, they're just going to get themselves killed, and he just hopes that he doesn't have to watch Ashi die.

*

Everyone has a breaking point. Aizawa can very clearly see his.

He cleared the first two floors and found them deserted, but on the next one he found Kirishima and Tokoyami trying to stop him with arms held out to do so. He asked what they were doing as a curtesy, but with the answer merely being 'rebellling,' he didn't offer it to any of the other students.

They are *lucky* that they don't try to use their quirks against him, merely arms outstretched to impede his way. He clears his path all the same, but if given the right provocation, he would be far less gentle with the capture scarf.

He's going to expel them. All of them. Kan will win, and he'll deal with that later, and his method of dealing with it will be to duct tape him to a chair and leave him in a closet for someone else to find. The deal is *off* because he's not going to deal with any of it.

Todoroki makes half a wall of ice before Aizawa cancels his quirk, and despite himself, he can't help but grin.

They don't need to worry about that exam anymore.

*

27 could jerk away from Ashi combing her fingers through his hair, he has the ability to move his neck if nothing else. But he doesn't. Even if it's distracting him.

He purposefully glances at Midoriya before turning his head to face the couch, eyes lowered. "Sorry. Is your hand okay?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Midoriya give him two thumbs up with his fingers bound together, and a grin. *Asshole.*

Bug tried to teach him better. To have a conversation to hide when his quirk could be used. He didn't practice much with it and wasn't very good before he was sold, and didn't think to really try it with the underlings at the 8 Precepts either. It's difficult to do in a fight, but it's also difficult to do it without one. It just seems pointless. "You probably wouldn't have talked to me if you knew my quirk in the first place."

"I would! I mean, Togata-sempai told me anyway, but I'm not just not talking to you because of your quirk! I just... kind of know what you're trying to do, Shinsou," Midoriya says nervously, and that's insulting. Even if 27 was being stupidly obvious, he didn't have to point it out. "Is your quirk always like that, though? It was kind of weird."

"It isn't. It's weak." It's fine that they know that. They already know to avoid it. "You broke out of it."

"Yeah, it was...really weird. Kind of like this dream I had," Midoriya says, staring at his hand.

Ashi hums, folding her hands on his forehead before she frowns. "Shinny, are you feeling okay?"

"It's rude that you get to ask questions," 27 grumbles, making her frown deepen. He sighs. "I'm fine."

"Want me to bring you some water? I think we still have those cute little bendy straws--"

"I know it's poisoned, you can't make me drink it," 27 says, rolling his eyes. They've tried that so much, it's like they don't know any better way to do it. They try to argue again, but he just ignores them. They're right, his voice is hoarse because his throat is a bit sore, but the only relief that he'll find for that is his eventual death.

Unless he gets out of here.

"Shinny," Ashi says sharply, her black eyes cutting to him even sharper. "If anyone was trying to kill you, I'd kill them first. You are *safe*, in a soft little purrito, and when Aizawa-sensei gets here and doesn't kill us, you're just gonna have to believe it!"

27 lets his lips twist at that, turning away and trying to make his eyes water. It's not working as well as he wants it to, so he just turns further away. "Ashi, I really don't want you to do this. I don't want you to get hurt."

He gets another pat on his chest, and she's probably grinning even if he can only hear it in her voice. "I'm gonna be *fine*, Shinny. Yeah, Aizawa-sensei's gonna be pissed, but I can deal with that! He's really not that scary after the first 15 times you get in trouble."

"I'm scared," 27 says, even if that sounds even *more* pathetic to his ears. "Can I just...I want to hold your hand. If that's okay."

She only gets the tape pulled off by a few centimeters before Midoriya stops her, and 27 glares at him. "Asshole."

Ashi sighs in frustration, tugging at her hair with both hands. "Shinny! You're gonna be fine, okay?! Jeez, that's so *mean*!"

"*That's* mean," 27 repeats, almost laughing. "I could have killed you. I don't even remember how

many times I quirked you. If I wasn't sold it could have been you too. I could have *killed* you."

Ashi looks confused, even if he already explained it. "Shinny, you wouldn't have killed me. Your quirk's not like that--"

"I killed my mother," 27 says, and he hates that he says it. That he has to listen to those words instead of just letting them sit in his skull. "She killed herself because I used my quirk on her too much. I drove her insane. She tried to get away but she couldn't get away from it. From what I did."

"But you used your quirk on Eri too," Midoriya says, and he hates that he speaks her name so familiarly. That he even speaks it. "If you're talking about Mental Quirk Abuse, then Eri would be the most susceptible to it, since she's a child, but she doesn't have any of the symptoms. Your quirk probably can't cause--"

"That's why she sold me," 27 says, unwilling to listen to them try to explain away what he knows. They don't know anything. "I drove her insane, and it's my own fault. It's my fault that everything happened - The Miasma, Chisaki, all of it. I should have just kept my mouth shut--"

"Shinny." Ashido grips the back of the couch too tightly, staring straight ahead with a blank expression that looks tepid beneath the surface. "Your mom was crazy already, none of that was your fault, and I'm really..." She swallows, wiping at the corner of her eye. "I'm really sorry that it did. And I'm really happy that I get to talk to you."

He's stealing that from her. He's stolen almost all of her smiles, leeches away at her happiness. And it's all for a lie. "I don't remember you." He's not Shinny.

"I don't remember either!" Ashi says, that cheerful grin returned even if her eyes are both closed. "I remember your quirk when I really think about it, but I really didn't remember a thing until I texted my mom! But I know that we were best friends...." Her eyes fall open, wiping at a few stray tears that fall. "And I want to be friends again, because I know we were friends for a reason."

"And I want to be friends with you too!" Midoriya chimes in, and he should be more embarrassed than he looks to say something like that. "Pretty much everyone in 1-A wants to be friends with you, Shinsou. And I know I can kind of be annoying sometimes when I talk about quirks, and if you don't like playing video games--"

The door to the stairwell bursts open and the white scarf looped itself around Midoriya's chest before it pulled him over the couch, another end of it ensnaring Ashi as well to pull them both into a heap at his owner's feet. He looked *furious*. "What. Have you done. To Shinsou."

Binding him up like this clearly wasn't part of his owner's plan. They were really going to pay for it. "Hey, Sensei! You're probably really *really* mad right now, right?" Ashi asks, and despite what she said about not fearing him, that bubbly tone warbles a bit too much for him to believe it right now. "Like, the rebellion thing and kidnapping Shinsou--"

"And taping him to a couch," his owner adds, hair still levitating with his eyes still alight with a red glow. He was right, that can be frightening. "I don't believe 'mad' is what I am right now."

Midoriya twists himself from underneath Ashido's legs to lay on his back, laughing nervously. "So, this is probably the angriest that you'll ever get at us, right?"

"That's correct," his owner says, his hair falling around his shoulders as he crouches to let his words truly sink in. "I'll never be any angrier or more *disappointed* with you, or any class

following you. You will not only be expelled, but charged with kidnapping and anything else that I can find, your provisional licenses will be rejected and I will make it my *personal* mission to ensure that *none* of you ever touch a professional one.”

Both of the hero students seemed to pale at that, but Midoriya regained himself first. “But you’re not going to kill us, right?”

His owner seems to be considering that question. Whether he should tell them so that they can anticipate it, sweltering under that certainty, or to simply do it now. “*Why* are you trying to make me kill you? Death does not excuse you from your exam.”

“Um, well,” Midoriya seems just as confused as 27, but he finally finds his footing to respond. “Shinsou kind of thought that you bought him and that you were going to kill him, and that everyone was going to kill him but we didn’t really know that yet, and Kacchan said it was a cognitive distortion and if we proved him wrong then he wouldn’t think that way, and so we decided to-”

His owner pulls the scarf off of his neck, dropping it to the floor. Judging by Ashi’s fruitless struggles, they seemed to be still bound by it anyway.

He doesn’t look at 27 when he starts pulling off the tape securing him to the couch. 27 doesn’t know if he wants him to. “Maybe it was kind of a bad idea, and maybe we took it a little too far. Shinsou just seemed really convinced and really scared, and we really couldn’t-”

An explosion louder than any that he’s heard from Blasty sent a quake through the building, but his owner seemed to barely notice it. All Might walked through the hallway from the front door, followed by Boss Mouse-Bear riding a robot that seemed to be opened at the top just for him to ride it. And one of its arms appeared to be smoking. “Ah, Eraserhead! Perhaps you can shed some light as to what your students were doing with this little ‘rebellion.’ Sadly, it already seems to be put down.”

His owner didn’t answer his boss either, and after pulling the last strip of tape free, he tucked a hand under the one wrapped around 27’s chest and lifted him off the couch. And just carried him like that.

27 doesn’t know what’s going to happen to him, but he really wished that it didn’t involve this.

“Toshinori, take over. Midoriya can explain,” his owner said, his tone an odd mix of exhaustion and something else, something 27 couldn’t place. Maybe he didn’t want to kill 27, maybe he had a reason not to anymore.

“Hey, Aizawa-sensei,” Ashido calls, ignoring that his owner doesn’t want to speak to even his Boss, so he’s not likely to answer her. “Where’s Shinsou’s mom at, because I *really* want to talk to her.”

His owner’s steps falter, almost imperceptibly, but he doesn’t answer. It would be pointless to, 27 already told Ashido that she was dead.

27 couldn’t speak, couldn’t fight even if he wanted to. He knew it would be useless to try to fight his owner anyway, but being bound like this and carried without a single glance from his owner as he walked across campus only seemed to compound that.

27 didn’t know what was going to happen, but he knew he had no choice and no way to fight whatever did.

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Aizawa carried Shinsou through the door and placed him on the couch before he went to Eri's room to check on her and Mirio. Both were asleep, both sprawled chaotically on top of Eri's plush pink comforter, and Aizawa placed the throw blankets from the foot of her bed over them.

He tried to text Hizashi that both wards were safe, but the message wouldn't send. Shiori still hadn't told him how to fix his phone, so he resorted to sending an email to Hizashi instead. Hopefully, Hizashi would check that rather than come home more incensed that Aizawa hadn't tried to reach out at all.

Aizawa takes a moment to just breathe, refusing to let his eyes fall closed for too long. He was tired, bone dead tired, and he couldn't afford to be. Not with the exam in an hour, not with Hizashi wounded and *shot*, not with Shinsou.

Not with *anything* about Shinsou. Shinsou attempting to run away, Shinsou possibly being sick, Shinsou inspiring his students to 'rebel' and tape him into a cocoon for some reason.

Shinsou being convinced that Aizawa was going to kill him.

Of all the reasons that Aizawa had to prove he was ill-suited to his job as a caretaker for Shinsou, he never expected that he would fail to the point of making Shinsou think that. It was obvious that Shinsou wasn't comfortable around him, but to think that he not only *bought* him but was going to *kill* him.

Aizawa has no idea how long he's thought this way. But if nothing else, he needs to convince him otherwise.

Aizawa spares one last glance at Eri sleeping so peacefully, reminded of what he thought before Hizashi took Shinsou in as a ward. He always knew that Shinsou would be more difficult to help, more difficult to gain his trust. He had lived in another world for far longer, a crueler world. He wouldn't know what to expect here, because it was different.

It was useless to only tell him it was, without proving it.

Aizawa goes to the bathroom to dig out the thermometer from the medicine cabinet, Ms. Saito already warned him that Shinsou might be sick. He would have to verify it himself, but he hoped not. The kid had enough to deal with.

He goes to the office to grab Shinsou's file, and makes sure that it has the page that he needs before he takes a pair of fabric shears from Hizashi's desk. He takes another breath, knowing that he's just hesitating, before he walks out to talk to Shinsou.

He might have already taken advantage of the restraints that the taped up blanket gives him, but he uses it once more to take Shinsou's temperature. Shinsou seems to be ignoring Aizawa so far, his eyes focused on the back of the couch and expression completely blank, but when Aizawa presses the end of the device to his forehead he flinches before he looks up at it.

"You might have a fever," Aizawa explains, even if it's not much of one. Shinsou's temperature tended to fluctuate to extremes, and if he did have a fever, it was mild. He placed the thermometer on the kotatsu and took the shears, starting at the tape binding Shinsou's ankles just so that he wouldn't think the shears had any other purpose.

Just so Shinsou wouldn't think he was going to *kill* him with fabric shears.

He seems to have read Shinsou right. With each severed piece of tape, Shinsou's expression becomes just a bit more pinched in worry, eyes unerringly focused on the shears. When Aizawa cuts the last piece, he stands up to put the shears in the kitchen, an irrational action with a rational reason, and notices that Shinsou doesn't move even if he's freed.

He doesn't look afraid, and that's what concerns Aizawa. Shinsou might have always thought that his life was in danger here, and Aizawa never knew it. Never saw a single sign of it.

"We need to talk," Aizawa says, sitting on the floor between the kotatsu and the couch. Shinsou doesn't sit up, not until Aizawa hands him the page from the file that he was looking for.

"Midoriya said that you were under the impression that you were trafficked to us. This is part of the paperwork that Hizashi signed before you were placed in his care."

Shinsou's eyes roam over the paper several times, likely re-reading it just as many. Despite how verbose The Commission's paperwork could be, this page was simple enough. The details of a monthly stipend that was paid by The Commission for Shinsou's care. It wasn't much, not enough to pay for more than his food and not at all enough to incentivize a hero to take in a ward just for the money. But it was evidence that wouldn't fit with Shinsou's perception that Aizawa or Hizashi had paid to 'own' him.

"Naomasa may not have explained it clearly before you came to UA," Aizawa says, intending to ask Naomasa exactly *what* he said the next time he saw the detective. "Because you are a minor who is endangered by a criminal organization under investigation, you were designated as a ward. Because your quirk may not affect Hizashi due to his hearing loss, and because Eri is my ward, you were placed here at UA, under Hizashi's care. But everyone that you have met at UA has taken the same responsibility that Hizashi has, to keep you safe from anyone that would threaten you."

Shinsou seemed confused by the mention of Hizashi's hearing loss, but seemed to realize it after a moment. They weren't sure if it would affect Hizashi when he was wearing hearing aids, but between Aizawa's quirk and the possibility of it, it was enough to approve the wardship placement. Shinsou being mute and unlikely to use his quirk also helped.

"I'm not going to kill you. It's my duty to protect you, as a hero and as a caretaker approved by The Commission," Aizawa finds it hard to look at Shinsou, to see if he believes any of that. Shinsou isn't reading the page anymore, his eyes focused on one corner of it, his expression so guarded that it's impossible to read. "Why did you think I would kill you?"

He earns a frown, but Shinsou's hands raise to answer him. '*You have name. M-I-A-S-M-A.*'

The name that Shinsou didn't volunteer, that Aizawa refused to ask for despite it being the most useful and simple lead he could gather from Shinsou. Because he'd learned well enough not to push when information was so timidly given. When it was better to receive it rather than pressure Shinsou for it.

A name that meant so much more to Shinsou than he realized. That was forced out of him all the same.

"Now that I do, I can find them. I can stop them from trying to find you," Aizawa says, wavering before he admits it. "The investigation won't be closed until we've captured every dangerous member of that organization. But you won't be questioned about it again. I have enough leads to guarantee it."

Shinsou didn't look relieved at that, his eyebrows pinching together in clear worry. '*Not useless. Not useless. Can-*'

“That doesn’t make you useless, Shinsou,” Aizawa says, finding it difficult to keep himself calm after seeing that. Knowing why Shinsou thought that way. “Your wardship isn’t a typical one. You shouldn’t have been so involved in the investigation in the first place. But even if you never told me anything about that organization, nothing would have changed. You would still be protected here.”

Shinsou frowns, eyes going wider for a moment. Shocked, and perhaps regretting that he had offered any information at all. Even if he would have been forced to give it all the same. He runs a hand through his hair, looking away for a moment, before he signs again. ‘ *My mother.* ’

Aizawa hesitates, wondering what Shinsou had told Ashido about her, why the woman was so concerning to Shinsou now. “Your mother is being extradited to Japan. She was able to get in contact with the organization, and may have been involved in it. Are you concerned that you’ll be placed in her care again?”

Shinsou turned to look at him with pure shock, his mouth slightly opened as he stared. ‘ *Not. Dead.* ’

“No, she’s not,” Aizawa answers, unable to find a reason why Shinsou would think that. Aizawa still had a bite mark in his palm to prove that Shinsou heard Naomasa say she was in Interpol’s custody, Shinsou only releasing him after that was said. “She’s in Interpol’s custody. Why did you think she was dead?”

‘ *Missing. Killed self. My quirk,* ’ Shinsou answers, and Aizawa feels horrified to know what he means.

“She was only missing. She’s alive, and we have no evidence that your quirk could cause that. Especially when you were that young,” Aizawa answers, folding his hands.

Shinsou had been convinced that he had been bought, that he was going to be killed if he wasn’t ‘useful’ to the investigation, and that he had caused his mother to kill herself. And Aizawa never knew *any* of this.

“We’re going to play the Question Game,” Aizawa says, because he doesn’t want any more surprises like this. “Do you believe what I’ve said so far?”

Shinsou hesitates, glancing at the paper still in his lap before he looks at Aizawa’s shoulder, then nods. ‘ *I do.* ’ He runs a hand through his hair again, an odd new tic, before he frowns and signs. ‘ *C-H-I-S-A-K-I dead.* ’

Aizawa considers not answering truthfully, but he doesn’t know how Shinsou came to suspect it in the first place. And he might believe that he was safe, now that he seemed to believe that it was Aizawa and Hizashi’s duty to keep him that way. “Yes. He’s dead.” Aizawa finds himself missing the familiar reassurance of the capture scarf that he left at the 1-A dorm. “How do you feel about that?”

Shinsou frowns, staring towards the kitchen before he shrugs. ‘ *I don’t know. You didn’t tell me.* ’

It would be easier if Shinsou asked him questions more clearly, even during this ‘Question Game.’ “I didn’t, because I didn’t want you to worry that you would be targeted. And I thought it would be better to avoid the topic of Chisaki for some time.” Aizawa sees a slight narrowing of Shinsou’s eyes, clearly displeased by that but unwilling to show it just as much as he’s unwilling to look at him. “Are you angry about that?”

Shinsou seems angrier at the question, his jaw clenching for a moment. ‘ *C-H-I-S-A-K-I. Face masks. 50. Hiding. I don’t know why.* ’

He wasn’t hiding things very well if Shinsou found them out. And Shinsou was able to hide the fact that he knew far too well. “I didn’t want you to worry about Chisaki. I was intending to tell you that we found 50 after I met with her family. And the face masks,” Aizawa hesitates, before he forces himself to say it. “I didn’t want them to be a reminder of something painful. Would it be?”

Shinsou looks down, folding his hands before he answers. ‘ *Maybe. I want them. Won’t wear in front of E-R-I.* ’

Aizawa swallows guiltily, proven right but the victory was hollow all the same. “They’re different. They might be different enough to try. If you want to.”

Shinsou finally glances at him, just for a moment, before he stares at the paper again. ‘ *I don’t have questions.* ’

“That’s fine,” Aizawa says, brushing his hair behind his ear before he asks his last one. “Is there anything else that you’re worried about, or anything that’s bothering you?”

Shinsou’s hesitation seems all the more telling that there is, but he’s surprised by the simple answer he offers. ‘ *You’re angry.* ’

“I’m not,” Aizawa answers. “If I was angry at you, I would tell you. I’m just very tired, and irritated at my class. And I would like Hizashi to be here. But I’m not angry at you.”

Shinsou nods, folding his hands tightly, fingers squeezing together before he asks again. ‘ *Not angry.* ’

“I’m not,” Aizawa repeats. He’ll repeat it as many times as it’s necessary.

But Shinsou seems to believe it, finally looking at him fully. Their eyes meet before Shinsou glances away, but he looks back again, before he sighs and runs both hands through his hair. ‘ *I don’t know. Different. I don’t know.* ’

Shinsou was clearly frustrated, but there was something in his pinched expression that wasn’t solely that. An undercurrent of fear, of being overwhelmed.

Shinsou didn’t remember what a caretaker looked like, if he ever had one. If Shinsou Ui ever was one. He remembered being owned by Chisaki, being controlled and raised by Miasma. He knew what to expect in those circumstances, but not here. Not when it was different.

It was likely easier to accept that it wasn’t different at all, rather than feel so lost in his new circumstances. “You can always ask questions here, if you’re worried that something is wrong. If you’re worried about doing something wrong. I want you to do that.”

Shinsou looks at him again, expression smoothing back into blankness, before he shakes his head. ‘ *No. I won’t.* ’ Aizawa almost begins to convince him otherwise, before he catches the slight wideness of Shinsou’s eyes. His refusal wasn’t out of fear. It was a test. A developmental milestone that he likely missed.

He’d rather not deal with a teenager discovering the word ‘No,’ but it was necessary. “I would rather that you did, but I won’t force you to,” Aizawa says, spotting an almost imperceptible sigh of relief from Shinsou before he pulls himself to his feet, legs aching after being folded for so long. “I’m going to make some coffee so that I can deal with the exam. Would you like some?”

He turns away to hide a smirk when he sees another ‘No.’

Tested

Chapter Summary

27 isn't owned, and he wonders what that means for him. Aizawa hasn't slept in a few days, which puts him in the perfect mood to oversee the Joint Training Exam while debating whether to expel his class for their antics.

Chapter Notes

SPOILER WARNING: If you don't know the Big Thing concerning One for All that happens in the Joint Training Exam Arc and you do care about avoiding spoilers, try to read that before reading this chapter. I would say that you could avoid reading a certain part, but unfortunately, the spoilers will come into play later on in Wards.

Trigger Warning: Blood (not terribly graphic)

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa left his capture scarf at the 1-A dorm after restraining Ashido and Midoriya. Aizawa's phone has been unable to call or text anyone but Shiori after Shiori removed the Trojan program. Mirio took out the SIM card of his Sir Nighteye agency phone before giving it to Shinsou, and Yamada and Aizawa have yet to buy one. Shinsou gave Aizawa the sign name 'Zawa Hero,' but felt that 'Zawa Coffee' fit better, and 'Zawa' can mean 'muttering.' Monoma, AKA Threatening Quirk Thief, gave Shinsou an 'offering' before Midterms that was a pain relief kit. Shinsou took the gift as threatening, while Monoma assumed that Shinsou had been missing class due to chronic pain because Shinsou's quirk felt painful to him. Shinsou had chemical pneumonia towards the end of his time at the 8 Precepts. Todoroki (possibly) thinks that Shinsou can transform into a cat, and thus has cat-like characteristics and should be treated like a cat. Todoroki came to this conclusion because Aizawa had a book about living with feral cats, which he used to try to connect with Shinsou better at Midnight and Ms. Joke's suggestion. Aizawa and Kan have a tradition where the teacher whose class loses the Joint Training Exam has to serve the victor for a day, and Aizawa suspects that Kan wants to leverage his victory to spend time with Eri. Shinsou was tricked into the influence of an interrogation quirk by drinking a mocha coffee. Shinsou was shot by a quirk that imitated a gun.

Aizawa was *irritating*.

He was a liar, he was *weird*, his face was just so unnerving because it never had a *single* fucking tell. 27 had to *ask* if he was angry because it was impossible to know it otherwise, and that was so unbearably insulting.

Aizawa had even fooled him into thinking that he had power over 27, and he didn't. *Yamada* did, and while Yamada was a liar for making 27 think that, Yamada wasn't an owner.

And neither was Aizawa. 27 didn't have an owner to answer to anymore.

He wasn't sold, he was rented somehow. But the money was going the wrong way. Yamada was paid what amounted to a 'fill out the ranks' job every month to take care of him. Maybe Yamada was being rented. Maybe 27 had power over Yamada through that. Somehow.

No. He knew he didn't.

It was *irritating*.

27 watches Aizawa fill a mug with coffee before the coffee starts pouring into the coffee pot, then put an ice cube in the mug before he starts chugging it. He's never seen Aizawa do that, and he's never seen the dark circles under his eyes look so dark, or his scruffy beard look that long. There's also a red spot next to his iris that's different from the other red lines, possibly from straining his quirk somehow. After he drains the coffee mug, he starts applying his eyedrops, three in each eye.

It's more irritating because he doesn't have the scarf. It still makes him look smaller, and weirder. This entire situation is weird.

27 wasn't going to be killed. He wasn't going to be involved in the investigation. He was probably going to have to break into the office again, periodically, to know what they found out or how close they're getting to The Miasma. He can't afford not to know, and while Aizawa fared well against Focus Imperceptible, 127 would be far different. If it wasn't someone else.

He wasn't going to be questioned. They had enough information. He's never been asked to take care of Eri, had little opportunity to do so. They weren't going to give him a job.

He had no idea what to *do*. He didn't want to leave, even if it was irritating. He didn't know if he still wanted to stop the investigation, but he probably had no way to do so at this point. He could do his tests, he could learn things here, he could train the hero students but he wasn't sure if Aizawa was going to keep them after what he said at the dorm. It would be *incredibly* boring if he didn't.

27 had no job, no owner, and that should make him feel like he doesn't have a purpose, but it doesn't. It just feels odd. Confusing.

Aizawa is confusing. "Can I use your phone to call Hizashi?" He's *holding* his phone. In his hand.

27 could say no, and he wouldn't get in trouble. He wouldn't be punished. He's never even tried to tell someone no, sure that the punishment for it would be unimaginable. He can't even *imagine* saying it to Bug, to shake his head at her. He can't even imagine how angry she would be at that.

27 goes to his room to get the phone, and it feels the same as it used to. His mother sold him for 112,000 yen, and Mirio bought this phone for 113,000. And then Mirio gave it to him, like 113,000 yen was nothing. Like it was inconvenient to have if it didn't have a use, and he wanted to get rid of it.

27 doesn't feel like he's like the phone, and it's odd. He's useless, but he's not going to be disposed of. It's *weird*.

Aizawa takes the phone but braces his elbows on the kitchen counter so that 27 could see what he's doing with it. He gets a message about the missing SIM card when he types in a string of numbers, before he closes that application to pull up LNE. He ignores the messages popping up at the top and types a short message in the chat he has with Yamada before he puts the phone back on the counter, and pours himself another cup of coffee, this time with no ice cube. "My students are as unsure whether they're expelled as I am."

Weird. He's supposed to be the one who would know first, and he already made that decision. He told Midoriya and Ashi that they were going to be expelled, charged for kidnapping, and never going to get a professional license. And 27 would rather that he didn't.

Aizawa sighs, leaning against the counter and letting his head fall back against a cabinet. "It would be annoying to deal with actually expelling them. Principal Nezu would probably want me to either co-teach with Kan or pull together a class from Class C, and I'm not sure which is worse. Probably Kan."

Muttering while drinking coffee. 27 really didn't give him the right sign name.

Aizawa opens his eyes to look at him, but barely opens them. "Did they help?"

They taped him to a *couch*. They ran their hands all over him while he couldn't fight them. Blasty set off two explosions in his face, and they all did something stupid and unnecessary 'for' him when he repeatedly told them not to. ' *Yes. They helped. I like them.* '

Aizawa closes his eyes and runs a hand down his face. "They *should* be expelled. They should be *very* expelled. The summer camp was bad enough, but it wasn't outright *rebellion* resulting in property damage."

27 wonders if Aizawa expects him to know what happened at summer camp, or if he just doesn't want to explain what the students did to irritate him then. He'll probably have to ask one of them, probably Blasty. If they did something stupid, he was definitely involved.

Aizawa sighs. "They have a very awful tendency to not ask for help when they need it. They're acting like eggs instead of hatchlings." Eggs actually didn't act like anything. They were just eggs. "At the very least, I need to break them out of that."

Aizawa was going to crack some eggs then. Even if Yamada said he couldn't, since he was so bad at cooking.

Aizawa looks at the hallway before he turns to pour the rest of the coffee into a thermos. "We'll need to leave soon to be at the exam site on time. Are you sure you don't want coffee?"

27 has to wait until he turns back around to answer. ' *I don't.* ' His throat is sore, but he can ignore it as long as he doesn't talk, and he can't talk to Aizawa. The mask is completely shut, even if he doesn't test it.

He doesn't know why the mask is shut, but it doesn't matter if he doesn't need his quirk.

*

The eggs look confused, and so does All Might. It might not be just because of the face mask.

The best part of the Heroics Exam was that Eri wasn't going to go to it. She and Mirio were still asleep, and Aizawa didn't want to wake them up. That meant that she wouldn't see him wearing a facemask.

The downside was that he had to pick his own face mask, and Aizawa made that more difficult by giving him the rest of them. 27 stared at them, found himself counting before he gave up at 26, and just closed his eyes and picked at random. It just happened to be one that said 'Delete Face.'

Just a *coincidence*.

Aizawa looked, but didn't react at all to it. Not a single twitch of his eyebrow, not a pull of a frown or narrowing of his eyes. Just looked at him for a little bit longer, before he looked away and started drinking his coffee again.

It's probably not a good idea to drink an entire pot of coffee in less than an hour, especially when it was the dangerous brand that was slightly poisonous, but it doesn't seem to be having an effect on Aizawa.

When he looks at the eggs, he looks even more tired. "Your exam will be a joint training session with Class B at Ground Gamma. The rules will be explained there so I don't have to repeat myself. Do your best to represent what Class A stands for."

The eggs are very confused, but All Might smiles in relief. Provost Piston raises his hand, and he probably shouldn't. "Aizawa-sensei, just to clarify for the sake of Class 1-A, are we going to face expulsion for our-"

"That depends solely on your performance today," Aizawa answers, before his voice drops to a growl. "Do. Your. Best."

The eggs look scared, but it doesn't last long. 27 finds himself walking a bit faster than Aizawa to use him as a shield whenever he hears one of their footsteps pick up and get closer. Luckily, it's effective, and 27 is able to make it to the exam site without a single one of the eggs talking to him. Once they get there, Provost Piston organizes them like a sheep dog does a flock, pacing and nipping at their heels to arrange them in neater rows than Class B forms.

Threatening Quirk Thief waves at him, and 27 doesn't even give him the dignity of a glare in response. He'll deal with him when he can *deal* with him, and there are too many witnesses and too many people here who would stop him.

Aizawa and White Chocula go over the exam rules, which he already knows. Teams of four decided at random, they seem very well balanced for Class A. Aizawa looks a little relieved to see Hundred Ears picked as the egg that would boil twice, and 27 agrees. He can see that the maze of pipes and dark corners is well suited to Sprout Senses' detection skills.

There's a few large screens set up outside to watch the matches, and the teachers stand on the small stage with the implication that the hero students shouldn't. That they should stay on the ground and either plot or rest, but not approach.

No matter how close 27 stands to Aizawa, several of the eggs are still staring at him, glancing at the stage like they want to cross that boundary. 27 would *really* rather they didn't.

Aizawa gets his scarf back from All Might, and 27 decides he doesn't like All Might anymore. "I'm glad that young Midoriya wasn't selected for a second match. Recovery Girl would have liked to excuse him from this exercise altogether but-"

"What did the problem child break this time?" Aizawa asks, and 27 would *really* rather he didn't.

Entirely Perchance glances at him, so he *knows* what he's doing by answering, but he still does it anyway. "Ah, well, he broke two fingers, but he wasn't aware of it. He said that his body seemed to move on its own to break out of young Shinsou's quirk. The laceration was rather shallow, but it was also healed by Recovery Girl's quirk." 27 knows that Aizawa is looking at him, but he's going to ignore it as long as he can. It seems like a good plan. "But I'm sure that young Midoriya will have enough time to recover before his match, since it's the last one-"

Aizawa starts walking away, but 27 doesn't follow. Complete Possibility asks how he's feeling, and 27 has to force himself to nod before he realizes that's not a response, signing ' *Fine* ' afterwards. He's staring at the screen instead of Total Mayhap, but he's not paying attention to the match at all.

He should probably take off the mask. He should probably be ready for whatever is going to happen to him after this, when there are no witnesses. His owner wanted to break the eggs, but didn't know that 27 already broke that one. He probably won't have to ask if he's angry.

Midoriya straightens up from leaning on Floaty's shoulder when he notices his owner approach. "Drink this."

"Class A is resorting to doping!" Loud Fang accuses, and his owner tosses a glare over his shoulder at him.

"It's *coffee* ," his owner corrects, and takes off the lid to hand it to Midoriya, who drinks it and seems to perk up afterwards. Satisfied, and ignoring the questions being pelted at him whether 27 is alright or in trouble or what they have to do to not be expelled, his owner walks back to his original place beside 27. Still not looking at him.

He's angry.

27 hooks a finger around one of the loops around his ear before his owner stops him. "I'm not angry," Aizawa says with a sigh. "The problem child's self-destructive drive is apparently in his subconscious. That's good to know."

He says that like he plans to surgically remove it. Maybe it's fine to break the eggs a little. On accident. If it's informative like that.

Amphibian Fibber's team wins, and Aizawa asks them to explain what they did wrong, while Chocula explains it to his students. The eggs have a good perspective on their faults, and Aizawa doesn't correct them or praise them for that. Sparky keeps waving at him, but 27 is trying to pretend like he isn't here.

It's really hot outside, even if it should be cold. He probably should have asked for some coffee.

The second match is incredibly destructive thanks to the Fungus Girl. Class B wins without a single loss of one of their members, and that worries 27. Aizawa said that he wasn't going to expel them, but then told his students that their performance would determine that. 27 doesn't care for Double Dark, Flashy And Stupid, or Not So Invisible With Mushrooms, but Eri would be upset if Momo was expelled.

Momo recovers from being knocked unconscious quickly enough, but when Black Bird asks to see Recovery Girl for the mushrooms in his lungs, 27 can't help but wince. He might not have had mushrooms in his lungs, but that familiar cough and wheezing wasn't something he wanted for Blackened Overcast.

They decide to take a break, because this couldn't be dragged out long enough. 27 watches the hero students sitting down, some of them even laying down to take a nap, enviously. He tries not to stare enough to invite their attention, but too many are looking at him and then at the stage. *Considering* when he would rather they didn't.

Chili doesn't seem to understand implications very well. He steps onto the stage with his eyes locked on 27, and a hand in his pocket. 27 steps a bit closer to Aizawa, and convinces himself

that's not cowardly. It's using his environment to his advantage.

"I don't want our friendship to suffer from restraining you," Central Divide says, pulling out a package of gummies that have cat paws patterned over the packaging. He's lucky that 27 is too curious whether the gummies are shaped like cat paws too, that's the only reason he takes them.

They are. It's amazing. "Todoroki," Aizawa says, taking a very long time to say anything after that. "Why."

That's not a very good question, but Todo acts like he understands it. He also raises his hand towards 27, fingers left limp. Not trying to touch him, and that's why 27 allows it, but it is odd. "Sensei, do you utilize the purrito technique when you need to restrain an aggressive cat?"

Aizawa stares for a while, before he answers. "I find scruffing to be less stressful. Why do you ask?"

Todo's eyes widen a bit when they look at 27, before his head tilts a bit as though he's trying to look behind him. Aizawa hides his face to the point that his nose is covered in his capture scarf, and looks away.

"Todoroki. Prepare for your match." As soon as Todo steps off the stage, Aizawa takes a very long pull from his thermos, glaring straight ahead when he starts muttering. "Teaching is *rewarding*."

Chocula covers his mouth to smother his laughter, while Witching Hour throws her arms over Aizawa's shoulders from behind him, grinning. "Oh, isn't it though? Aren't you glad that Mic and I finally wore you down?"

Aizawa takes another, longer drink before he answers that. "I'm retiring."

00:00 gives him a feral grin while she traces her long nails over his chest. "Oh? You're not *thrilled* about Principal Nezu restarting the Duckling Model?"

Aizawa looks like he really hates ducklings. "I'm retiring *immediately*."

27 eats one of the gummies and puts the rest in his pocket. It hurts to swallow, but his wince is covered up by the mask. It's nice to be able to hide things like that.

27 finds himself watching Replicate Webbing more than the other eggs in the fight. The others are fighting recklessly and risking getting injured, but he can't afford to with a second match. Though four are knocked unconscious and Excessive Vertebrae is injured, Humanoid Squid is basically unharmed at the end of the 20 minute mark, ending the match in a tactical draw.

Screaming Dracula preens about that, loudly, much to the eggs' dismay. He's been goading them quite a bit over the course of these matches, but with a win, loss, and draw, those taunts are harder to brush off. Especially for Aizawa, who walks forward to address the eggs and give them a bit of psychological punishment.

The damage when he says that Vlad must be a better teacher than him reverberates clearly in each of the eggs. Rattles them. It's an odd way to inspire them to do better, but a mixture of self-preservation, rivalry with Class B, and pride for their organization might propel them to make tactical decisions rather than forceful ones.

The next match could end either very well or very poorly. Blasty has tighter attachments to Tapey and Long Lobes than he does to Sucrose Hurry, and out of all of them, he's the loudest and least willing to compromise. He'll either lead the pack or abandon it, but he leads it. And leads it well.

A total victory in under 5 minutes. The eggs cheer loud enough to shatter themselves, while Class B glares, their class victory now impossible to achieve. Even Aizawa has to offer praise, and after that, everyone else falls over themselves to do it.

He can tell it makes Bakugo uncomfortable. It seems like he only wants to hear those words in his own voice.

Midoriya looks awake for his match. Wide awake. Hopefully Chocula won't realize that he might have been right about the doping scandal.

27 hasn't appreciated listening to Quirk Thief's crowing, nor his waving or stares, but the way he cups his chin again and grins irritates 27 all the more. And when he turns to address Midoriya, 27 starts reconsidering whether there are too many witnesses here. "Perhaps the prideful goons in Class A would like to make this match a bit more interesting. When Class B proves once again that having the intellect necessary to strategize and communicate will cinch the victory, we should get a few spoils of war for it. Your ward, specifically."

27 has been sold. Twice. He's been rented maybe a hundred times. Sometimes he's cheap, sometimes he's not, but 27 has never been cheap enough to be traded over a training match.

Aizawa isn't saying anything, and he knows what that means. He *is* up for trade. To *motivate* the damn eggs.

The eggs bristle, and Ashi looks like she'll forget that the match hasn't started yet by the way she's scowling, but Squidly holds her back and argues. "Class B doesn't have anything to offer up."

"We'll give you Monoma," Heavy Handed Leader says, slapping the Quirk Thief's back. "Anything you want to do to him, anything at all is up for grabs. And that's fine, *right* Monoma? You're going to do well and represent Class B, right?"

Quirk Thief tosses his hair back, grinning so maniacally that 27 thinks someone should tranquilize him. Witching Hour is standing right there, perfectly able to do that. "Of course! Are those terms agreeable to the swine of Class A, or should I repeat them a bit slower for you?"

"You! Are! On!" Ashi agrees, and Octo Man resorts to wrapping an arm around her waist and physically lifting her off the ground to keep her from charging. The rest of them seem just as agreeable to those terms. Midoriya raises a clenched fist and looks at 27 to nod, and 27 doesn't know what the *hell* he means by that.

When they scurry off to the exam site, Chocula sees an opportunity to goad. "They didn't say *which* ward-

"Eri is not a part of this deal, or any deal, and if you try anything you will *pay for it*, Kan," Aizawa snaps, and 27 finds himself agreeing to that at least. Aizawa glances at him and sighs. "I didn't agree to any of that either. *If* Class B wins, there's no way to enforce it, but if Class A wins-

"LIES! TRICKERY! DECEIT! DON'T LET THEM GET AWAY WITH IT, CLASS B!" Chocula screams into the microphone, and it's incredibly annoying.

Midoriya abandons his team after a few minutes of waiting, and 27 can see that Quirk Thief's team is planning a round-about ambush. Quirk Thief himself is targeting Midoriya, and they exchange words that the screens don't catch before their fight begins. Sensory Overload picks up the ambush, alerting Floaty to the first wave of projectiles thrown at them. Ashi would have been a

better choice, but 27 finds himself grateful for it when that first wave doubles back around. Acid would have made that rubble far more dangerous.

Sensory Overload grabs both Floaty and Ashi, and Floaty levitates all three of them to dodge effectively, but they're cornered. They needed Midoriya's offense and mobility to get the time to properly prepare their own attacks since their foes were long-range.

27 looks back at the screen where Midoriya was, feeling the same shock as the other onlookers. Black tendrils were seeping out of his arm first, before his entire body, lashing out at Quirk Thief before it started to pull him towards his teammates' base.

Some of the others wonder if this was a new ability that Midoriya was hiding, but that's impossible. He has strength and speed enhancement, and emitting black tendrils like that isn't related to it at all.

What the *hell* was in Aizawa's coffee?

Aizawa frowns before he starts running towards the exam site, followed by Entirely Perchance. Midnight notices it, notices that something is wrong, and follows through a different route.

That leaves 27 with Chocula.

That's not okay with 27.

He feels like more people are staring at him than he knows there are at this exam. He feels his nerves singing that he'll get in trouble for this, he'll get punished, he's acting out on his own and he has no reason to follow Aizawa like this. Aizawa will turn around and catch him and something *bad* will happen. He tried to escape, he broke an egg to do that, he's still wearing an insult around his face and now he's acting on his own without any instruction to do so.

But it's fine. If he's in trouble, he'll know. He'll know if that's what makes Aizawa angry.

When he gets close enough to see the battle, he knows something's wrong. Midoriya is biting back screams through clenched teeth, Floaty is holding onto him to levitate him, and both the eggs and Class B students are hiding behind enlarged pipes and other debris. Aizawa's back is turned to him, but 27 can see his hair standing straight up, not just floating, before Aizawa yells at Floaty to release Midoriya and get to safety.

Aizawa didn't try to cancel Floaty's quirk. He tried to cancel Midoriya's.

And it wasn't working.

27 feels like his head is suddenly too heavy, too hot, too full of something, but he knows what that something is. He knows what he has to do, he has to do it again. Just like Eri's quirk, Midoriya's couldn't be controlled, and it was hurting people. But just like Eri's quirk, 27 could control it.

27 takes a deep breath, even if it hurts his throat, and lets the words come to him, even if he nearly tastes blood when he screams hoarsely. "Are you trying to fight it?!"

"I'm try-" 27 goes limp when Midoriya does, it *hurts*. He braces his hands on his knees, feels himself shaking but just tries not to fall. If he falls, he might lose concentration, and more than the hot and muggy fog inside his head, more than the searing pain behind his eyes, more than the pain in his throat that feels like he swallowed fire still burning, he needs to *say it*.

It takes him too long to pull the air into his lungs, deep enough to do it, and his voice comes out so

hoarse that syllables become soundless, despite the air hitting his throat that tells him they were said. “De tiva... Deactivate your quirk.”

He hears something fall to the ground, his eyes still closed too tight to see it. He breathes out, it *hurts*, and he feels like he breathes out too much because he sways, losing control of his body in a pitch black moment. There’s a hand on his shoulder, holding him upright. “Shinsou, release your quirk-”

It doesn’t so much release as swell until it snaps, like the string is trying to fray at the ends and unravel. The pain swells and seems to burst, his vision turning white behind his eyes before it fades, and he feels his arms shaking. But he breathes in through his nose, forcing it down, and with every breath the pain starts to recede until it’s something he can ignore. Midoriya and the others are talking, and it’s probably about what happened to Midoriya’s quirk. It’s probably important.

But Aizawa keeps staring at him, his eyebrows pinched together. He looks so openly worried that 27 can’t stand to look at it. ‘*It’s fine.*’

27 tries to stand up straight, but relies on the firm pressure of Aizawa’s hand more than he wants Aizawa to know. He feels weak, he has to convince himself that falling flat on his face to block out the light and have something firm beneath him is *not* a good way to get Aizawa to stop looking at him.

‘*I’m fine.*’ Aizawa presses the back of his hand against his forehead and 27 is too tired to jump away from the sudden warmth of it. He just lets his eyes fall a bit more closed, pretends that he’s a little less in this situation.

“Does your head hurt?” 27 doesn’t catch himself in time, starts to nod before he shakes and Aizawa catches it too clearly on the back of his hand. “How badly?” It’s hard to tell when it’s this hard to keep his eyes open. “Do you need to see Recovery Girl?”

27 shakes his head. He doesn’t know how to sign something that Aizawa would believe, but he doesn’t want to leave. He doesn’t want to go alone there.

Aizawa frowns, and 27 thinks he’ll make him. That 27 is bothering him just by standing there. That he can’t stand the sight of 27 after seeing him use his quirk on one of his students. “Tell me if you do,” Aizawa says, and waits like he expects 27 to change his answer, before he pulls away his hand to look at the eggs.

The eggs are worried, for Midoriya and for 27. Midoriya is holding out his arm the same way he did before, staring at it like he’s trying to make those tendrils come back again.

27 would really. *Really* rather he didn’t. Aizawa seems to agree. “The match is postponed until a decision is made whether to continue. Everyone head back to the staging area, except for Toshinori and Midoriya.”

And 27. Maybe Aizawa meant ‘everyone’ to include him, but 27 ignores that implication. If Todo gets to do that, he should too.

“I would like some answers as to what happened here,” Aizawa says, and it doesn’t sound like a request at all. Completely Possible and Midoriya look at each other nervously, before Midoriya starts rubbing his arm.

“I don’t know? I was trying to use Air Force Shoot Style, but then I saw those black things start coming out of my hand where my quirk was building up, and I couldn’t stop them and it was

starting to hurt, and..." Midoriya frowns, staring down at the ground. "I really don't know, Sensei. I can't make it happen again either."

"Young Midoriya also had a quirk slip last night, destroying his bed while he was asleep. Perhaps it's related to the stress of Midterms and-"

"Then he needs to see a quirk specialist to sort this out," Aizawa cuts off, horrifying both father and son. "I'm not going to allow an uncontrollable quirk loose in an exam. Even if this is your exam, Toshinori, I'm sure you'll agree with me."

Entirely Perchance doesn't look like he will, but he definitely doesn't want to admit that in front of Aizawa. "I do agree with postponement, but perhaps we should return to the others before any decisions are made."

Aizawa doesn't like that, but he doesn't say anything. Midoriya looks like he wants to say something to 27, but luckily Aizawa walks fast enough that he has an excuse to turn away and ignore that.

It's hard to tell if Aizawa is walking closer to him or if 27 isn't catching himself well enough when he closes his eyes, but it's nice.

It would be nicer if his head didn't both hurt and itch at the same time.

*

Aizawa glares as the only comfort he has left is sealed away in an evidence ziplock that Nemuri keeps on hand for these kind of unfunny jokes. "Recovery Girl has a testing kit for quirk enhancement drugs, but I won't be surprised if she finds something even worse in this stuff."

Kan glares like the results have already come back as a false positive. "We can't allow the exam to end incomplete like this. Eight students are relying on this grade, and All Might hasn't prepared a make-up for this kind of scenario."

Kan is so much more obvious when he's trying to be logical. "Neither I nor Midoriya can control his quirk. It's reckless to proceed under those conditions. The safety of my students is more important than Toshinori's lack of preparation."

No one seems to understand that this was Toshinori's fault. Even if he was the only teacher on staff who hadn't at least taken a course for education, and even if this was his first year, he should know to be prepared for something like this. Someone should have told him.

Nemuri and Kan both look like they want to blame Aizawa for that, as Toshinori's co-teacher, but he honestly didn't expect to explain something that simple. Toshinori was a fully grown adult, and Aizawa had enough trouble with all the children he had to manage.

One of those children was giving him a very good reason to call the entire exam off until he could convince him to drink something. He tried to hand the coffee off to Shinsou, sure that even if it was coffee, both he and Midoriya had drank enough to prove that it was safe. But Shinsou continued to refuse it, first in sign then by shaking his head. ' *No, no, no, no.* '

His discovery of the word could not have come at a worse time. Short of taking off the kid's face mask and forcing it down his throat, there was no way to get Shinsou to drink something.

That plan shouldn't sound nearly as tempting as it did to Aizawa, but he couldn't ignore how raspy and choked Shinsou sounded when he spoke. He sounded worse than he did in the interrogation

room when they first met, and Shinsou hadn't drank anything for nearly three days at that point.

Even his students' grades were becoming less and less meaningful to him as the discussion continued to be dragged out, especially as he watched Shinsou sit down and press his face into the bend of his arm, clearly suffering from a migraine he decided to lie about.

Suffice to say, it was a relief to see that familiar shock of blonde, even if the arm sling was still concerning. "How's the exam coming along for the first year herole..." It was clear to see the exact moment when Hizashi laid eyes on his ward, and Aizawa felt a shiver of dread run down his spine. Hizashi didn't know the *half* of it.

His husband walked a bit more rigidly, smile too tight and looking more like a grimace as he made a beeline for Aizawa. He should count himself lucky that Hizashi was still in his hero costume, and that it was hard to see his eyes behind the sunglasses from this distance. But the distance was closing very quickly.

"Eraserhead," Hizashi said, too flat and too neutral, his face leaning in a bit too close. "Why does Shinsou look like that?"

The near whisper that his husband was using was louder than his quirk. "He used his quirk to control Midoriya. Successfully. He's refusing to go to Recovery Girl."

And of course, as soon as Hizashi looked at him, Shinsou changed his mind. ' *Head pain. Hurts. Help.* ' Shinsou looked up with glassy eyes, face a bit too slack before he winced and covered his face again.

Little shit. "It's alright, Shinsou, we are heading right over to Recovery Girl to get you patched up!" Hizashi shot him a scathing glare, and Aizawa knew it would be pointless to argue his side at the moment, or try to ask after his husband's health. He noticed that Hizashi angled his injured arm away from Shinsou when he offered a hand to help him up to his feet. And he noticed that Shinsou stumbled a bit when he stood, in a way that was *almost* natural.

Manipulative. Little. *Shit.* And he had Hizashi completely wrapped around his finger.

When Toshinori suggests having Nemuri posted close to the battlefield to act as a referee for the Problem Child's quirk mishaps, *again*, Aizawa sighs and agrees. He's outnumbered here, and if they wanted to risk the lives of everyone involved, the first being Aizawa's when he would have to test whether the capture scarf could restrain any of those black tendrils, then he would have to let them.

He's willing to accept anything to be able to go home to his husband, in whatever mood or state he happened to be in.

*

27 finds himself picking at the face mask while he hears Yamada grumble to himself, the words indecipherable beyond the occasional 'that man' or 'I swear.' He really didn't mean to do that. He just wanted to leave, and he wanted to leave with Yamada. And he was curious whether he could actually pull it off.

But he had. He made Yamada mad at Aizawa, and he's not sure if he likes it.

When they get closer to Recovery Girl's office, 27 has to tap on Yamada's shoulder because he's walking too quickly for him to keep up. "Oh sh- Shinsou, I am such a scatterbrain right now, I completely- are you okay? I'm walking too fast, aren't I? Jeez, why can't I just--"

‘ It’s fine, ’ 27 signs, a bit unnerved by how quickly those grumbles turned to nervous whining. Yamada seemed a bit off today, and it probably had to do with his injured arm. *‘ Head not bad. Getting better. ’*

Yamada smiles at that, but it doesn’t really reach his eyes, and 27 notices the bruising around one of them behind the sunglasses. “That’s good, but we should still get Recovery Girl to look at you. With the...quirk and all, last couple times didn’t end so hot for you,” Yamada insists with a lot of hand-waving. It wasn’t even sign.

Yamada definitely wasn’t okay.

Recovery Girl doesn’t look very okay either. She was laying on one of the cots but sat up as soon as they entered, sighing when she saw Yamada. “Present Mic, you’re usually more responsible than Eraserhead. Don’t start coming to me instead of a doctor.”

“Nope, I just got discharged, oh, 20 minutes ago? Right as rain, but Shinsou here is having a bit of a headache from his quirk and I was wondering if you could do a little check up to make sure everything’s okay,” Yamada says, a bit too fast at times and a bit too slow at others. He was *not* right as rain.

‘ You’re hurt, ’ 27 signs, ignoring that Yamada tries to brush him off, starting to talk more and more like Existing Amplifier as he keeps repeating that he’s ‘right as rain.’ *‘ Not going to. Unless you do. ’*

Yamada’s wincing smile comes out before he starts patting the sling around his shoulder. “It’s alright, Shinsou, I already saw plenty of doctors and I just need some rest, but I’ll be fine!” 27 crosses his arms, unmoving, and that smile starts to fall to become a bit more pinched, his voice rising in pitch with it. “Shinsou, I really would feel a whole lot better if Recovery Girl could take a quick look at you. I know the sling looks bad, but I just got a little banged up-”

‘ Eye, ’ 27 signs, pointing to the right one that was bruised along the side. *‘ C-O-N-C-U-S-S-I-O-N. ’*

Yamada winces again, this time raising his hand halfway to touch the ‘bruising’ that was looking more and more suspicious. “Yeah, you’re right, but trust me, I’ve gotten way worse, and the concussion is really mild, nothing to worry about-”

“Present Mic, take a seat right here,” Recovery Girl said, patting the cot. “Shinsou seems concerned, and it would be best to reassure him properly. And quickly, as I have no idea when the next round of injured students will arrive.”

Yamada sighs, sitting on the cot and taking off his sunglasses. It wasn’t just bruising, there were tiny scratches as well disappearing into his hairline, and the white of his eye flaring red from the corner where the damage was. “I got tossed around a little bit, banged up my head, but really it’s fine.”

Recovery Girl tells Yamada to follow a light at the end of her pen, then shines it in his eyes to test how his pupils will react. “Have you taken painkillers for the concussion? And cover that left eye for me before you read this.”

“Yep, following the doctor’s orders, you know me, Chiyo,” Yamada says, before he covers his eye, wincing in pain after he does. “Uh, lot of painkillers actually, I’m just gonna read that last line because I’m a bit too fuzzy on the others. My vision isn’t usually this bad-”

“And the arm?” Recovery Girl asks sternly, and Yamada opens his mouth, grinning like he’s going to say ‘it’s fine’ and it’s ‘right as rain,’ but Recovery Girl doesn’t let him. “Your arm, Present Mic.”

Yamada ducks his head, working the sling off before he starts gently pulling his jacket off to reveal it. “Chiyo, I’ve seen a bunch of doctors, I’m even cleared for patrol tonight, it’s really fine-”

It was *not* fine. The bandages wound around the join of his arm and chest were holding gauze already soaked with blood. 27 had bandaged Eri enough times to know that they needed to be changed or else they would stick to the skin too much when they were removed. Luckily, Recovery Girl seemed to agree with that, already unwinding the bandages.

“Yeah, I must have rattled it around too much, but I can take care of that while you take a look at-”

“Present Mic,” Chiyo repeats herself, stopping her progress to put her hands on her hips. “You have a ward in your home that shouldn’t see you in this state. Now, I appreciate that you tried to be considerate to the demands I have to meet, but I can’t allow you to be reckless. What caused this injury?”

Yamada pulled a grimace, shaking his head a bit, but Recovery Girl just stared until she wore him down. “I got a little shot? It was a ricochet, it was really nothing-”

“I wouldn’t have discharged you like this,” Recovery Girl muttered, continuing to unravel the bandages. 27 found himself looking away, unwilling to see Yamada’s skin torn like that. It was bad enough to see the blood and know who it belonged to.

“Shinsou, it’s really fine, it looks way worse than it is. I’ve gotten into way worse scraps as a hero, trust me,” Yamada says, begging 27 to believe him, but 27 doesn’t even want to consider that.

27 slips a hand under the collar of his hoodie to feel at the scars, until he finds the circular dip he was looking for. It was on the same side. ‘*Shot not fun. Be careful.*’

Yamada looks like he wants to jump off the cot for some reason, his face a mixture of seriousness and panic. “Look, Chiyo-”

“Lay down, eat this, I know you don’t want to rest until you get home and even then I doubt you’ll *want* to, but do *not* make me call Eraserhead in here to deal with you,” Recovery Girl says, handing Yamada a granola bar and two different colored pieces of candy. “Now, let’s have *you* take a seat right here.”

27 sits down on her stool, and once he does he can’t force himself to sit upright, bracing his arms on his legs. Recovery Girl puts that clip around his finger while she makes him look at the penlight, and 27 grimaces and blinks through the first one before she lets him give up.

“Shinsou, when is the last time you’ve eaten?” Recovery Girl asks, so nicely that it almost has a brittle edge to it.

27 squints, trying to remember. ‘*W-A-F-F-L-E-S. Yesterday.*’

Recovery Girl looks at Yamada, who looks like he just wants to hand over the half-eaten granola bar instead of answering, shrinking in on himself before he does. “Shinsou said breakfast yesterday. Look, I really should have kept a better eye on Shouta-”

“This. This,” Recovery Girl says sharply, handing 27 another granola bar and three different colored candies. “You need to drink all of this, before you take this painkiller, and once Present

Mic takes you home you need to eat a nutritionally sound meal and go *right* to sleep.”

27 tests the seal on the water bottle, before he squeezes it. He knows that he should check for any warping in the clear plastic, where it could have been injected with something and then burned to cover up the hole, but Recovery Girl won't stop staring at him with that pinched scowl. He lifts up the face mask to take a drink, but when it hits the back of his throat the pain flares so badly that he can't help but cover his mouth, wincing.

“You haven't drank anything yet? Since....” Yamada trails off, but 27 nods, forcing himself to drink more of the water to chase away the worry on Yamada's face. “Okay, that's okay. We should have a few water bottles like that, and I can run to the store to get more-”

“I'll send you home with some, dear,” Recovery Girl promises, already pulling more from the mini fridge by her desk. Once she has eight of them in a bag, she walks back to 27 and asks to see his throat. 27 has to pull the mask under his chin, but after staring inside his mouth with her pen light, she feels at the bottom of his jaw close to his throat, humming to herself. “You have a slight fever and the back of your throat is irritated, but your lymph nodes feel fine. Do take care to wear that face mask and use hand sanitizer, I've already seen a few colds and flu cases.”

She hands him more candies, and when 27 starts eating the granola bar, he needs another bottle of water to keep his throat from hurting. Recovery Girl kisses Yamada's shoulder once 27 is finished, telling them both to rest, and 27 has to argue with himself to not just slump forward and rest like that. Either the candies were drugged to make him want to sleep or the granola was, but the leather jacket on Yamada's back looks too tempting to let his head fall into.

When they do get back to the dorm, it's all 27 can do to keep his eyes just open enough to see Yamada's feet in front of him, but when Yamada opens the door he hears too many voices inside.

“Yama! Twenny!” Eri calls, running out from the kitchen to greet them both. 27 sees Mirio wearing an apron, waving at him, and 27 wishes he were anywhere else. Especially with Tamaki and Neji sitting at the table, laying on their arms and either falling asleep or already asleep. “We made lunch together 'cause everyone else had a really hard day, and I got to stir the soup the whole time so it would really stick to the rice!”

“Eri did a really great job helping me cook,” Mirio says, and 27 busies himself with considering whether to crouch to Eri's level to pick her up when he wasn't sure if he could stand up again. “We have some scorched rice porridge, tofu and veggie stirfry, and some hamburger steaks. We were just about to make some smores for dessert too! Sorry about inviting Neji and Tama-”

“Mirio,” Yamada says, his voice wavering like he's about to cry. “I really, truly, honestly appreciate you. More than anything. You are a lifesaver and I don't deserve you.”

Eri takes his hand and pulls him to the table, and he hates that she puts him in the chair where his back is facing Mirio, even if he doesn't have to look at him. He can see Neji and Tamaki are in fact asleep, a bit of drool escaping the corners of their mouths, and Neji still has a spoon in hers. He can also hear Yamada hugging Mirio while he tries not to cry, lavishing Mirio with praises that he keeps trying to brush off. “Really, it's nothing! I just figured that the last thing you'd want to do after the mission is cook, so I-”

Yamada sobs, and it sounds like Mirio starts patting his back while he shifts from rejecting his praises to trying to soothe him with shushing sounds. Eri leans against 27's leg, staring at them confused. “Yamada had a rough day. It's fine,” 27 says, trying to make sure Eri wasn't worried, but she hears the slight rasp in his voice and frowns.

“Twenny, you’re sick!” Eri says, eyebrows pinching together and 27 ignores the complaint in his arms to pull her into his lap.

“No, I’m not sick, I just haven’t drank anything for too long. I’m really fine,” 27 says, letting Eri press her fingers against his neck, but when he feels her fingers brush against the face mask he freezes.

He forgot to take it off.

He rips the mask off, fingers still shaking, how could he be so *stupid*? It was bad enough that he sounded sick, but now he’s covered his mouth, he’s reminded her of what he used to look like with the mask, she’s going to have nightmares for *weeks* thanks to him and his stupid idea and his selfishness-

“Twenny, you gotta wear it if you’re sick!” Eri whines, pulling at the face mask still held tight in his fist. “But you should wear the cuter ones that have little cat faces on them. Shoji should wear cute cat face masks too! You should share with him!”

27 just stares, still unwilling to breathe, to startle this. He’s pretty sure she’s lying, she’s covering up how badly she’s worried now, how badly this affects her.

But she just looks at him, just pouting because she wants him to do what she tells him to, and her legs swing but don’t kick. She’s not bothered at all.

“You like Shoji,” 27 asks without asking, too tired to try to monitor himself. Too numb all over to feel it. “It’s fine that he wears a mask.”

Eri nods, each of her feet kick once in turn, like she doesn’t know why she has to explain it. “Shoji didn’t like me at first, but I think he does now. And his mask looks really comfy, but I think it should be cuter. It’s kinda boring.”

Yamada smiles and ruffles Eri’s hair when he sets down a plate of food in front of 27. “Ugh, my kids are amazing.”

Mirio comes around the other side to set down a water bottle, trying to catch 27’s eye. “Feeling better?”

He doesn’t, really. He doesn’t think he ever can feel anything more than this sickening dread in front of Mirio, hearing those words that he said to him when he tried to escape. Seeing the way that Mirio looked so sad and hurt, and seeing it twist to look even worse the more he thinks about it.

But 27 nods, and Mirio smiles like he actually means it. “That’s good. I’m really, really glad, Shinsou,” Mirio says, patting his shoulder before he turns away.

27 stares at the food long enough for Eri to offer to feed him, and 27 forces himself to pick up the chopsticks just to keep her from doing that. He manages to eat a few bites of the hamburger steak and stir fry before he switches to a spoon to eat the porridge, exhaustion seeping in too deeply for him to do something as demanding as balancing his food on a utensil.

27 doesn’t even realize that Yamada sits down to eat too until Eri jumps down to make smores with Mirio. Once 27 sees Yamada smile at him, the bruising faded a little bit around his eye and the red irritation faded too, he can’t help it anymore.

27 lays his head on the table, listening to Eri’s voice for a few seconds before he falls asleep.

*

Aizawa opens the door slowly, half hoping that he can sneak into his own home and curl up inside a sleeping bag in a closet. He knows Hizashi will want to talk, that he will want to talk very loudly and very angrily about the state Shinsou was in, and even longer if he knows anything else that happened last night.

He knows he should talk to Hizashi. He wants to know the details of his injuries, even if he trusts that Hizashi took care of them. He knows that he needs to check on Shinsou, on Eri, he has a *mountain* of essays that he still hasn't graded.

But he. Is also. *Tired*.

So when he opens the door to see Eri and Mirio feeding the goldfish and not a single sign of Hizashi, he feels relieved enough to nearly collapse and fall asleep right in his doorway. But Eri notices him, and the sound of her excitedly calling his name gives him the strength to open his eyes and crouch down to meet her.

"Zawa! Me and Mirio made lunch 'cause everyone had a really hard day. Yama and Twenny had such a hard day that they fell asleep, and Twenny fell asleep right at the table!" Eri says, more impressed by Shinsou than concerned.

"I'm glad. Shinsou could use the rest," Aizawa says, running a hand over Eri's hair while he tries to convince himself not to fall forward and sleep on the floor.

"You look like you could use it too, Aizawa-sensei," Mirio says, and if Aizawa had the strength to be irritated that his own student would see him like this, he would be. "I'm fine with watching Eri if you wanted to take a nap. It looks like the first years' Midterms were a killer."

It was honestly one of the more relaxing parts of his week. Aizawa nods, dragging himself to his bedroom on instinct before he realizes that Hizashi is in there, before he reasons with himself. Hizashi is probably exhausted too, he might be so deeply asleep that Aizawa can check his injuries without waking him, to finally put to rest that still present and irrational worry that he was injured more than Aizawa knew. He knows Hizashi worries more when Aizawa is injured, and he knows that he probably gives Hizashi plenty of reasons to be. But Aizawa won't truly find rest until he knows that Hizashi is safe, and healing well.

He looks at his husband, his limbs splayed chaotically over the bed like he wants to keep it all to himself, but that only makes it easier to check. His eye looks better, the bruises fading, but when he picks at the T-shirt to look at what must be his injured shoulder, the back of a hand swats at his arm.

He looks up to see Hizashi blinking at him blearily, and it's hard to tell if he's angry or just freshly woken. "R'covery Girl... Gonna be fine, Shou," Hizashi mumbles, before he opens his arms in an invitation Aizawa can't refuse, even if he takes a moment to slip out of his scarf and shoes to do so.

Aizawa settles against Hizashi's chest with a sigh, his hair falling into his face and his eyes falling shut for good, but he can't bring himself to care. "Shinsou ate... and slept."

"Mhm," Hizashi grunts, his hand falling heavy on Aizawa's chest. "Wasn't for you?"

"No," Aizawa answers. "Manipulative."

Hizashi offers a reassuring huff, almost a laugh. "I know."

“Tried to run away last night. Thought I was going to kill him. Used his quirk twice,” Aizawa says, fighting the heaviness in his limbs to give his report. “They’ll want to test it-”

“Shh,” Hizashi shushes, pulling his head a little closer to Aizawa’s. “We’ll talk about it.”

Not right now.

It's Different

Chapter Summary

27 doesn't want to go to the 1-A dorm shift tonight, but his feelings on the matter change after a drastic event. Aizawa finally gets to deal with his class for their 'rebellious' actions. A nice family brunch turns disastrous.

Chapter Notes

A bonus chapter in celebration of Chapter 29 of The Last Resort being posted!

Trigger Warning: Nightmares, 50 mention, Bug scars theorized about in graphic terms, graphic vomiting

Previously on Wards of UA: After the interrogation, Shinsou had 4 repeated nightmares before he attempted to use Midoriya to run away from UA. Shinsou was captured during that escape by Midnight, who was later locked out of the dorm along with Mirio and Eri when Class 1-A started their 'rebellion.' Shinsou has been referring to Class 1-A as 'eggs' after Aizawa compared them to eggs. Shinsou went through sensory deprivation conditioning at The Miasma to be trained to answer to '27.' Class 1-A knows that Shinsou was convinced that Aizawa would kill him and the students after the events of Shinsou's attempted escape. Shinsou would hide his lost teeth in his room when he was at The Miasma. Yamada told Aoyama to avoid using French around Shinsou, because Shinsou reacted poorly to learning his mother taught him some French. Midoriya and Ashido tried to get Shinsou to drink something after he tried to escape, and he refused because he said he knew it would be poisoned. Midoriya and the other 1-A students know that Shinsou usually only answers questions to trade for information. During the escape, Shinsou brainwashed Midoriya and almost took control over Bakugo before it 'snapped.' Shinsou thinks that Monoma's attempt to be friendly and give him a pain relief kit was threatening. After Bakugo taught Eri how to say 'Fuck,' Shinsou used a pressure point in his shoulder to hurt him. Kan and Aizawa have a running bet that whoever's class wins the Joint Training Exam gets to boss the other around for a day. Monoma traded his day in a similar manner depending on the outcome of his match, in a bid to try to get Shinsou to spend time with him instead of with Class 1-A. Yamada told Monoma that Shinsou might appreciate spending time with someone else who was fluent in JSL. Aizawa has 'tested' Shinsou's drinks before after learning that the poison that Shinsou fears would take effect in 10 minutes. Shinsou and Eri ate oatmeal every day that Eri wouldn't be taken to be experimented on. Bakugo told Aizawa that the one thing that Shinsou doesn't like to eat is oatmeal. Shinsou has a system of clapping to allow someone into his room, since he can't verbally give permission. When Aizawa collected Shinsou from being 'kidnapped' by 1-A, Ashido asked him where Shinsou's mom was.

27 wakes up feeling too hot, a humid fog enveloping him, and pressure on his stomach and face. Then he hears her humming, and despite the sweat gathering on the back of his neck and under his arms, the warmth feels too nice to disturb it with anything more than a smile.

He feels Eri's hand pull at his cheek, and she stops humming. "Twenny, you're s'posed to be sleeping!" 27 opens one eye, just enough to see Eri laying next to him, her white hair loose and messy across his bed and her eyes too wide and curious. She pinches at his cheek, probably interested to see how the scar there moves.

"M' 'wake," 27 says, and tries to mean it. He could drift and drowse, probably fall back asleep if she let him, but he doesn't want to. "You 'member the song."

Eri nods, poking under his eye now at the deep bruising there, always present even if he does sleep. "So you won't have bad dreams."

27 pulls his arm around her, hates that he couldn't keep that to himself. It was bizarre. He had been so exhausted last night, he wanted so badly to sleep next to Eri thinking that it might be the last time that he could, but he couldn't put it out of his head. That woman's quirk that forced him to talk left things he couldn't escape, like the cold and darkness of The Miasma. The nothingness when he was inside Chisaki, how her quirk felt *exactly* like it did when Chisaki tried to use his voice and his quirk.

The worst part was waking up Eri. Worrying her. By the time Midoriya arrived, he was sure that Mirio was going to have Midoriya kill 27 just because he was bothering her so much. And he felt like he deserved it at that point.

He couldn't even tell her goodbye properly, but he's glad that he didn't have to. "That song has words," 27 says, one of so many different things that he's never told her, that he has a chance to. "I just never got to say them."

Eri rolls over onto her side to fully face him, pulling her knees to his chest and pulling away the foot that had been pressing against his stomach. "I wanna hear it!" Her wide red eyes are so bright, and he smiles thinking that even these little things can be so exciting for her.

He remembers the words to that song, to so many that he made up or changed. Words that were kept inside his head, his mask locked at night when she would have those bad dreams, when he could only hold her and hum. He doesn't think half of those words fit anymore, so he changes them. "Er-i is a prin-cess, and she has a sil-ver crys-tal. A. Sil. Ver crystal. A. Sil. Ver crystal. A. Sil. Ver crystal, and she can save the pla-net."

Eri's eyes go even wider, and he feels like he's lying to her by changing the words now. "That's like Sailor Moon! Sailor Moon has the silver crystal to save everyone! Did you know Sailor Moon back then?"

27 nods, and that's another lie. The words used to be that Eri was crying, but she will smile tomorrow, but she doesn't need to know that. She doesn't need to remember when she used to cry, because tomorrow already came for her. She already smiles. "I watched a lot of it."

He probably didn't. He watched enough of Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats to remember it, enough that he had a lunchbox from that show, according to that news article about his fake kidnapping. He probably would have hated Sailor Moon because he would have thought the Kawaii Kawaii

Pussycats were better, and he couldn't have liked both because they both wore schoolgirl uniforms.

But Eri doesn't need to know that.

"Twenny," Eri says, pulling at his cheek when his eyes fall closed again. "Are you sleepy?"

He forces his eyes open again. He is, but she clearly doesn't want him to be. "Nope. Just comfortable."

Too comfortable. When the door opens he can only half-pull away the arm thrown over Eri, and can barely lift his head to see who it is. And when he sees that it's Mirio, he almost tries to pretend that he's still asleep. "There you are! I was wondering why it was taking so long to check on Shinsou," Mirio says, winking at Eri but she probably doesn't realize that he's trying to scold her, because he does it so gently.

"Cause Twenny's awake now, and he's comfy," Eri explains, and Mirio smiles like he's trying not to laugh.

"That's good, I'm glad you finally got some sleep, Shinsou," Mirio says, and 27 stares at his shoulder so that he can still see that smile, even if he can't look at it fully. "Aizawa-sensei and Yamada are awake now, so I guess I'll see you guys on Monday!"

"Okay! Bye Mirio!" Eri says, waving at him. "Twenny says bye too!" She picks up his hand and waves it for him, and he lets her. Even if he has to close his eyes.

When Mirio leaves, 27 turns his face to press it against the pillow, forgetting himself for a moment that Eri catches.

"Twenny, what's wrong?" Eri asks, her fingers wrapping around his, holding too tightly. He looks up and sees the worry on her face, and he knows he can't lie to her. But he can half-lie.

"Nothing, I just.... I said some really weird stuff to Mirio... and he probably thinks I'm stupid now," 27 says, knowing that wasn't even the half of it. Mirio probably did think he was stupid to think he had been bought by Aizawa, that he was going to be killed, but more than that Mirio was probably disturbed by 27. Disturbed by what he said, disturbed by what he threatened to do. Disturbed by his quirk now that he's finally seen it.

Heroic. Mirio thought his quirk was heroic, but he probably doesn't think that anymore. Not if he believed that 27 could have killed Midoriya by forcing him to activate Full Cowl at 100%, which 27 couldn't. Once it started to hurt Midoriya, the control would have been broken, but he hoped just the threat and the fact that Midoriya was All Might's son might have helped him escape.

But he didn't escape, and he wanted to stay here. But that meant dealing with Mirio, dealing with everyone who had seen 27 like that. And he wished that he didn't have to.

"Mirio doesn't think you're stupid!" Eri argues, before she starts playing with his hand. "I say weird stuff to Mirio a lot, and he never acts like it's weird. Maybe if you feel bad, you should draw him a picture so he can tell you that you did a good job, and you can forget about the weird stuff."

27 hums, wishing it was that easy. That he could be a little more like Eri, and be forgiven like that. "Maybe."

27 closes his eyes, finding them still too heavy. Finding himself still too comfortable. It would be nice to just stay here, but he can't.

If he's here at UA, it means he still has to do things he doesn't want to, like going to the 1-A dorm with Aizawa. Going back to the Safe Room, and trying to pretend that everything that happened last night didn't.

But he gets to be here with Eri, with Yamada and with Aizawa, and maybe that makes it worth it.

*

His wards are planning something.

Aizawa notices when Shinsou seems to trail behind a bit more, whispering to Eri, and Eri whispers back a bit too loudly. He's only heard snatches of their conversation, enough to know that it doesn't involve him. If Shinsou did try to use Eri in a scheme against him, Aizawa knows he wouldn't fare well against it, even with prior knowledge.

Eri also has a plan of her own, and Aizawa might have helped in the loosest definition of the word, but he hopes that it works. The duffel bag he cleared out for her purposes is slung on his back, and he wonders if that will increase his students' worries before the long deserved stick drops on all of their heads.

When he walks into the common room, he's pleased to see that all of his students have been gathered, and that they seem to know what is coming. He also sees that they're still eying Shinsou too intently, and Aizawa knows that he'll need to talk fast to get their attention before they try to get Shinsou's.

But apparently, this was part of his wards' scheming.

He hears Eri trying to cry, 'trying' being the operative word. She's sniffing, but Aizawa knows that she tends to hold her breath first when she's upset. "Eri, it's okay," Shinsou mutters softly, picking her up and making sure to let Eri bury her face in his shoulder. He smooths a hand over her back to hide the fact that her shoulders aren't shaking like they would if Eri were actually crying, before he looks up at the students with a pinched and worried expression. "I'm sorry."

Eri whines, a bit too loud, before she offers a weak hand to wave at the students. "I-I'm gonna miss you guys! Zawa, *please* -"

On cue, Shinsou turns and enters the stairwell, as though he wanted to shield Eri from a horrible sight soon to befall his students.

Aizawa has kept his mouth completely hidden by the capture scarf, sure that he would betray a laugh if he didn't. His students were fearful before, but now they're horrified, and Aizawa can't say that the discipline he worked so hard on will ever live up to what Shinsou has done to them. "Out of all the performances that I saw today, one stands out as the most deserving of praise."

He lets Bakugo preen for a few seconds before he continues.

"Tsunotori from Class B," Aizawa says, and more than in this certain scenario, he means that. Too many heroes were willing to die, willing to push themselves beyond the beyond and into an early grave. "Tsunotori recognized that the situation she was in was too risky to pursue alone, and that she was ill-equipped to fight Shoji on her own. Instead of taking that risk she reduced the risks that she could manage. In a real world exercise, she would have been protecting civilians while waiting for reinforcements to arrive, or heroes who were better equipped to fight the villain she encountered."

And he doubts that a *single* one of his students saw that action as anything other than cowardly.

“This is clearly a lesson that Vlad teaches better than I can,” Aizawa says with a sigh, closing his eyes for effect, and when he opens them he thinks that his students couldn’t look more crushed. But he’s going to have to crush them a bit more. “But, I’m going to have to try harder, and to do that, I’m requiring a list of 1000 scenarios in which you would need to wait and call for someone else to help you with that situation. That list is due by sunrise.”

He hears several loud protests, and he understands why. They did do well in their Heroics Midterm, and they are likely still exhausted from that.

But they should also be *expelled*, and as such have no right to complain. “If you have justifiable reasons not to complete that assignment, let me know now and I can finish filing your expulsion form.” Dead silence met his ears. “On top of that, you will be responsible for returning your dorm to the same condition it was in before you moved in, and that includes the sidewalk damage. The supplies necessary are outside the back door, and all of the repairs will have to be up to code by sunrise. Yaoyorozu will be expelled if her quirk is utilized.”

“Sensei, that’s child labor!” Kaminari protests, and even if it is, they have only one recourse. One that apparently, Aizawa needs to remind them of.

“All of you were complicit in kidnapping a ward, and damaging UA property to do that,” Aizawa reminds, and if they thought that their pure and *utterly* misguided intentions were enough to be forgiven for that, they were *sorely mistaken*. “None of you were equipped to deal with the situation you meddled in, and instead of calling for help, you locked out Midnight, a hero who specializes in that situation and who already had it under control.”

Bakugo seethes, the only one of his students who doesn’t look stricken by that. “She knocked him out and left, like a real fuckin’ pro-”

“To call Present Mic,” Aizawa interrupts. “Because the difference between you hatchlings and a fully fledged hero is knowing when someone else is better suited to the situation. Lives can be saved or lost because of that difference in mindset.”

Aizawa knows that the events of last night could have turned far more disastrous if his students hadn’t restrained Shinsou, despite whatever reason they had to do so. Shinsou was armed, dangerous, and desperate, and he didn’t doubt that he could have also been in an altered state of mind at the time due to how he perceived his situation.

“Your phones will also be confiscated until each of you either complete your tasks, or the sun rises on your failures to do so. UA has no right to withhold property from expelled students,” Aizawa says, opening a bag that had been in his pocket to collect all of his students’ phones.

It was honestly a bit disturbing to watch some of them shed tears over that, more so than the other punishments laid out and the risk of expulsion still looming over their heads.

*

27 stares as Aizawa and Eri go through the contents of that duffel bag. While 27 had been curious why Aizawa would want to take all of his hero costumes and goggles to the dorm, he didn’t comment on it, but that wasn’t what he did.

Eri struggles to pull out the Gengar, too large for her to even wrap her arms around half of it, and he pulls it out for her, even though he’s still confused why she brought it.

He’s confused why she brought a lot of this stuff.

There's a hot plate that Aizawa is setting up by his desk, with a cat face mug sitting beside it. There's also two thermoses full of some liquid, a bottle of honey, five of Eri's books and an English book that he hasn't even started reading from his bookshelf. There's also two of Eri's giant unicorn plushies, and Aizawa's sleeping bag. And after Aizawa plugs in the hot plate, he pulls out a pen and notebook.

"Eri said that you were having nightmares last night," Aizawa says, before he hands the pen and notebook to 27. "There's several methods of dealing with nightmares, and we can try all of them if it's necessary."

Eri nods her head, struggling to crawl along the cot to drag the Gengar to the top where she wants it to be. "Zawa is the best at making nightmares go away! He's even better at it than Mirio!"

That might be because Aizawa can look like a nightmare himself, but he doesn't look that way now. The scarf is hanging on the doorknob, his hair is pulled back in a bun, and he changed out of his hero costume as soon as he returned from cracking the eggs. He's wearing that same black shirt that looks too soft for him to wear, and sweatpants. Either he *permanently* cracked the eggs or he doesn't think he'll have to deal with them again tonight.

27 stares at the notebook, wondering how it's supposed to help, before he puts it down to help Eri arrange everything the way she wants it to be. The Gengar goes on top of their pillows, the unicorns stand guard on either side, and the sleeping bag is unzipped to lay at the foot of the bed in case it's necessary.

27 doesn't think it will be, though. He's still so unbearably tired, almost angry that he had to get up and walk to the 1-A dorm instead of sleeping in his own bed uninterrupted. Even if this is the same room that Chisaki haunted so thoroughly last night, it feels different. Even if the only difference is Aizawa being there, like he usually is. Like he's supposed to be. Even when 27 still thought that Aizawa was his owner, it was easier to relax with him there because he was supposed to be there.

Eri seems to want to put him to sleep immediately, despite how often she woke him up when they were in his room. She tells him to get comfortable, to put on the sleepwear that she picked out for him. He does, he brushes his teeth and changes into the soft pants and softer shirt, and finds it easier to ignore the short sleeves if he wears the face mask with cat whiskers that she picked for him.

She has a sleeping mask to go over his eyes too, bright pink with cat eyes drawn over it in black, but he doesn't want it for too many reasons. He doesn't want to sleep yet, and he doesn't.

He doesn't want her to know that he's scared of the dark.

It's embarrassing. Eri can sleep in the dark, and even though she has plenty of nightlights here, she doesn't need them. When the lightbulb burnt out in the bathroom at the 8 Precepts, she could sleep just fine. It was 27 who had to try to wheedle Rikiya or even beg Hari to get another one that he could change out. It was 27 who couldn't sleep in a pitch black room like that, who couldn't shed the terror creeping under his skin that wouldn't be pried out no matter what he tried.

He likes that it's easy to hide that here. Maybe Aizawa and Yamada think that Eri's scared of the dark, because there's always nightlights turned on in the hallway, the string lights in his room and above Eri's bed are always on. The computer screens that show what the hero students are doing provides enough light, even if it's too bright sometimes.

There's always light here. It's never really cold. It should be easier to forget about all the things that UA isn't, but it's not. Especially when he sleeps and can't see it.

But Eri curls up next to him, warm and soft by his side, and he can't overlook how soft the cot has become with her efforts. He practically sinks into the Gengar behind him, the unicorn plushie under his arm is perfect to rest it on, and if he has another odd spell of feeling so cold that he can practically feel his blood freezing, the sleeping bag looks warm enough to fight it off.

He's comfortable, almost too comfortable to waste it on sleeping. Eri wants to catch more Pokemon anyway, so they do.

27 finds himself glancing at the monitors to watch the eggs organize their punishments. Half of them scurry around to replace the still broken door or lay cement to repair the sidewalk, the other half are in the common room agonizing over their notebooks. Aizawa didn't tell him what their punishment was exactly, but it looks like it's both physically and mentally demanding.

27 wonders what he would have to do to get punished like that. It's odd that he hasn't been punished for trying to escape, for using his quirk on Midoriya. Twice. Aizawa wasn't even angry about that, and he still doesn't know what really makes Aizawa angry.

He wonders if the eggs will be angry at him, but he can't ask them now. Their phones are in a bag, and he doesn't want to leave to talk to them. Eri doesn't seem like she wants to do that either, and he doesn't know why. Even when they run out of monsters to catch, even when it seems like she doesn't have anything to do and she doesn't seem that tired yet, so she rests her head on his shoulder and watches the screens too.

But she must have been more tired than she seemed at first, because she doesn't even last through a full hour of Yamada's radio show before she's fast asleep.

*

Twenny's taking too long to come back from his outside trip. Eri tries not to get scared, but the room seems way darker than it's supposed to be. Whenever she looks at a really dark spot, the shadows start moving and it gets really scary, so she tries not to look at it. She tries to just hold her legs, to be good and not be scared, but it's getting even scarier.

It's so scary that even when He comes in the room, the shadows are scarier than He is. "The heroes left you here. They all left you here with me," He says, and the shadows get dark and start moving around like they're going to hurt her.

Eri's still really scared, but she gets scared enough to run. She knows He's lying, she knows that the heroes are coming to save her, and Twenny is coming back too. She knows he is, she knows it.

The shadows are chasing her, and she knows they're going to hurt her really bad if they catch her, and she tries to run faster but she keeps running slower instead, no matter how hard she tries. She runs and runs and runs until she sees a window in the wall low enough for her to look in, and she stops because it has a light that makes everything look orange and warm.

Twenny's inside that room, with Yama and Zawa and Mirio and all the other heroes. They're laughing and smiling, like they don't even know that Eri is getting chased outside. They don't even care.

She knows they don't care when Twenny looks at her, and his face gets mean. He looks at her like he hates her, he really hates her, and then everyone else is looking at her like that too. Eri feels more scared of that than the shadows that were chasing her, and she tries to knock on the window but her hands won't touch the window, even when she tries. "Zawa! Twenny!"

His hands are really big, and really loud when He claps them close to her ear. "Talk properly," He says, and she doesn't have to look to know that the shadows are all around her now, even if she's trying to make Twenny and the heroes not hate her. "Talk properly. Talk properly. Talk properly, talk properly, talk properly."

He keeps saying that, over and over until his voice gets scary, it gets so loud and his clapping starts to hurt. Twenny just keeps staring at her with his face getting even meaner, like he hates her more and more and more and -

"-ri, it's just a bad dream, it's just a bad dream," Twenny holds her really close, and his hands feel really big and warm on her shoulders, but Eri can't stop breathing so loud, and making whiny sounds that kind of help the scary feeling come out of her better.

But she doesn't want to sound like that, she doesn't want to make Zawa and Twenny look like that, she doesn't want them to go away and leave her again. "Don't leave! Don't leave, please don't leave!"

"Eri, I'm not," Twenny's face gets really sad and his voice gets really sad too. "I'm not going to leave. I'm sorry, I'm not. I'm here. I'm not leaving."

Zawa sits on the bed and puts his hand on Eri's head, and his thumb makes little circles that feel kind of nice. Eri tries the circle breathing trick that Twenny showed her, and it's kind of hard to do when the circles are that small, but Zawa and Twenny being close and helping her helps her a lot.

When Eri feels like the scary feeling is gone, she doesn't really want Zawa and Twenny to stop being so close to her, even if she knows that's bad and selfish. Zawa knows the scary feeling is gone though, because he puts a hand on her shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?" Zawa asks, and Eri nods because even if she doesn't want to, she knows it'll make her feel better.

"Twenny didn't come back and no one liked me anymore, and He was telling me to talk right, and Twenny really *really* hated me-e," Eri says, and she has to hold her breath so she doesn't cry because just talking about it makes her feel even sadder than she was in the dream.

"I don't hate you, Eri," Twenny says really quiet, and she looks up to see his cute mask is gone. "I'm sorry you had that dream, but it's not real. We're at UA, and I'm not going to leave. I'm sorry."

Eri frowns, because Twenny seems really sad, but it's not his fault. "It was just a bad dream," Eri says, because saying it helps her remember. And because Twenny seems even more sad about Eri's dream than Eri is now.

"And we're very prepared for bad dreams," Zawa says, giving her a really nice smile. "Do you want tea or milk?"

Eri picks at Twenny's shirt because she's not really sure she should have those. She wanted to have them in case Twenny had bad dreams again. But maybe it's okay, because Twenny might like the tea better because he's bigger, and big people like Yama and Twenny actually *like* tea. And Zawa makes the best milk in the whole world, even better than Mirio. "Milk please."

Zawa smiles, and he sets Eri's books down in front of her before he starts making it. Even Twenny smiles when he pulls the books closer and lets her look at them to pick one. "You have a lot of options."

Eri doesn't really know which one to pick. She really likes when Zawa reads the book about the

alley cat, because he makes all the cat noises really good, and he always sounds just like a cat. But she really likes when Twenny reads the one about the color clown, because he makes the ‘splishes’ sound really splishy.

And Eri really, really, *really* wants to pick a book that Twenny and Zawa can both read to her, because she thinks that if they did, she would never ever *ever* have a bad dream ever again.

Zawa hands her the milk, and it’s really warm and really sweet. Her hands feel warm holding the big cup, and just drinking a little makes her feel really sleepy and safe. “Zawa, can you and Twenny read me this one?”

Eri almost spills her milk, but it only sloshes when she moves the cup to point at it. Zawa picks it up and starts reading it to make sure he knows the words, but Twenny frowns. “You have a lot of other books. We could read a new one.”

“I don’t think I’ve read this one,” Zawa says, but he puts it down to say something with his hands that Eri doesn’t know, but it makes Twenny nod after a while.

Twenny makes sure Eri is all tucked in and warm, and that the big purple Grenny is nice and fluffy under her. Zawa moves her unicorn to sit on her legs so he doesn’t squish it, before he sits next to her on the bed, and holds the book out for Eri and Twenny to see it.

And just having Twenny and Zawa close to her at the same time makes Eri feel so warm and safe that she doesn’t think she can ever have a bad dream ever again, and she can’t help but smile about that and wiggle down so she’s super warm under the blanket.

Zawa gets to be the narrator person, and he reads really slow and soft until the saggy elephant kicks over a bush or shakes the jungle, because then he’s really surprised that the saggy elephant does that. Twenny gets to be the mean parrot, and he makes his voice really high and crackly, and makes his laugh really mean. It’s Eri’s job to make an elephant sound whenever the saggy elephant sighs, and elephant sounds are exactly like yawns, and they always make Eri feel a little more tired.

Zawa makes the saggy elephant sound really sad when he talks about how he tries to look less saggy, and really scared when the tiger and crocodile want to eat him. Twenny always makes the lion sound really whiny when he talks about how he’s still hungry after eating all those other animals, and how he wants to eat the saggy elephant. But when all the other elephants come to save the saggy one, Eri has to yawn a whole bunch, and it even makes Zawa yawn too to help her.

The saggy elephant is really silly, because he doesn’t know he looks just like all the other elephants, but he looks so happy dancing with them with their one-two-three kicks that Eri can’t pick out which one he is.

Eri’s really tired after making all those yawns, and really warm with Twenny and Zawa cuddled close to her. She can’t even take another drink of milk, even though she still has a lot, because she’s so comfy, and she really wishes she could be less comfy so Zawa and Twenny would read her another book. They make her even more sleepy than when Zawa and Yama read to her, or when Mirio does.

Eri frowns, because she doesn’t want to go to sleep now, because she might miss Yama playing her song if she does and that might make him sad. “Dad, can Dad read to me too? On his show?”

Zawa gives her a kind of funny smile, and takes her milk away. “He probably would if his boss wouldn’t get mad. Would you like to send him a picture so he can send one back?”

Eri nods, and cuddles close to Twenny and grabs his arm because Twenny tried to run away. Twenny tries really hard to keep Yama from getting pictures of him, but Eri knows that Twenny is just teasing Yama. Zawa takes a picture with his phone so Eri can see it before he takes it, and all of them are in the picture smiling. Eri still looks really tired when she tries to smile, and Zawa kind of does too. Twenny looks like he doesn't like that his picture is taken, and his hair is kind of smushed against the wall like he was trying to run away from it more.

Zawa sends the picture to Yama and after a while he gets the picture back of Yama smiling and waving in his radio show. Even the lady that works with Yama is smiling and waving behind a big window, but her waving is weird because her fingers are doing something like she's talking with her hands. Twenny has a really weird snort when he looks at it, and Zawa smiles a little more when he does. "Hizashi and Byte Sound hope that you have good dreams tonight."

Eri nods, and closes her eyes so she can work hard to have good dreams, and maybe she can fall asleep before Zawa goes back to look at the heroes to make sure they don't do bad stuff like they do at night. "Does... Byte Sound like me?" Eri asks, and has to stop to yawn.

"Mhm," Zawa says, and he sounds kind of tired too. It would be really nice if Zawa fell asleep too, and then he couldn't leave. "Zashi has to keep her in that room to make sure she doesn't steal you. She is very interested in meeting both of you. And stealing you."

Eri cuddles really close to Zawa but makes sure to keep holding Twenny's hand so he can't leave either. "Can you stay until I fall asleep? Because you like me?"

Zawa looks at her, and nods before he puts a hand on her head. "Of course. I...like you, Eri," Zawa says, but he says 'like' kind of funny. "I like you, and care about you, and I hope that you'll have good dreams."

Eri nods, and she tries to think of all the good dreams she could have. Maybe she could fly on cotton candy clouds, or be a scientist in a jungle with a bunch of animal friends. Maybe she could be a hero with Mirio, and they could punch bad guys together and both have really cool capes.

Maybe she could dream that she's in that orangey warm room with Twenny and Zawa and Yama and everyone, and they're all laughing and having fun together.

*

27 holds the mask in his hand, and wants to burn it. Wants to burn his hand with it, how could he be that *stupid*? That selfish?

Eri hasn't had a bad dream in weeks, she's been growing and thriving and losing her first tooth. She's forgotten about it until he brought it up, he reminded her. Either she's grown enough that it's harder to read her, or he's just that selfish, that stupid. He actually believed that she was fine with it.

Aizawa looks away from the monitors, still trapped by Eri's arms wound around his, and looks at 27. He should look angry, he should look like he's going to send 27 out to complete a punishment for this, but he doesn't. He looks tired. "I don't think that it's related to the face mask. Just a change in routine is enough."

She had five books to pick from, but she picked one that Chisaki gave her. She didn't want him to leave, almost like she knew that he tried to escape last night. Aizawa might think that reading the book together would be different, it would help her forget when he read it to her in that room, but either he doesn't know or he's lying. 27 doesn't know why he would, but he has to be. He has to

know that this is 27's fault.

27 runs a hand through his hair, shifting slowly so he can see if Eri will stir if he pulls away. She let go of his hand after she fell asleep, and started clinging more to Aizawa. Aizawa looks tired enough that he might appreciate this.

' Can watch students. Wake if something happens. I can't sleep, ' 27 signs, and he's not lying. He was tired, so honestly exhausted that he fell asleep despite wanting to hear Yamada's show, but now he doesn't feel that way at all. He feels as angry as he was when he wasn't able to sleep because of the nightmares, but it's different. He's angry and hot and irritated that he feels so warm now, too warm to even stand Eri's body heat.

Aizawa looks at the monitors before he looks back at Eri. "Wake me up when they alternate duties. I need to keep an eye on Kaminari and Ashido."

27 nods, and moves slowly and silently to take Aizawa's usual place in the computer chair. It feels weird to sit there, but the chair itself feels comfortable and soft. The desk seems cluttered with the phones and all the things that Eri insisted on bringing, but 27 doesn't touch them, just watching the screens without really watching them. Listening to Yamada's show, but listening more to Aizawa's breathing until it starts to even out and slow.

He looks to see if Aizawa isn't comfortable, if he's just half-lying on the cot and might wake up on his own, but he looks like he'll be able to sleep for a while. His head tilts slightly towards Eri, they're both curling in towards each other. Eri would probably be happy about that if she were awake.

27 stares at the hot plate, the one that Eri wanted to bring if he had nightmares. He gave her a nightmare instead. She's free in this place, thriving and cared for by two fathers, and he's no longer necessary here.

He's not necessary.

He isn't here for the investigation anymore, they don't need him for that. Eri doesn't truly need him either, and even if she wants him, she probably wants him as much as the plushies on her bed. But he gives her nightmares, unlike they do. They're not even slightly troublesome, but he is. He's troublesome to everyone from the hero students to Aizawa. He tried to run, he hurt Midoriya, he says weird things and does weird things because he's broken, because Yamada says he has PTSD, but he doesn't have PTSD, he's just a troublesome person.

He's troublesome to Eri. He's a reminder of Chisaki, and he shouldn't be. He should really just leave if he can't change his face enough to not remind her, but he can't. He can't know if that wouldn't trouble everyone too.

Sparky said something about transferring once. Maybe he could transfer into the 1-A dorm. He wouldn't be troublesome to Eri, he would only be around her as much as she needs him and he could make sure those times aren't a reminder for her. He could make sure to stay in his room and not be troublesome for anyone, to keep quiet so eventually the hero students forget that he's there, forget what he's done too.

27 realizes that he hasn't been paying attention to the monitors or the radio show, someone else is speaking and Yamada should be the only one who speaks. He looks at the time and realizes that it's late, he didn't even hear Yamada play Baby Shark or end his radio show, but when he looks at the camera feeds they go black.

Everything goes black.

27 blinks, he knows he's blinking, he knows that his eyes are open and it's still pitch black. He brings his hands to his eyes, he feels his fingers start to shake when his nerves start screaming, it's just dark. It's just dark, nothing has changed.

Nothing has changed. He's been dreaming. They haven't put the mask on yet, he must have heard from Bug that they will. He must have been dreaming.

He stands up slowly, feeling around the room. The room is different, there's smooth walls instead of brick, but he knows that's not enough. He might just be dreaming. He finds the door, the door is different, the knob actually turns, but it's dark outside too. He can't see where Bug is, but he knows she's there. She's going to catch him.

He walks forward one more step before he freezes. He waits.

He can't move, he knows this is bad enough, he just wants Bug to catch him, to turn the lights on, to hear her voice if she's nice if this is a nice one if she doesn't leave without talking to him maybe she'll talk to him he just wants her to talk to him he wants anyone to talk to him *please talk to him he'll be good he won't talk he won't this time he'll be good he'll do anything anything they want he won't talk he won't say anything he knows his name he'll do anything just talk just talk just talk*

He feels fingertips searingly hot on his chest and he gasps, his hands move too quick for him to know what they're doing. He has something warm and soft in his hand, he feels like he's squeezing it too hard. He has to breathe to make himself stop, he has to breathe and that's when he notices it.

There's a circle of light in the darkness, hands and arms that appear too sharply, stand out so much in the light. Midoriya is standing in front of him, his hair catching the light oddly, too much like 50's, and even if it's still dark he can see Midoriya wincing like he's in pain.

27 looks down to see the hand that he's holding is scarred, and he's holding it too tightly, enough for the skin to turn white around his fingers. There's a wider circle of light on his shoulder, people are talking. People have noticed him.

"Hey, is Aizawa-sensei in there?" Sparky whispers nervously, maybe 27 did something to make him nervous. 27 doesn't know, it takes long enough for him to figure out the question, but he doesn't know. Aizawa might not be here, he might have left.

The circle turns away and 27 can't stop himself from squeezing, he has to look at what the circle illuminates, the door and the doorframe, before he hears footsteps and watches it disappear. The world is too black now, too dark.

He feels another hand on his hands, soft and trembling. "H-Hey Shinsou," Midoriya says, his voice high and strained. "I-It's okay, you know. Kaminari just kind of knocked out the power."

27 doesn't know what those words mean, but he wants more of them. He doesn't know what to do to get that, he doesn't know what they want him to do. He'd do anything. Anything, anything at all, anything but let go of this hand, he might not be able to hold another one.

"Kaminari, come on," Stress Bake hisses, and 27 hears a rustle of plastic before he hears more footsteps, and the light returns to shine on more shoulders and chests in the hallway.

"Look, maybe we can call an electrician, but we really can't wake Aizawa-sensei up right now. I *will* die if I try it," Zappy says in a rush, pleading for the others to listen to him.

“Ix nay on the ie day,” Adhesive Strips whispers back, strained as though he was hissing it through clenched teeth. Probably talking about him. That’s nice, it’s nice that they see him. He hasn’t melted into the dark, he’s still here, still here because he has one of their hands.

“Kaminari, seriously,” Aux Lobes hisses, a bit too loud, and a series of heavy footsteps snatch away the light before it hits the top of the doorframe. “We need to....” Amplifier 2.0 trails off, looking at something horrifying inside the room. Maybe she found one of his teeth, maybe the room is more horrifying than he remembered it. Maybe the bricks came to life after he named them. “Ochako’s dad is a construction guy, let’s see if he can help us.”

The light comes back, pointed at the white ceiling, and he hears the bag rustling, he sees more lights come on to illuminate faces before they illuminate each other. 27 can force his fingers to release, even if he doesn’t let go of the hand, he can stop demanding so much of it, but the hand on the back of his just pats his hands, the hand he’s holding twists and moves as the bones inside do, as the fingers curl and flex.

“Hey, Shinsou, do you want to come down with us? Unless you want to stay here, if Eri’s scared of the-” Midoriya cuts off when 27 pushes his hands towards Midoriya. He can’t talk, he knows he’ll get in trouble, and he doesn’t have his hands, not that they could see them. “Okay, let’s head downstairs so we’re all together.”

Midoriya pulls away the hand that was on top of his, but he doesn’t take away the other one. 27 watches all the things that appear from the dark, shoulders and stairs and walls. He has to use one of his hands to catch the hand rail, he can’t see well enough to know where his feet are, if he has feet in the dark, but Midoriya doesn’t take advantage of that to pull away.

There’s a lamp on in the common room, sitting on the floor in the middle to illuminate the notebooks and pens thrown around, and the students looking at them. It’s soft and warm, and comforting.

“Aizawa-sensei is asleep, so we took back our hostage,” Sparky says, a hand on 27’s shoulder. The others don’t seem happy about that, and Momo sighs with a hand on her face.

“This is exactly why Aizawa-sensei assigned us that list. *Exactly*,” Momo repeats, and she might be right. Aizawa might not like that they keep kidnapping 27.

27 doesn’t really mind it, though.

Aux Lobes and Sparky take the bag of phones to Floaty, begging her to call her dad, and Ashi points at either him or Midoriya. “What’s with the hand holding?! Did *something* happen up there?” Her eyebrows move up and down, her smile tight and exaggerated, and that means something that Midoriya takes offense to.

“It’s not like that! I just kind of scared Shinsou on accident,” Midoriya says, waving his free hand, but he doesn’t pull away the other. It’s probably weird, but it’s not weird enough that 27 will either. “Are you okay, Tokoyami?”

Wheezing Crow straightens from slumping over his legs, nodding at Midoriya. “Dark Shadow has been tamed. I apologize for worrying you all.”

“Non! YaoMomo’s thinking quick and my sparkles are here for you, mon amie!” Frenchie declares, swinging his arms around dramatically before he sees 27, wilting. “Ah, par- I mean, sorry!”

“Non,” 27 says, to see if he can say it right. The way Frenchie says it is different, it’s lighter until it’s harsh at the end, and 27 sounds harsh all the way through. His voice sounds like his throat should hurt, but it doesn’t.

Floaty talks on her cell phone with her dad, her voice high pitched and only gets higher when she apologizes for waking him up. Ashi launches herself off the back of the couch and runs to the kitchen, the other students are sitting around or standing close to the others, a lot of them are crowding around Floaty. Midoriya probably wants to be one of them.

But 27 is holding his hand, so he can’t. “Did you work everything out? With Aizawa-sensei?” Midoriya asks, nervously, like he doesn’t want to say it. He doesn’t want to talk about how stupid 27 was.

27 nods, even if he could talk. But maybe he should, maybe Midoriya wants to make sure that 27 won’t hurt him again. “Yamada is getting paid for me. I’m not going to try that again.”

Midoriya smiles, relieved. “That’s good. I mean, it’s good that you’re not going to leave. Everyone would be really worried about you. Eri would be really sad-”

“I can’t kill you either,” 27 says, even if he probably shouldn’t. He’s giving away a good weapon, a good threat, but Midoriya is giving him his hand, so it’s fine. “I was lying.”

Midoriya tilts his head before he starts scratching the back of it. “Kacchan was pretty convinced, but it doesn’t really make sense... With your quirk... It has....” Midoriya’s lips twist and he screws his eyes shut, before they open, too wide and too bright, his free hand in a fist. “It can’t maintain control when the target is in pain, right? Because the endorphins from that are really strong, it could probably affect the part of the brain that your quirk uses to control-”

Ashi slaps a hand over Midoriya’s mouth, before she holds a glass of pale pink liquid with a bendy straw out to him. “Here! Wait!” Ashi takes a sip, exhaling in relief after she does. “Yep, bendy straws make all the poison go away! See? Definitely not poisoned!”

27 takes a sip, even if he didn’t need her to tell him that. He’s not stupid, he knows that Ashi wouldn’t poison him. She might be trying to suffocate Midoriya, because he keeps trying to talk behind her hand. “It’s sweet.”

“Strawberry yogu-milk!” Ashi says, now that she knows when he asks questions. “It’s the perfect thing for when you’re sick. It’s the *only* thing I used to drink when I got really sick as a kid.”

She pulls away the hand on Midoriya’s mouth to press the back of it to his forehead, frowning. “It’s always hot,” 27 says, trying to take the strawberry yogu-milk from her. She might forget that he has it, and he can steal all of it. “I’m not sick.”

Midoriya starts scratching his head again, like he has 27’s quirk, and 27 sighs. He didn’t really want to admit that much, but Midoriya looks upset about it.

“Pain is an interrupter. I can’t make people do something complicated, and I have to be specific otherwise they make up their own interpretations of what I mean,” 27 says, and he has to look away from Midoriya’s intense gaze. “I could control three at once, but now it’s only one. And it’s weird.”

“Shinny,” Ashi half-whispers, her eyes wide and haunted. “Don’t.”

Midoriya takes a deep breath. “Is it pain only to the target or if you get hurt, does that also interrupt your quirk? How much pain? Is a papercut enough or maybe just something uncomfortable that

isn't painful? How specific do the commands have to be? How do you control one person and not the other if you need to talk to make them-"

"Five," 27 says, counting the questions. He's starting to lose track of how many things Midoriya wants to know. "Five questions. Tell me how to transfer to UA."

Ashi grins, jumping on the balls of her feet. "Shinny's gonna be in the hero course! I don't care if Aizawa-sensei wants to put you in the stinky boy's side, there's a free room on the girl's side and we're gonna treat you *right*!"

"Um, you haven't been in school since you went to school with Ashido and Kirishima, right?" Midoriya asks, and 27 wavers before he decides to not count it against one of his questions. He nods, and Midoriya looks more nervous. "You might need to talk to Principal Nezu and take the entrance exam in the Spring. The r- the exam is kind of tough, though."

27 knows, he knows that he's probably too stupid to do it right now, but he can cleave onto these hero students and prepare himself for it. "The target has to be in pain. As long as I concentrate, it's fine. It depends on how much pain, how many people I'm controlling. Being uncomfortable doesn't affect it. People can't really think under my quirk, but they can see and react. If I told you to walk, you would walk in any direction, so I would have to tell you to walk forward. And I tell the person I want to control... It's hard to explain."

Talking about strings might be weird, but that's how it works. Midoriya's eyes are practically glowing like he activated some part of his quirk, nodding to himself. "Do you know what part of the brain it affects? Like, um," Midoriya stares at his free hand, clenching it and unclenching it a few times, like he's considering beating the answer out of 27. "Do you want some snacks? Or a video game? Or maybe-"

"I don't know," 27 admits. He might have lied and convinced Midoriya to help him with his tests so he would be ready to take the entrance exam, but Midoriya also might have found out about it.

The rest of the lights come on, and several students either sigh in relief or cheer. Floaty looks even more relieved, holding one phone to her ear while the other is held by Jirou before she pulls it away. She thanks her father and apologizes again, tells him to be safe at work.

Blasty kicks through a door that leads into the dark, followed by Kirimson Shark and Squidly. "Blew fucking all those breakers, you shitty phone charger bitch! Oi, why the fuck is-"

"Hey, Shinbro!" Kirimson Shark calls, waving at him like he's across a field instead of across a room. "Is Aizawa-sensei her-"

Blasty elbows Kirimson in the side, but not hard enough to do much damage. "That's what I wanted to know, Shitty Hair, don't fucking interrupt people. Learn some fucking manners."

"Aizawa-sensei still seems to be in the dark about this," Toko says, and 27 wonders if he did just to make that joke. "We should return to our tasks and ensure that when light falls upon us again, it will not alight upon our failures."

"And Kaminari should not be tasked with cleaning the electrical outlets," Provost Piston decides with a chop of his hand towards Sparky. "We have approximately two hours and 37 minutes before sunrise, and our guests should be arriving at 10, so if we are to gain the four hours of sleep necessary for semi-functional-"

"We should get back to work," Momo interrupts, even though 27's pretty sure that someone taught

her manners. She seems to be irritated, either she doesn't deal well with not sleeping, the others are annoying her, or she was concussed during the Heroics Exam and hasn't had much time to recover from it. Or all three. But when she looks at him, she talks like she's talking to Eri. "You could stay here with us, Shinsou, but we'll be rather busy with our assignments from Aizawa-sensei."

27 feels the mask when he tries to tell her, so he has to drop Midoriya's hand to sign. '*Can help. My fault.*'

"It wasn't really your fault, Shinsou!" the Fluent One says, waving his hands. "It's nice that you want to help, but we did something pretty bad. We're really sorry about that."

27 has no idea what he means, they wouldn't have acted so recklessly if he didn't make them. And he wants to help anyway, to ingratiate himself to them. To make sure he can transfer smoothly, that they won't keep him from being able to move in here, close enough to Eri but distant enough not to disturb her. '*I want to. It's fine.*'

The students give him easy tasks. Dusting things, writing down scenarios for their list. They have to clean everything so it looks like no one lives there, but they're hoping that doesn't include their rooms. They worry about that a lot, and several of them think that certain ones would be impossible to clean even when they move into the 2-A dorm.

One of them wrote down needing to call for help if they're in a rescue operation in a flood, in a hurricane, in a tsunami, and if it's raining, so 27 writes down several different scenarios of being attacked with different weapons or quirks. He counts to make sure that they have enough, they've each filled out several pages and the numbering system is off or non-existent if it's there, and they've actually named 1024 scenarios with no repeats. It's very Plus Ultra of them.

Provost Piston and Momo make their final inspection, and Momo seems relieved that 27 counted for her. Then they announce that they can all go to sleep, that they still have 5 hours before these guests show up, and that they should sleep anyway. Sleep is important, four hours are important.

Ashi offers to walk with him back to the room, but he shakes his head. He's tired, he's tired again but he doesn't want to leave. He doesn't want to go back there.

They still leave, even if they want him to leave too. They worry that Aizawa might blame them if 27 is out of place, but Blasty argues that 27 just does weird shit, that it'll be fine. 27 appreciates that.

He's alone in the common room, the lights are still on. He looks at the walls and he drinks the last of the yogumilk to prove that he can, that it's easy. There's no mask, there's nothing that forces him to suck water from a rusty faucet through his teeth. He can just open his mouth and suck through the bendy straw.

He's not there. He's not at The Miasma. He's not at the 8 Precepts either.

He's at UA, and he has no idea what that means anymore.

*

Bakugo puts up with it for almost an hour before he starts making his way back to Shitsou. The fucker is too stupid to sleep, it's clear as fucking day on his face and Bakugo's known that from day one, but he's not putting up with that shit.

The fucker is just staring at the *wall*, like there's not a fucking TV with a thousand channels and five fucking game consoles staring him in the face. He's full of fucking shit when he looks at

Bakugo, trying to act like he's *not* tired. Fucker is fucking exhausted but he's too fucking stupid to fall asleep on his own, and no one fucking gets that shit.

Fucking *no one* gets how fucked up Shitsou is, and it's pissing him off.

"Oi, I'm making some milk and chamomile bullshit, and it's not fucking poisoned," Bakugo says, because he has to fucking tell Shitsou that shit thanks to whatever weirdass obsession he's had about being poisoned for fucking *ever*. Fucker's problems with eating shit has probably been a big fucking red flag this whole time. "Get over here and watch me so you know that shit, alright?"

Shitsou still follows basic fucking orders and shit, and Bakugo forgot how fucking creepy his staring is when he doesn't fucking talk. He sets the water to boil and shit, the milk is in the microwave even if it tastes better getting boiled in a pot like the old hag makes it. He's got to wait to let that shit steep and shit, and he's not fucking doing it in this weird fucking silence.

"Try to talk to me," Bakugo tells him, turns around and crosses his arms and fucking *dares* Shitsou to prove him wrong about this shit.

"I can," Shitsou says, and he sounds like he's fucking gargled some nails or some shit. Bitch needs to fucking hydrate. Or needs someone to *remind* him to hydrate, and no one is doing that shit. "I won't ask questions. Not trying to quirk you."

Bakugo scoffs. "Like I'm scared of your fucking quirk. Fucking ask questions, that's some shit you need to get over. Fucking Kaminari gets to fuck up our whole power grid, no one's gonna beat you for making some creepy fucking human puppets."

Even if it is *fucking creepy*. Deku looked fucking soulless, like there were no fucking lights on and never had been, just moving so fucking creepy and ramping up All for One like he didn't fucking care if it splattered him.

"Apparently, that shit unlocks your shit talking," Bakugo says, and starts plopping some tea bags from Yaoyorozu's high class stash into a mug. "You can talk to anyone you quirked. Eri, Ashido, now Deku and me. Maybe Shitty Hair, he doesn't fucking remember if you did. Pretty fucking sure if Micsei and Shitsei don't take your ass to a quirk specialist now, it's fucking child neglect or some shit."

"It's not," Shitsou says, because he's real fucking stupid about this shit. He's probably just been through so much fucking nightmare shit that the subtle abuse goes right over his fucking head. "I can wear a mask again. It's fi-"

"*Fucker*," Bakugo turns around and fucking seethes, because Shitsou *fucking means that shit*. "That shit. Isn't fucking happening. It will fuck you, *the fuck up*. And no one here is scared of your shitty quirk. You got that shit?"

The fucker doesn't, because he just fucking shrugs, and that's not a fucking answer anymore. But he's probably not going to believe that shit until Shitsei tells him, because Shitsei fucking *owns* him and shit in his fucked up head.

"Shitsei is fucked up, but he's only fucked up at us. You could fucking get away with murder, fucking hell." Shitsou pretty much fucking did. He didn't actually kill Deku but he probably fucking could have. Shitty Hair said his quirk was fucking dangerous, and he wasn't fucking kidding.

But Shitsou has some fucking pinky swear with a dead chick not to kill anyone, and he's fucked up

enough to keep it. Shitsou's issues have fucking issues, and they balance each other out like the shittiest house of cards ever made. It's *fucked up* , but what isn't about Shitsou?

"When's the last time someone fucking fed you?" Bakugo asks, because he fucking *has to*. Fucker is still too twiggy, even with the delusions about poison and shit. And Eri *isn't* , and that brings that shit to a whole new level of fucked up.

Shitsou takes way too damn long to answer, so Bakugo opens the fridge to see what he has to work with. He's too damn tired to make some fancy shit, but he needs to get over that shit because he's not fucking *sleeping* either. Just thinking about that fucked up dream makes him want to shove some toothpicks under his eyelids to fight that shit off.

"Fuck it, we've got eggs and oranges and shit, don't fucking ask for some fancy fucking omelettes because I'm just making eggs. Some fucking egg boats too, and don't tell that cheese bitch I like that shit, alright?" Bakugo says, and he doesn't have to fucking worry about that shit because Shitsou can't fucking talk to Aoyama anyway. Even if it's fucked up, it's a fucking relief that *one* of his shitty friends can keep some shit to themselves.

"You should sleep," Shitsou says, like he can *fucking talk*. He's probably *never* fucking slept, and he definitely hasn't in a while with how fucking huge his fucking eyebags are. Fucking Micheal Kors Insomnia line in the works over here. "They'll drug you again."

Shitsou might be *right* , but he doesn't have to fucking say it. "And I'll beat their asses, *again*. I'm not fucking sleeping til I forget some shit, alright? My fucky brain is dealing with some shit, and I'm not dealing with my fucky brain until I beat the shit out of it by not sleeping. It fucking *works* , so don't argue with me."

A bunch of fucking articles say it's unhealthy or some shit, but that's just because it works too damn well. Stingy fucking therapists don't want everyone jumping on this hack or they'll lose all the fucking money they make. Got a fucked up brain? Just don't sleep until it becomes fucking mush so you don't have to deal with it.

Maybe that's why Shitsou looks like that. And that's why he's so damn *stupid*. "When's the last time you slept? Like, really, full fucking 8 hours and shit?"

He looks over to see Shitsou looking at his hand, counting and shit. And when he gets to fucking *four* , Bakugo starts looking for that Benadryl stash. Fuck it, maybe he can convince Shitsou it's seasoning instead of poison.

"Why the fuck isn't anyone else keeping track of this shit? You're a fucking disaster, and no one fucking gets that," Bakugo grumbles, and he can't fucking find that shit when it's hard enough to keep an eye on the fucking egg boats in the pan. There's a fucking balance between toasting the bread and burning it, and it's hard as shit to flip if it's too soft.

"I have nightmares," Shitsou says, and fucking *duh*. Why the fuck wouldn't he? "Tea doesn't work. The medicine just made me weird."

"Then don't sleep until you can't think about it," Bakugo says, and he gives up on the Benadryl because he doesn't want to see Shitsou acting *weird*. Fucker *is* weird, and he doesn't want to see what weird is for him. "Like, when you can't fucking think anymore, and you have to try to remember how to fucking walk. You can sleep like a fucking baby after that, no nightmares at all. Nightmares are too fucking complicated for your fried ass brain."

"I could make you sleep," Shitsou says, but the way he fucking says it is weird. Like he's trying to

be helpful and shit instead of threatening. “You can’t think under my quirk.”

Fucking. *Nightmare fuel*. And Bakugo didn’t need any more of that shit. Apparently Deku’s hack ass quirk has a secondary function to give him fucking nightmares, and it’s not *fucking* appreciated. “No fucking thanks, I’ve got this shit covered. Fuck Class B if they want me to be fucking hospitable and shit. All the other extras need their fucking brainstorming and reflection shit, but you saw my match. Five fucking minutes and I had that shit in the bag, what the fuck are they gonna tell me?”

While everyone else is playing host and shit to those fucking extras, Bakugo can take full fucking advantage of Monoma’s hack ass quirk. *That’s* the fucking brainstorming that everyone else needed to get on, get a new fucking perspective on their shit by letting that whiney theatre bitch try their shit out.

But that theatre bitch has some weird fucking plans for Shitsou, and now Bakugo’s curious. “Why the fuck is Monoma obsessed with you? He wanted to steal you and shit, like you’re a fucking quirk. He’s fucking weird, but he’s got a fucking weird ass crush on you or some something.”

“He threatened me,” Shitsou says, and doesn’t *fucking elaborate* but he needs to. Bakugo’s all fucking ears and he’s got Monoma all to himself tomorrow to sort that shit out *permanently*. “I don’t know why. I didn’t break his hand, but I should have. He tried to steal my quirk.”

The quirk stealing was Bakugo’s fault, and it was fucking hilarious that Monoma got his little fingers twisted for it, but that doesn’t explain why he fucking *threatened* Shitsou. Maybe Shitsou could handle that shit on his own, and he’d probably get away with it because Shitsei doesn’t fucking bother to feed him so why would discipline be on the fucking table? But Bakugo isn’t going to let fucking *Monoma* threaten Shitsou and get away with that shit. “I’ll sort his shit out, don’t fucking worry about it.”

Shitsou didn’t look that worried in the first place. He looks way more concerned with a healthy fucking breakfast, but he’s going to have to get over that shit because he should have been paying attention.

“Here. Eat and drink and shit, you need the fucking vitamins if your ass is getting sick,” Bakugo says, setting the table for him because Shitsou just doesn’t *do* shit like that on his own. He’s an overgrown toddler with serious fucking issues, and it’s a fucking miracle that he doesn’t need to be spoonfed.

“I’m not getting sick,” Shitsou whines, because he’s stupid like that. He sounds fucking sick, he looks fucking sick, Ashido says he has a fever so he definitely fucking does. He needs to get over squishing the orange slices and just fucking *eat them*, fuck.

“Your ass is gonna get sick if you don’t eat all of that shit. Fucking take care of yourself, hydrate and fucking *sleep*. If you don’t, your immune system gets weak and you’ll get your ass wasted by disease.” And *finally*, he’s found a hack to make Shitsou do shit.

Just threaten him with getting sick.

Shitsou is fucking *inhaling* those oranges, he’s drinking the shit out of that milk tea too. The tea and having a full fucking meal will probably put Shitsou’s ass to sleep, and maybe when Shitsou wakes up he’ll look a little more like a real fucking person.

Bakugo gets him some fucking orange juice too, and fucker doesn’t even check it. Fucking nutrients really do that shit, they’re fixing Shitsou’s brain problems fucking immediately. And

Bakugo has time to make some fucking coffee, two caffeine pills too because he is *fucking* tired but he's not dealing with that shit yet. He's not going to close his eyes and see that shit again.

"Great, now go the fuck to sleep," Bakugo tells Shitsou, and he doesn't care where he does it. If he wants to go back to Eri and Shitsei so no one gets accused of kidnapping him again, that's fucking fantastic, but Bakugo can and will read him a fucking bedtime story if that shit will make any fucking difference.

Shitsou shakes his head, but he sounds better with all the fucking hydration going on. "I'll have nightmares. Something reminded me of it."

Bakugo sits down at the table and drinks some coffee until he can think of something to say other than 'fucking *same*.' Yeah, he has issues and Shitsou has issues, some of their issues are the same fucking issues, but Shitsou needs to get over his issues. "What reminded you? We'll fix that shit so it doesn't happen." Shitsou shakes his head, because he's so *fucking helpful*, but Bakugo lets it slide. Shit might be pretty fucking horrifying. "It's stupid how that shit works."

Shitsou is back to doing that silent staring shit, and he has to know that it's fucking creepy. He knows that he doesn't have to, he can fucking talk now, and it'd be better if he did because Bakugo wouldn't feel like he has to fucking talk about it either.

"Deku's weird fucking quirk has me a little fucked up," Bakugo says, and he says that shit quiet so Shitsou knows not to talk about that shit. That's the fucking *best* thing about Shitsou, he can keep that shit to himself. "I had this fucking nightmare where I was back in that shitty bar, and I was puking that weird black shit again, but fucking *Deku* was there too. Fucking Deku and me, fucking both of us got snatched but we didn't go to that fucking parking lot in Kamino. We were right in front of that guy and he just fucking..."

He didn't even look at Bakugo, even when he screamed at him. Even when he tried to use his quirk, but his quirk just wasn't fucking working, like fucking Shitsei was on that bastard's side. That bastard knew who Deku was, what his quirk was, and Bakugo didn't fucking matter to him.

"He fucking killed Deku. Fucking ended the whole fucking world. I fucking ended All Might, ended Deku, the villains fucking won *permanently* because of my ass and I can't fucking..." He's too tired to quirk, so he just drinks some more coffee and hopes he can find some fucking balance between this shit. Too exhausted to quirk, too awake to sleep. He just needs to get to that point where it doesn't fucking matter anymore. "I'm tired of dealing with this shit."

Shitsou looks at his fucked up hands, more scars there than fucking Deku's, before he touches one of those really fucked up ones. Three long scars all over his arms, one almost goes to his neck, and Bakugo doesn't *want* to know what made them. If someone took a fucking oversized potato peeler to Shitsou and fucking *peeled* him or some shit, or if someone just ripped the skin off like ripping out a fucking cuticle. Or if it was *worse*. "I forgot about it. Chisaki helped me forget."

"He didn't fucking help you with *shit*," Bakugo reminds, because Shitsou is *so* not going to form some kind of attachment bullshit to the dead fucker. "He fucking tortured the shit out of you, so don't fucking send him a thank you card for any kind of shit. Got that, shit face?"

Shitsou fucking *pouts*, and Bakugo's three seconds from wiping that shit off his face. "It was easier when I didn't think about it. I didn't have to remember."

Bakugo didn't really have the option of getting tortured to keep the fucking summer camp bullshit out of his head, but he might have picked it. Not that he thinks Shitsou's lucky or any shit for that.

“I don’t know what to do here,” Shitsou says, and Bakugo doesn’t know what will fix that whiney ass tone in his voice, but he’s gonna fucking do it. “They don’t need me for the investigation. I’m just a reminder for Eri. I don’t...”

Fuck , if Shitsou cries, Bakugo is going to fucking *lose it*. “Oi, don’t fucking worry about that shit. Fucking pick up a hobby or some shit, find some shit you’re good at. Or shit at. Then make yourself good at it.”

Fucking fuck *fuck* , Shitsou looks like he’s going to fucking *cry* and Bakugo is nowhere near close to anything surrounding handling that, *fuck*.

“Teach me that pinching shit,” Bakugo says, holding out his arm. He’s pretty fucking sure Shitsou could fucking wreck his shit if he tried. The last time he did that fucked up shit to his shoulder he fucking saw *white* like his eyes decided that shit was too much to deal with. But even if Shitsou found a way to pop his whole fucking arm off like a fucking action figure, that shit would be easier to deal with than watching Shitsou fucking *cry*.

And maybe Shitsou *does* know how to do that shit, because he looks fucking *excited* to try. He looks over Bakugo’s arm before he puts a hand on his forearm, feeling around for some shit under his skin before he finds it. “Breathe out.”

Bakugo rolls his eyes but fucking does it, and it’s a *fucking great thing* he did. Shitsou presses down on a fucking *agony button* with his fucking thumb and Bakugo would have screamed if he could, but Shitsou apparently knew that. He just throws around his free hand, not sure if he should bite it or wave it or try to punch Shitsou in the face, before he starts slapping the table because *fucking fuck FUCK*.

Shitsou lets up and Bakugo’s still not sure if he should deck him across the fucking face. “Sweat related quirks have swollen glands and ducts. Pressing down on one hurts-”

“No *fucking duh* ,” Bakugo hisses, he didn’t fucking *need* a demonstration of that shit.

Shitsou just rolls his fucking eyes, the fucking *twerp* . “You use yours a lot, so they’re bigger. The gauntlets on your costume protect you from that.”

And Bakugo is never going to *fucking change that* , fuck. “Great. Let’s put your ass in the support department, fucking crazy eyes is going to go apeshit over your fucking reviews.” Actually, they’d probably get along great. Too fucking great, that crazy bitch would probably make a robot baby programmed to hit every quirk’s pressure points and Shitsei would probably love it. “How do I fuck up Kaminari with that shit?”

Apparently, Kaminari’s quirk probably uses his nervous system, so his nerve endings are either really fucking sensitive or really fucking dull. With the shit that Shitsou shows him, Bakugo finds out that his nerve endings aren’t *fucking dull* at all.

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Aizawa stands at the bottom of the stairwell and considers whether he *really* wants to know what’s going on.

“Oi, how much harder do I have to go? You’re fucking falling asleep, you fucking liar,” Bakugo grumbles, pressing two fingers behind Shinsou’s jaw and below his ear to trigger a his mandibular pressure point.

“You’re doing it right. It hurts a lot,” Shinsou answers, and more surprising than the fact that he

does is that he isn't affected by the pressure point at all.

It's also surprising that Shinsou is participating in a somewhat normal activity for a teenage boy. Even if he clearly knew a bit more about pressure points and painful restraining holds than the average teenage boy, Aizawa has observed this kind of bonding ritual enough times to know that this was somewhat normal.

Sneaking out of the Safe Room to do this sort of activity with a friend was also somewhat normal, but considering the fit that Eri had woken up to when she realized Shinsou wasn't there, he didn't appreciate it. "Mom!"

Eri runs to bury her face in Shinsou's stomach, her arms wrapped around him tightly. Both Shinsou and Bakugo seem startled by that, Shinsou hesitating before putting a hand on her head to reassure her. "Eri, what's.... You had a nightmare."

Eri shook her head, twisting her fingers in Shinsou's shirt, but didn't move to respond. She likely didn't want to say what Aizawa was only now piecing out.

Eri wasn't coping well with being separated from Shinsou. With the Heroics Exam, the interview at the station, the dorm shift without her and Shinsou isolating himself after discovering Furokage Mizuki's picture, they had been spending considerably less time together. And it seemed that Eri was reaching the point that she couldn't tolerate it much longer.

Aizawa was still unsure how to remedy that situation appropriately. If Shinsou was able to cope well with it, able to forge new attachments to others, then it wouldn't be conducive to stunt that and reinforce his bond with Eri. But he also wasn't sure whether Eri would be reassured by spending more time with himself or Hizashi in Shinsou's stead.

Before Aizawa could begin to face that situation, he needed to make sure that his students had been dealt with. "Your peers seem sure that there's nothing to worry about."

Bakugo huffs, leaning towards the coffee table to pick up a stack of papers. "1024 times we need to run away or call for help. Everything's fixed up and cleaned like we don't even fucking live here. I'll walk you through it."

That's completely unnecessary, but Aizawa finds himself hoping that this is a situation in which Bakugo is approaching an adult instead of attempting to resolve the issue himself. Bakugo points out the repaired door with a wave of his hand, and Aizawa notices the kitchen has been thoroughly cleaned, including the inside of the cabinets and refrigerator. Bakugo pauses to start making coffee, and Aizawa steps in to pull out his usual blend, well hidden and tucked into the bend of a pipe underneath the sink.

"Are you actually going to help Shitsou if I tell you shit?" Bakugo hisses, an aggressive statement with a pleading tone. That worries Aizawa in more ways than one.

"That would be my job," Aizawa answers, and waits for whatever Shinsou had admitted to Bakugo, someone that he obviously felt more comfortable with than either Aizawa or Hizashi.

"Right, like making sure he eats and sleeps and shit, doing a great job so far," Bakugo grumbles under his breath, but he looks away under Aizawa's stare. "Don't fucking leave him alone or let him get bored. He's going through some fucking midlife crisis shit."

Aizawa breathes in the smell of brewing coffee, in hopes that the air carries enough caffeine to understand that statement, before he finds it lacking. "What do you mean by that?"

“He almost fucking cried because you’re not bugging him about the investigation, and Eri’s giving him some fucked up empty nest syndrome,” Bakugo answers, staring at Shinsou and Eri with a cocked eyebrow before he glances back at Aizawa out of the corner of his eye. “You gonna do anything about that ‘Mom’ shit? It’s seriously fucked up-”

“I appreciate that you told me this,” Aizawa says, resting a hand on Bakugo’s head before the teenager shakes it off. “Don’t bring it up to either of them.”

Shinsou had held out longer than Aizawa had expected. Shinsou had probably never had the opportunity to appreciate being a child with few responsibilities, between his ‘jobs’ at Miasma and Eri’s care at the 8 Precepts. Perhaps fighting the investigation had given him a sense of purpose, and with the absence of that coupled with the sudden realization that his circumstances were much different, that he was free for the first time in his life, Shinsou found himself lost.

He would likely lose himself in Eri’s care again if Aizawa wasn’t careful to manage that. “You should sleep,” Aizawa mutters, noticing the way that Bakugo was eyeing the coffee, under eye circles already developing from one night without sleep that Aizawa was mostly responsible for.

“Nightmares, but I fucking got it,” Bakugo answers, and Aizawa finds himself a bit surprised that he admitted that so easily. “I’ll sleep in like, two days. It’ll be fine.”

Aizawa doesn’t want to know what those two days will look like, considering that normal class schedule will resume tomorrow. “Research ‘Image Rehearsal Therapy.’ If that doesn’t work after a week, I or your parents can schedule an appointment with a general practitioner to prescribe medication that can help.”

Bakugo glares at him, more shock than actual irritation. “Oi, what the fuck does that mean? Did the hag sign over her fucking parental rights to you or some shit and no one told me?”

“Limited guardianship in order to make some medical decisions, mostly in place for emergencies,” Aizawa answers. “It’s the same for every student who lives on campus, though I’m only responsible for Class 1-A. Chronic nightmares may not be an emergency, but I doubt that it would be questioned.” And he doubts that Bakugo would go to his parents with this, even if it did become an emergency.

Bakugo crosses his arms, glancing back at Shinsou and Eri. “You gonna get Shitsou on that shit?”

“If it’s necessary,” Aizawa lies. Shinsou seems to have taken the same great lengths as Bakugo to avoid having nightmares in the first place, and may be less willing to discuss the issue with Aizawa. And even if he did, medication would still be out of reach as Recovery Girl would be unable to prescribe it, and no other medical professional could truly evaluate Shinsou without The Commission’s approval.

Aizawa pours himself a cup of coffee and takes a sip, wondering how much easier both Shinsou and Eri’s wardships would be to manage if they both had the skills necessary to communicate their needs clearly.

*

There are too many people, and 27 doesn’t like it.

He lets Eri cling to him, and tries not to appreciate it too much, knowing that she’s only doing this because that nightmare must have been horrible. Horrible enough for her to lie that she had it. He gave her a horrible nightmare, and he shouldn’t feel so entitled to wish that he could escape this

crowded room, but he does. He finds himself staring at Aizawa, pretending that he had him under his quirk and could command him to let them leave without talking to him.

But Aizawa is giving commands to Chocula, giving him a list of errands to run and half of them were assigned to Aizawa by Yamada. 27 wonders if he should tell Yamada that, if making Yamada angry at Aizawa would feel good this time now that Aizawa is irritating him.

The Quirk Thief had his arms full of drink carriers that he's been dispersing to the hero students, but when he approaches 27 with one still in his hands, 27 hates that there are too many people here for a different reason. "I do apologize that I was unable to save you from these wretched barbarians of Class A and give you a reprieve for a day, but I hope that this will make up for it."

It's a purple drink.

27 doesn't want it. He *doesn't want it*. He doesn't like Quirk Thief and he doesn't trust him, shouldn't trust this drink either. Out of anyone at UA, Quirk Thief would definitely try to poison him to make it easier to steal him, and 27 doesn't even know why he wants to steal him. He didn't seem to enjoy stealing his quirk last time.

27 takes the drink but hands it to Eri, to gauge Quirk Thief's reaction. He wouldn't try to poison Eri, he'd be unsettled by the threat of that happening. Few people in this world are demented enough to want to hurt a child, and even fewer who would hurt Eri. Despite what he knows and what he suspects about Quirk Thief, he doubts that he would stoop to that level.

Quirk Thief looks unsettled, but it seems to be more out of confusion. "I wasn't aware that Eri would be here, otherwise I would have made sure to bring something less caffeinated."

Eri tries to hand it back to 27, and he wavers before he hands it back. It has coffee in it. It's purple. But he doesn't want it.

He *doesn't want it*, and he just has to remember that.

Quirk Thief's eyes widen a bit before he tosses the empty drink carrier towards the kitchen counter, smiling a bit too wide and shakily. ' *Do you like T-A-R-O?* '

Quirk Thief is too good. He's too good at whatever game he's playing at, he knows too many of 27's weaknesses and he's been plotting too long while 27 was unaware of him. 27 is woefully outmatched here, he doesn't even know what Quirk Thief *wants*, but if he's not careful, Quirk Thief will get it.

Aizawa *finally* seems to realize that 27 has been begging him to end this and give him an escape. "Monoma, come to the staff dorm after you're done here. Vlad will let you in."

Aizawa is in on it. Whatever Quirk Thief wants, Aizawa wants that too, and that means that 27 is *fucked*. He's surrounded, two people that he can't fathom and can't manipulate are working together to force something out of him, and because it's Quirk Thief and Aizawa, he has no idea what they want. What either of them could want but especially what both of them could want.

Aizawa brushes off Quirk Thief's enthusiastic agreement and starts to walk out, and 27 follows him far less relieved than he thought he would be. Eri keeps trying to hand him the drink but 27 really doesn't want it, he doesn't know what to do with it either. He can't bring himself to throw it away, and it's stupid. It's just *purple*.

"Here," Aizawa says, holding his hand out to take the drink from Eri. Maybe he'll throw it away, maybe he'll give some indication of what it is. Instead of doing that, he takes off the lid and takes a

sip, before he puts it back on and hands it back to 27. “It’s 10:15. And it’s a taro latte. It’s sweet, but it blends well with the coffee.”

That doesn’t really matter. He knows Memory isn’t involved, the poison might take longer than 10 minutes. But if Aizawa drank it, then it isn’t poisoned, because he wouldn’t risk that. He’s involved in this plot, whatever it is.

He might be bluffing, he might have drank it because he has an antidote, only drinking it to make sure that 27 drinks it. But 27 finds himself too curious to know what the plot moving against him is, what Aizawa and Quirk Thief could possibly want from him. It might be something simple, something he can be useful for. If that’s so, they could have just asked.

27 takes a sip, and it’s warm and sweet. It’s not as sweet as a Mocha, it’s far more muted, but 27 finds himself appreciating the color more than the flavor of it. And he knows it’s weird.

It’s probably weird enough that neither of them know it.

“Zawa, is Monoma coming over?” Eri asks, as enthused about the idea as 27 is. When Aizawa tells her that he is, she pouts and leans a bit closer to 27, head nearly resting on the arm of his hand that she’s still holding. “But he’s the dark face of UA. Even if he gave Twenny coffee, he’s still really mean.”

“He’ll only visit for a little while. I need his help with something,” Aizawa says, and 27 wants to know what it is, but he doubts Aizawa would just tell him. It would be far easier if he did. “I would like him to copy both of your quirks. He may notice something with yours that would make it easier for you to control it. And I would like to know if Shinsou’s quirk would be able to affect Hizashi.”

27 stares for a moment, trying to understand why Aizawa was making this difficult. Why he was doing something so irrationally unnecessary. He could erase Eri’s quirk, 27 could control it. 27 wasn’t going to use his quirk on Yamada, he would *never* think of doing that. Even if Yamada was deaf, which Aizawa thought affected his quirk somehow, 27 didn’t see any point in using his quirk on *Yamada*.

27 was pretty sure that he could make Yamada do anything he wanted anyway, just by asking for it.

But Aizawa must be scared that he would. He didn’t say anything about 27 using his quirk on Midoriya, but he must be worried that 27 was planning to use it to escape again. He must be worried that 27 would use his quirk to do something worse, to hurt someone, and he must not have planned to make a mask yet because his quirk came back too soon. Bakugo seems to think that he wouldn’t do that, but Bakugo must be wrong.

27 has to walk faster to catch up to Aizawa, but he needs to know, he needs Aizawa to know that what he’s doing is unnecessary. That it would be fine. He’s pretty sure the mask would even be padded well this time. ‘ *Can wear mask.* ’

Aizawa looks at him, still betraying nothing with that look, and it’s still *so* irritating. “You can. Recovery Girl wants you to, since face masks can protect your immune system.”

That’s *not* the mask he was talking about, but it’s an answer that he needed anyway. Aizawa knows that Eri wouldn’t want to see 27 wearing another mask, it would make her upset. That’s why he doesn’t want to give 27 a mask, he doesn’t want to make one. Quirk Thief isn’t unnecessary, they want to make sure that Yamada can be a mask. They want to know if he’s immune to 27’s quirk so

he can be around 27 at all times, he can break any control that 27 holds over someone else.

That's even better than a padded mask. It feels stupid, but 27 would like it if Yamada had to be around him all the time, even if it was just his job to make sure 27 didn't use his quirk. Yamada treating 27 like 27 did to Eri at the 8 Precepts. Control, but also care.

27 doesn't want to think about how nice that would be.

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27 realizes it when he finds himself staring at the cards and unable to do anything else. He's too exhausted, his brain is mush just like Bakugo said it would be. But he can't let it be.

He's been trying to hide it by bracing his head on the table with his hand, by humming like Eri does when she's trying to think of a good strategy, or when she's trying to bluff him to reveal a card that's in his hand. It's easy to play along to let her win like that, to pull a fake grimace when she draws out saying a number that he has, when he earns an excited wiggle of her feet by losing that card. But he hasn't been paying attention, hasn't been feeding her enough false tells, he's been playing the game too honestly and now there's no way for her to win.

He has seven full suites, and there's only 13 in this game. And that means that he's won.

But he doesn't want to win, because that means that Eri loses. He's never done that, he's never beaten her at any of these games and he doesn't want to, but he can't think of a way to let her win, what rule he needs to bend for that or what new one he can make up.

His brain is too mush for that, so he just stares and tries to force it to solidify. To give him *something*.

"Twenny, are you sleepy?" Eri asks, and 27 sucks in a breath, realizing that he's been breathing too slowly. He's not just sleepy, he almost fell asleep.

"No, I'm fine," 27 lies, and tries to think of something. *Anything*. It should be easy, but it would be easier if he didn't let it get this far. Maybe he can distract her, he can slide two of his suites to her side while she's distracted and maybe she won't notice. Maybe she doesn't count things like he does.

He hopes she doesn't, but he doesn't know. She might count things all the time, she might have counted the dresses to name them like he named the bricks in his room. He taught her how to count, but he doesn't want her to count like that. But she might. He might have taught her to count like that on accident, with good intentions but scars all the same. "Twenny."

"Do you have-" 27 forgets himself, but there's a reminder in his throat. He's grateful for that, but not for the panic, not for the way he barely remembers how to swallow against a cough.

He's getting sick. Even if he ate that food and drank everything that Bakugo gave him, he's still getting sick, and he can't. He can't scare Eri like that, it couldn't have come at a worse time. He's already made her upset, he's given her a nightmare because he reminded her with the face mask, she woke up without him and that scared her because it's happened too many times before. It might happen again.

He doesn't know what they'll do if they know that he's sick, and he doesn't want to find out. Chisaki might have been right, maybe they should be separated if he's sick, he doesn't want to infect her or get her dirty with his germs. Yamada and his owner might not want that either, they want Eri healthy and well and well cared for but they should know that 27 isn't good for that, for

any of that. They should probably take him away.

“Twenny, you’re sleepy and you should take a nap! I promise you won’t have bad dreams!” Eri says, and he’s sure this should work. This should be distracting, and it should keep him from getting sick.

“I’m not sleepy, I’m hungry,” 27 says, almost choking on the last word trying to keep it so quiet. Aizawa has been on his laptop and shuffling through papers next to it, papers that might concern the investigation but 27 has been ignoring that. He knows he’s too sloppy right now to cover his tracks, and even if he knows he should know what they know, he doesn’t want to get caught so soon.

He doesn’t want to get caught, but he needs to eat. He knows he needs to eat to keep from getting sick, to get nutrients, but he also feels hungry in a way that doesn’t make sense. He ate a lot of Blasty’s food and he shouldn’t be hungry so soon after that, but he is.

He has those snacks that Recovery Girl gave him, but he doesn’t want to eat them. He wants to have something to eat just in case he needs it, but he feels bizarrely irritated thinking about eating them. He feels like he wants something else, and that’s bizarre by itself. He doesn’t know what he wants, but he knows he shouldn’t want it, he should just eat and be grateful that he can, that everything he’s eaten here is nothing like what he’s eaten before.

It’s *irritating*, and he can’t even bury his head in his arms to forget about it because Eri will think that he’s tired. And he is, but he doesn’t want her to know that.

Yamada walks in, finally awake after sleeping for so long, and 27 can barely hide his relief. He knows how to get things from Yamada, getting food is easy, and 27 can use him to distract himself from how tired he is. ‘*Can you teach me to cook?*’

Yamada has one eye closed, 27 was too sloppy to notice he was yawning, but he blinks for a moment before he smiles, and it looks odd. It looks like he’s tired. “Oh, sure thing Shinsou! I sure hope *someone* didn’t forget to feed you guys while I was down and out.”

That ‘someone’ looks up from the paperwork, eyes a bit wider in surprise. “We had cereal.”

27 honestly forgot, but they did. He had a full bowl of it, but he still feels hungry. And he shouldn’t, between the breakfast Blasty made him and the cereal, he’s eaten as much in a few hours as he used to eat on a good day before UA. If Bug remembered both meal times, if he didn’t trade or refuse a meal at the 8 Precepts.

He’s almost unnerved by his own greed, but maybe he can convince Yamada that it’s not. That he just wants to learn how to cook, and he needs to eat some of it to make sure it tastes right. But Yamada looks tired, maybe he shouldn’t have asked. Maybe now that he knows that he’s eaten, he’s already eaten their cereal, he won’t want to waste more food on him.

But Yamada looks happy for some reason, like there’s some joke that 27 can’t piece out even if it involves him. His smile has too much teeth, so he knows it’s not entirely a kind smile, but he still trusts it. Even if he probably shouldn’t. “Well, let’s see what we can whip up, listener! I know *I’m* not in the mood for cereal, and that’s just not filling enough for a growing boy.”

Growing? 27 probably can’t grow, he’s not like Eri. He’s not that young. He’s already taller than some of the hero students, and that should be enough. Maybe he’s shorter than Yamada and Aizawa, but he should be. He’s read that children who don’t eat enough don’t grow very tall, that they can have deformities because of that. He isn’t deformed, and he’s probably lucky for that, but

he doesn't think he can grow any taller.

27 gets up and watches out of the corner of his eye to see if Eri will too. She stands, and he walks back to get his glass of water once her back is turned, and slides three of his matched suites to her side. That's done, Eri will win now, and now it's a little easier to accept that he can be a little selfish.

Yamada hums to himself as he looks through the cabinets and refrigerator, before he pulls his hair in a messy bun. He usually braids it on Sundays, he might not have wanted to do this much. He's probably still tired and wanted to drink some coffee first, but 27 forced him to do this by asking for it.

It should feel nice to be able to do that, but it doesn't. It does feel nice, but it feels weird. It feels like guilt and something else, something selfish. 27 should be better at not being selfish.

"*Someone* needs to go grocery shopping," Yamada says, and 27 wonders if Aizawa will admit what he's done, that he handed that task off to Chocula. If Yamada will get angry with Aizawa if 27 tells him that he did. If it'll feel good this time if he does.

"*Someone* should be getting groceries right now," Aizawa hiding a rare smirk behind his coffee mug. Apparently, Yamada already knew that he would do that, because he's not angry. He just grins and shakes his head before he looks back at the cabinets.

This is really taking too long. Yamada must be tired, he must be too exhausted to do this. 27 is asking for too much, and he can't find a way to take it back, to ignore it. Maybe this odd hunger is a punishment for that, the way it's still there even though he can feel his stomach twist and knot. He's just being odd, he's being selfish and it was a mistake to let that out. He should have just tried to sleep, to wake up less odd.

Yamada stifles another yawn, and 27 feels worse. Yamada *is* tired, he's probably still recovering from the concussion even though he worked last night. 27 is making him do this, he's forcing him to, and it doesn't feel nice at all. "Let's see, we've got some pancake mix, a few muffin mixes too, some oatmeal-"

"Oatmeal!" Eri cheers, and he has no idea *why*. He catches himself grimacing, and he didn't want to give away that tell, but he can barely stand the thought of it. Tasteless, lumpy clots that only serve one purpose - to fill a stomach just enough. Whoever made their breakfast at the 8 Precepts made it thicker than the watery gruel at The Miasma, it was at least better at making 27 feel full. Even if Eri ate less of it and ate a better version of it, there's no reason that she would want it.

But *muffins* sounded delicious. He's only held one before at The Miasma, when he snuck out of his room and paid the price for inviting Bug's attention like that in the worst way. He traded Mocha just to hold that muffin, and it wasn't worth it. But the cat officer brought him muffins a few times while he was living at the police station, almost like he knew that 27 was tempted by that more than anything else they tried to make him eat. They were warm, he watched the steam fade away from them and couldn't help but try to hold on to the smell before they eventually took them away.

He knows that these muffins wouldn't be poisoned, that Yamada wouldn't poison him. Yamada would probably make some that would smell even better, they would be even warmer because they'd be fresh.

Yamada looks at him after looking at Eri, his eyes are too green, too inviting. It's impossible to think of lying to him when he's looking at his eyes. "Well, that is one very enthusiastic vote for oatmeal, but what feels inspiring to my aspiring little chef today?"

It's cruel that he asks that, that Eri looks at him with her hands curled into fists in front of her chest. She wants oatmeal for some absolutely *unfathomable* reason, and Yamada is still giving him the choice, but it isn't a choice at all. 27 can be a little selfish, but not that much, he can't let it go that far. ' *O-A-T-M-E-A-L*. '

He deserves this anyway. For being so selfish.

"Oatmeal it is!" Yamada declares, and pulls out a tin that should really look more menacing. It should be black with a red skull on it, it should look like poison because it pretty much is. It's a slow poison and that makes it the worst poison, because it prolongs every inch of suffering. It always seemed to expand in his bowl whenever 27 considered the risk of passing out during a match if he didn't eat it.

"I wouldn't mind muffins, though," Aizawa says, cupping a hand around the back of his neck while he leans back in his chair. "Since it takes a while to bake, it would be a good snack to have on hand."

27 is truly willing to die for Aizawa right now. He's had to be willing to die for a lot of people, for people who rented him and paid for that level of protection. Chisaki often demanded that kind of dedication from the 8 Expendables, and presumed it from 27. But right now, in this moment, he would die for Aizawa's sake.

"Well, that's pretty big talk for a guy who tried to mix batter with a spatula," Yamada says, and 27 needs him to *not*. He can't do this to him. 27 can accept a certain level of cruelty, but dangling that hope in front of him only to snatch it away is just too much. Especially because it's *Yamada*. It's such a cruel betrayal that it's almost enough to make him cry. "But, snack muffins sound good! We can set this water to boil and start mixing up a little mix tape. Sound good, my little chefs?"

27 feels like he could cry for a different reason, and he's probably nodding too much, but even Eri agrees. It's almost enough to forget what else Yamada is making, but when he forces 27 to measure the oats in a cup, it's enough of a reminder. He's never seen this side of the process, but just that much, just scooping the oats into that measuring cup feels like a horrible crime. He wonders if whoever cooked at The Miasma had that muffin sitting out just to cope with it.

But he can turn his attention to the muffin mix after that. He honestly has no opinion on the flavor to choose, and he's glad that Eri is there to make that decision. She picks a matcha flavor, probably because it reminds her of Momo and her passion for tea, and 27 gets to measure out the milk and preheat the oven while Eri mixes the batter and Yamada butters a pan.

And then Yamada *ruins it*. "I wonder if sprinkling some oats on top would work out like I think it will. It would be nice if they toasted up in there, but I usually use some pistachios or sunflower seeds."

If Yamada puts oatmeal on these muffins, 27 will die. He's read books where characters waste away from giving in to such deep despair that they can't go on living, they fade away because their will to live was so incurably poisoned. He's never understood how that could happen until this moment, but now he knows. He knows that he *will die* if Yamada does this to him.

"Or sugar," Aizawa says, and 27 *will die for him*. "The matcha can be a bit bland."

Yamada raises an eyebrow at Aizawa, and 27 feels a sickening dread pool in his stomach. "You sure do have a lot of opinions on these muffins that you're not making with us. What's that little story about the hen that went through all the trouble of making bread, but didn't get a crumb of help?"

27 knows that story, he read it to Eri, and Aizawa must have read it too because he rolls his eyes. “You know why I can’t. I’m cursed.” 27 *will not die* for Aizawa anymore.

“You’re not cursed, Zawa!” Eri says, and he doesn’t want her to say it. He doesn’t want her to think it, but if she says it, he’ll have to correct her and it’s so hard to correct what she says without making her *do it*. “Only people in movies are cursed, but real people aren’t cursed. That’s just stuff that villains say.”

27 feels relieved enough to cry, he feels *blessed*. He doesn’t know which hero student taught her that, but he owes them so much. He *wishes* he could have come up with a line like that for her to believe.

“You’re right,” Aizawa says quietly, seeming scolded enough by Eri for 27 to forgive him. “I’m just very bad at cooking. I would like to help, but I would probably ruin what you’re making.”

Yamada sighs very loudly, like he’s tried to correct Aizawa for saying that too many times but he can show the irritation from it. “Well, I guess this little red hen can spare a slice if you fix me up a cup of coffee for it.”

27 really must be bothering Yamada, and he’s not sure if he can make it up to him. He tries to keep out of Aizawa’s way while he helps Eri pour batter into the tin, topped with sugar thanks to Aizawa. Then they put the tin in the oven, and 27 waits eagerly for the smell of baked muffins now that the task of making oatmeal is unavoidable.

“Alright! So I usually boil it halfway with water, so it’s a little quicker, before I drain it and use coconut milk for the rest,” Yamada explains, and 27 wonders if that will make it different. If that’s a special touch that Yamada adds to it, something like the way a mother changes a recipe to make the food better. He *hopes* so. “And I know Eri will want some apple slices, cinnamon, and a *little* bit of honey on hers. I’m a sucker for greek yogurt and pears, but I think we’re out of those, looks like even the dried ones have been nibbled up.”

Those...all sound really good. They sound like they absolutely, do *not* belong on oatmeal. But it sounds really good.

“Let’s see, we have cinnamon, sugar, honey, syrup, I think that’s all the pantry can say about it. Powdered sugar? Nah, it’s probably too powdery. Apples, we still have a *lot* of apples. A few plums hanging around, some chives and eggs could make it pretty savory. What flavor are you feeling, Shinsou?” Yamada looks up at him from crouching in front of the refrigerator, still holding the chives, and 27 forgets that he’s talking to him. He’s talking to Shinsou Hitoshi.

Shinsou should probably know what kind of flavor he feels like eating, when he knows that he wants something specific. When he knows that all of those toppings sound nice, when it shouldn’t be a surprise that people put things on oatmeal to make it taste better.

Shinsou probably shouldn’t feel like crying, like there’s a chasm opening up in his chest because he never *fucking* knew that people did that. That he could have known, he could have a preference like Eri does, but he *doesn’t*.

‘ *I don’t know* ,’ 27 signs, because he has to sign something. Yamada is looking at him weird, like he’s concerned about something, and 27 doesn’t want it to be him. ‘ *Sweet* ,’ he can’t remember the sign for savory. ‘ *A little* ,’ because he doesn’t really want it to be sweet, but he’s not sure if it should be savory.

“Are you sure? I could whip up an omelette instead, or we could wait for the muffins. You don’t

have to eat oatmeal if you don't want to, I'm just kind of a scatterbrain in the morning and I forgot-"

27 shakes his head, ' *I want to.* ' He doesn't know if Yamada knows, how he knows if Eri never minded it. But he knows if Eri did, if she used to frown to herself before Yamada started making her oatmeal like that, if that happened while he was away, she knows the same thing that he does now. ' *It's different.* '

It's different enough to try.

Yamada makes him sample everything they have that goes on oatmeal, from a slice of apple that he really doesn't need to the chives and honey that both taste too powerful on their own. He likes the greek yogurt, and wonders if he would like the pears too, and picks that to go with apples and honey. They have a lot of all of those things, so if the oatmeal doesn't taste different enough, he can add more of those things to it.

Yamada makes Eri's bowl in his usual way, taking care to put all those little slivers of apples in a circle before he drizzles honey over it and sprinkles sugar and cinnamon on top. 27 can smell the muffins beginning to cook, he can smell the sugar on top of them strongly enough to make him forget he can't smell it from Eri's oatmeal. He tries to copy what Yamada does with his own bowl, to put a bit of yogurt in the center but when he tries to smooth out the top for the apple slices, it dips into the oatmeal and ruins it. "Oh, that's fine! It looks good Shinsou, it's just a little tricky- it'll still taste the same anyway."

It *doesn't*.

His stomach twists again at the first bite of it, and he finds it too hard to swallow. It doesn't taste like that, it doesn't taste *anything* like that, he's never eaten oatmeal like this before. This isn't even *oatmeal* , it's delicious.

It shouldn't make him angry, but it does. He feels so angry that he feels sick, like he just wants to vomit out this feeling inside of him, but that means that he'd lose this food that he's already eaten. These things were so simple, Yamada just makes them complicated, but they aren't. The coconut milk was in a can, and canned food is cheap, even if it's not as cheap as water. Just that much, just *that* much could make a difference. He could have gotten a spoonful of sugar or a packet of it when he made a client happy, not that it happened often. It still could have happened.

He could have had this before, but he didn't.

"You don't have to eat it, Shinsou," Yamada says quietly, trying not to disturb Eri's happiness from eating this treat, the way she hums with her happy hum but it still sounds so different from the way she used to. 27 doesn't want to disturb it either, doesn't want to disturb any of them, not Eri and not Yamada and not Aizawa. But he can't eat the rest of it with his stomach so tight, with his inability to separate disgust with himself and disgust for this meal.

This food isn't complicated, but he is. He's too complicated and his mind is too simple now, too tired to understand it. ' *Sorry. Tired. I like it.* ' He feels like crying because he *likes* it.

Eri apparently learned the sign for 'tired,' and she seems too excited about it. "You should take a nap, Twenny! I can nap with you so you won't have bad dreams!"

27 looks at her nearly full bowl of oatmeal that Yamada put so much care into and frowns. "I'll be fine, Eri. You should finish your food...."

He doesn't want to remember saying that. He doesn't want to remember the hundreds of times that he's said it. He doesn't want to remember why he said it, that unspoken threat that Chisaki's glare held.

You're supposed to be taking care of that, Dog.

"But I wanna--"

"I don't want you to," 27 says, his words falling out in a rush, too rough, too sharp, too *wrong* for Eri and he hates it. He hates it as soon as he hears them, as soon as he says it, and rubs his eyes with his hands to try to work something better out of his mouth. "I'm sorry, I'm just weird. I'm sorry."

He just has to leave. He can't change his face enough, he's worse than the reminder, he's *worse*.

He gets up from the table and tries to ignore that Yamada and Aizawa might be disturbed by that. That Yamada might be insulted, that he might not be allowed, but he has to pretend that he is just for the chance to hide his face, hide the mess inside himself threatening to come to the surface, and it begins to before he reaches his room.

He throws the back of his head against his closed door once he's inside and sinks to the ground, feeling nothing for too long before it breaks. Before he remembers what he did, all of it, everything he's forgotten to think he deserves to be here.

He's done that to her, forcing her to eat for materials. He put her under his quirk and walked her to The Chair, again and again and *again*. He's taken her to that place, never a place that she's safe, he's *never* done that, only standing and watching while she's hurt *again and again and again*.

He's selfish. He's selfish and rotten, he's an ugly person meant to be thrown away. He could have shown it to Chisaki, he could have proved that Eri didn't have to be taken out of the room, that even when he got sick and lost his voice, he still had his quirk. She wouldn't have been taken out of the room, she wouldn't have learned to do that clap. That was *one* thing he could have protected her from and he didn't *fucking* do it.

He can't leave. They won't let him. They won't do it, but they should. They should make sure that Eri's happy. If they won't throw him away, they should make him into a better person, a person who doesn't remind Eri and a person who wouldn't hurt her.

They can't. They can't make him into Shinsou Hitoshi.

Shinsou Hitoshi doesn't have scars, he's never met Chisaki and he's never been sold. Shinsou Hitoshi likes greek yogurt and pears, and he knows that he likes it, and he can say that easily. Shinsou Hitoshi isn't mute, and he doesn't have to be, because he was born without a quirk and that changed his life drastically.

Shinsou Hitoshi kept Mocha, and ate muffins, and went to school with Ashi. Shinsou Hitoshi is a good person, a *great* person, and he's never done a single thing to hurt Eri. Eri grew up smiling because Shinsou Hitoshi smiled at her, Eri grew up better and Eri is taller because she ate food to grow instead of eating for materials to be used to repair her.

27 wants to be Shinsou Hitoshi, but he isn't, he can't force his way through that wall and into a better reality. He can't change his name that easily. He can't *forget*, no matter how hard he tries, and he can't sleep because he remembers too much.

27 wants to be Shinsou Hitoshi, but he can't change his name.

Someone has to change it for him.

He knows how to do that. He knows how to forget, how to turn those memories into dreams, into things he's not sure of and things that he might be wrong about. He doesn't know what will stick in the end, what will be his mother's eyes in the rearview mirror, but he thinks it will be enough. If just one thing haunts him, it will be enough.

He knows that when someone comes in here, they'll call him Shinsou. He knows if he answers to it, it will become his name.

27's fingers shake, but he pulls the string lights out of the outlet, and ignores the maggots writhing in his stomach.

*

Yamada puts away one bowl of oatmeal, and finds himself looking at a sad little bean only staring at hers. And he imagines that Eri's excitement to help with brunch preparations wasn't just for the excitement of helping.

Shouta seems to notice that too, setting aside his little research project to hopefully put it to good use when he closes the laptop and looks at Eri. "Is something wrong, Eri?"

Eri pouts a bit at that, chin resting on her arms while she stares at the oatmeal like it will bring Shinsou out of his room. Almost like she knows what Shouta is trying to do by pretending the answer isn't obvious. "No," Eri answers, and that word has never sounded so hollow.

"I have a feeling that something is bothering you, and I would like to help if that's the case," Shouta says, and those big pitiful eyes turn to him full of hope. "But I can't know what it is if you don't tell me."

Absolutely everyone in this room knew what was bugging the little bean, but the person who probably had no idea wasn't in here. But this little exercise might just be the trick to help Eri communicate that to him a little better.

Eri shrinks into herself a bit, like she's weighing the possibility of being in trouble. She's honestly never been in trouble at UA, and the few little shenanigans she's pulled off have never seemed worth even half of a time out. It's always seemed like the wards had been punished enough for things that weren't their fault, and adding a time out to that seemed too cruel.

"I miss Twenny," Eri admitted, doing a great job of 'communicating needs and wants clearly' to Shouta. "It's bad, but... I liked it better when he didn't leave."

Yamada had to admit, that was a *little* bad. Shinsou was doing surprisingly well being apart from Eri, he was making those same tentative steps towards connections with others that she had made a bit more easily at first. He knew it was hard because they trusted each other so much, because they only had each other for years, but as much as Eri wanted to be a little kid and be taken care of by Shinsou like she had before, Shinsou deserved to be a teenager. He deserved to have some space and the chance to explore himself as a person.

He deserved to explore what being free really meant now that they both were outside of that room.

"It's not bad to feel that way," Shouta reassures, with the same gentle tone that he always uses, that Eri never seemed to doubt anymore. "Do you feel like you haven't spent enough time with Shinsou lately?"

It's a nudge, but it might be one Eri needs. She nods, still looking at the oatmeal like Shinsou might just pop out of it. "Even if he's weird and grumpy, I still wanna be with him, but he doesn't like me anymore."

"What makes you say that, little bean?" Yamada asks, sure that it couldn't just be a little time apart to make Eri think that Shinsou didn't even *like* her.

"He wasn't playing like he's s'posed to. He always acts like he's really play-sad when I pick his card, and he didn't at all! He really didn't want to play with me but I made him do it," Eri says, and *almost* realizes what Shinsou was doing with his little 'play-sad' act.

"Shinsou was very tired today, because he hadn't slept well," Shouta says, drawing a guilty little frown over Eri's face. "I think that he was playing Go Fish with you despite that, because he knew that you wanted to play with him. Because even if he was tired, he wanted to make you happy."

Eri tilts her head at that, before her head falls to her arms in a huff. "But I want Twenny to be happy too. Even if he's asleep, I just wanna be with Twenny."

Yamada glances at Shouta, trying to hold back his own excitement to tell her the big revelation, and he gets that nod that he's waiting for. "So it sounds like Shinsou was trying to make you happy, but he didn't really know the best way to do it, because he didn't know exactly what you wanted. And if you just want to spend time with Shinsou, I'm sure that he'll be happy to do that if you tell him that."

Eri still looked a bit unsure about that, a bit like she might get in trouble for saying something that bold, but Shouta's nod seemed to be enough reassurance. "Can I tell Twenny now? If he's sleeping I promise I won't bother him, I'll just wait until he wakes up to tell him."

Yamada smiled, sure that he wouldn't mind if Eri had the patience to carry through her little promise. With midterms behind them and quite a few chores on Kan's shoulders, it would be nice to just spend some time with his husband on a lazy Sunday afternoon knowing that the wards wouldn't need them for a few hours.

Then Yamada heard a door open so hard that it slammed against a wall, before another slammed shut, and in the silence he could hear the faintest sign that none of that slamming was due to teenage hormones. *That* was the sound of a teenager throwing up.

He glanced at Shouta but honestly didn't want it to be a question, and answered it himself by rushing down the hall. Maybe Shouta was just as capable of checking on Shinsou and making sure he wasn't riding out the waves of nausea on his own, but Yamada wanted to be there.

Maybe *want* is a strong word for a guy who's just as much of a sympathy vomiter as a sympathy crier, but Yamada just swallowed down the twinge in his stomach when he heard that wet heave and knocked on the door. "Shinsou?"

He realized a bit too late that clapping was probably as likely to happen as talking for Shinsou right now, and sheepishly opened the door to see what he'd find.

No mess on the floor, probably thanks to the rush that sent all those doors flying, but the poor kid hugging the toilet looked like enough of a mess himself. Yamada felt another twinge when he recognized that coiled tension in Shinsou's back, the fact that he wasn't breathing right now due to the fact that he probably *couldn't* with another upchuck soon to be chucked, but he tampered that down to kneel on the floor and have no idea what to do with his hands.

Shinsou probably wouldn't appreciate him holding back his hair, and luckily his hair wasn't long enough for that to be a concern. He wasn't entirely sure if a reassuring hand on the back was a great idea either, if he'd flinch and mess up his perfect aim thus far, but when Yamada heard that sickening heave, he couldn't just watch.

"Hey buddy, it's alright," Yamada muttered, running a hand over Shinsou's back and imagining that he could draw whatever upset his stomach right out of him on the upstroke. "Well, it's not alright, it's definitely not fun for you right now, but we'll just get that out-" Another successful heave cut him off, and Yamada held his breath until the smell wouldn't get to him quite as strongly. "You'll feel better after this, just got to get through the worst of it."

He *knows* he checked the expiration date on that yogurt, but he can't remember if Shinsou has had dairy before. Greek yogurt was close enough to lactose-free for most, but Shinsou might be a bit more sensitive to it. He probably was, they had no idea what Shinsou was used to eating before he came to UA, but it didn't seem to be very varied.

A small watery deposit was made in the porcelain throne before the dry heaving set in, and after the second one seemed to promise that the worst was over, Yamada gently pried Shinsou far enough away to flush. The acrid smell faded a bit at that, enough that it probably wouldn't trigger another spell from either of them, and Yamada let Shinsou dry heave a few more times over the toilet before he got up to start setting the poor kid to rights.

"Okay, let's give this a little swish first to get the taste out," Yamada says, handing off a cup of water and wincing when Shinsou's eyes got a little wider when he tried, like the second coming was *coming*. But luckily, all that came out was the rinse. "And a bit of mouthwash too, just be careful with it. Just a swish, that gag reflex is pretty sensitive right now."

That bubblegum pink was a bit easier to see coming out of Shinsou's mouth than the stuff that came out beforehand, and Yamada flushed it all away before sitting down with a wet hand towel to brush away the sweat on Shinsou's brow, worrying whether it was really a bout of food poisoning that caused it. "Sor...s-sorry."

Yamada took in Shinsou's glassy and unfocused eyes, his chest full of twinges now that his stomach was fine. There's always an instinctive shame that comes with that kind of violent sick, but he hopes that it isn't worse for Shinsou, and that Yamada's attempts to be there through that didn't make it worse. "It's fine, buddy. Just a little upset stomach, nothing to worry over. You didn't do anything wrong."

Shinsou grimaces, turning his head away from the wet cloth before he shakes his head. "W-wanted to b-be norma-al. W-w-wanted..."

Shinsou sucks in a breath and Yamada finds himself trying not to do the same. He should have *known*, he should have known better than to trust that Shinsou knew what was best for himself. Sure, the kid needed to eat more and needed to eat when he wanted to, but he probably had an idea that his food intake wasn't what it was supposed to be. That it wasn't 'normal,' and that might have inspired him to push himself beyond his limit to fix that. "Shinsou, it's okay. It takes some time, but we'll get there, alright? You're normal, you're normal for you and that's perfectly fine, alright? That's right where you need to be right now."

Shinsou seems too worn out to fight a few more dabs to his temple, something that Yamada hoped would soothe him a little bit. Yamada wiped away the lingering moisture with the dry half of the towel, before he stood up to fetch the thermometer from the cabinet, hoping he'd be able to find a sign one way or another from the reading.

And just like he figured, it really didn't tell him much. Shinsou had a fever, but he almost always did, and even if it was just a hair above mild, he couldn't be sure if that made him sick.

Even if it wouldn't be surprising if he was, after drinking that woman's *spit*.

"Let's get you to bed, alright? A little ginger tea and a few crackers to settle your stomach, just a few," Yamada says, finding himself both unnerved and relieved that Shinsou lets him pull him up to standing with an arm around Yamada's shoulders. He knows Shinsou doesn't like being touched so much, but the weakness that makes it hard for the teenager to walk on his own, his unfocused eyes and the fact that he spoke probably means that he has far bigger issues than that to deal with.

Yamada has to turn on the lights, surprised that the string lights are out. Even when Shinsou sleeps alone, Yamada imagines that he prefers to know exactly where he's waking up before any doubts can set in, and that's exactly why Yamada made sure to set them up before Shinsou came to UA.

"Okay, let's just sit right here," Yamada mutters, helping Shinsou lean back against the wall at the head of his bed, pulling a throw blanket from the foot of it over him when the kid seemed too exhausted to be moved under the comforter. "Just get that tea--"

Yamada felt the smallest tug on his shirt and looked down to see Shinsou holding onto the hem of it, shaking his head. His expression seemed close to tears, lips twisted in a tight grimace and eyes nearly shut, before he breathes in and managed to hide half of that. ' *Sorry. Fine. Don't.* '

Yamada sat down on the edge of the bed, ignoring that the leg pulling away wasn't just to make room, and tried to find a way to smile reassuringly. "It's no problem, Shinsou. You're not feeling too hot, and making tea for that will do a lot to help you, it won't bother me at all."

' *Bother. Cooking,* ' Shinsou signed, lips twisting again, and Yamada was reminded that even those little requests could be hard for Shinsou to ask for in a different way. That the kid has probably learned not to rely on an adult, and probably sees even something as enjoyable as sharing a love for cooking to be a great burden for Yamada.

"You weren't bothering me, Shinsou. I like teaching you things, and you know that. I like taking care of you too, you know?" Yamada says, his hand resting on a knee that he's relieved doesn't finch away. "You're probably feeling a little nauseous, but does your head hurt? Feel a little sniffly or a little cough coming on?"

Shinsou shook his head, a sniff still coming, but with the hand coming up to wipe at the corner of his eye, he didn't think it was a sign of being sick. ' *Don't. E-R-I. Not sick. Don't.* '

Yamada winces, knowing that his little bean's efforts to keep Shinsou healthy by making sure he brushed his teeth and washed his hands weren't just for his benefit. Sometimes it seemed fine, it was starting to look like that little tic was beginning to fade, but Yamada imagines that there was a reason for it. "Before you guys were rescued, you got sick, right? And something bad happened after that?"

Shinsou nods, and with shaking hands he does exactly what Yamada was afraid of, and what he half-suspected already. That small, quiet clap seems to rattle Shinsou more than himself. ' *Took her. Taught her that. My fault-* '

"No," Yamada argues, trying to keep himself from grabbing one of Shinsou's hands to keep him from signing that lie, convincing himself of it more through that. "Shinsou, that wasn't your fault. *Nothing* that Chisaki did was ever your fault, and it wasn't your fault that you got sick. You really couldn't help that, any of that."

Shinsou grimaces, hands folding together and fingers squeezing too tightly, trying to keep from signing something else. Yamada knows there's something else, and he hopes that Shinsou will let him know about it.

"I know something's bugging you, kiddo," Yamada says, and hopes that Shinsou can open up about it. He knows that there's plenty of reasons that he can think of to set Shinsou this on edge, he knows that absolutely nothing that Shinsou will tell him will be a surprise. It would be a surprise if it's just one thing.

' *Can't sleep. I want to forget,* ' Shinsou signs, and Yamada would be lying if he said he didn't want that too. His kids have been through so many things that he wished didn't happen to them, and so many that he wishes they could at least forget. He knows that Shinsou remembers more, and opens up about less of it, but he hopes that with the investigation leaving him alone, he can open up about it for his own sake.

"Is it your mom again?" Yamada asks, hoping that knowing she was captured wasn't a reminder for Shinsou that she exists, that she did whatever she did to him. That it didn't start up those nightmares again.

Shinsou shakes his head, eyes too red and irritated, too hollow after seeing too much. ' *Dark. C-H-I-S-A-K-I. All of it. If I sleep.* '

All of it was too much, all of it too dark to even think about. *Years* of darkness, of terror and pain, and all of that was coming down on Shinsou too hard right now. Coming when he couldn't run or distract himself from it, and when Yamada couldn't be there to stop it.

Unless he could be.

"You do need to sleep, kiddo," Yamada says, unwilling to let himself wonder when was the last time Shinsou did get more than a handful of hours. "How about this - I'll get the tea really quick, and stay here, and we can just talk. Do something to get your mind off of all of it. And I'll be there if it comes back, alright?"

Shinsou takes a while to consider it, but just the smallest nod answers him, and Yamada can't help but smile at that. He's not as experienced on nightmare duty as Shouta or Mirio, but he knows that he can try his best at it. And he knows he can distract Shinsou from anything that might come up later when he's sleeping.

But when he goes back to the kitchen to see a settled Eri and an unsettled husband, he's not sure if he can distract him from this. "I need to talk to Ashido and Midoriya for the case. Is Shinsou..." Shouta lets the question trail off, and Yamada isn't quite sure how to answer it.

"Think he might have eaten too much, just gonna whip up some tea and let him rest for a bit," Yamada says, asking Eri to help him pick out a mug while trying to push the smallest amount of dread from Shouta's crossed arms and fixed stare at the door. "You need to go now?"

Shouta makes sure Eri's back is turned before he signs it, a scowl working over his face. ' *Extradition not approved. They know something.* '

It was amazing that Shinsou Ui could still be hurting Shinsou from halfway across the world, to pull away Shouta's attention like this. "Okay, just don't take too long. Sounds like we might all be down for a little afternoon slumber party. Does that sound good, little bean?"

Eri nodded, both hands clasped around a purple cat patterned mug that she was staring a bit too

intently at. “Is Mom mad?”

“No, sweetheart, Shinsou’s not mad. He’s not sleeping too good and not feeling too hot, but we’ll fix that up together. Does that sound good?” Yamada asks, getting a bit more excitement on the next nod from his best little helper in the whole world. He gets distracted when the timer for the muffins goes off, frankly relieved that he was there instead of trusting Shouta to know to turn the oven off after taking them out. “Shou?”

Shouta looks up, and he knows the hesitation to leave probably shouldn’t be a hesitation at all. Their wards needed him here, and even if Yamada could manage it, he’d rather be able to focus on Shinsou to set him to rights before patching things up with Eri.

But he knows that Shouta won’t really be here until he knows one way or another if Shinsou Ui will still be boarding that plane, and he hopes upon hope that those two students know something. “Just let me know how it goes, okay?”

Shouta nods, almost forgetting to tell Eri goodbye, and nearly forgetting his capture scarf as well. Yamada’s long since given up the fight about jackets, but he’s pleased to see that Shouta puts one on himself.

And he doesn’t want to think about what would happen if the woman who gave Shinsou so many bad experiences that turned into nightmares walked away from Interpol’s custody scot-free.

Image Rehearsal Therapy

Chapter Summary

27 knows that he's getting sick, but he has a plan to hide that. Monoma arrives to evaluate Eri and Shinsou's quirks, and makes a startling discovery when he does. Aizawa and Shinsou both have nightmares, and are able to have a late night talk because of it.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Blood, Flashback, 50 mention, Bug mention

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou has been struggling with nightmares, most prominently from the night that he attempted to escape from UA and had 4 successive nightmares that caused Eri to worry. One of the first signs that Shinsou taught Eri while they were still living at the 8 Precepts was 'Danger', and taught Eri to stop doing whatever she was doing when he signed it. Shinsou threw up the last chapter and Yamada was going to bring him ginger tea and stay with him while he fell asleep to keep him from having nightmares. Eri has been unhappy with how little time Shinsou is spending with her, and the separation between them has increased since she lost her first tooth and developed a 'tooth whistle.' Shinsou thinks that wearing a cloth face mask reminds Eri of the metal mask he wore at the 8 Precepts, and that it gave her a nightmare last night. Shinsou tried to imitate the conditioning he went through at The Miasma to 'forget' everything that happened to him and 'rename' himself as 'Shinsou.' Aizawa invited Monoma to the dorm to copy Shinsou and Eri's quirks to evaluate them, to see if Monoma could find a way for Eri to control hers and if Shinsou's quirk would affect Yamada, as a condition of Shinsou's wardship depends on Yamada being immune to Brainwashing because he is deaf. Shinsou told Bakugo that Monoma was threatening him, and Bakugo planned to resolve that while Monoma was '1-A's Servant For a Day.' Vlad King has been doing errands for Aizawa since his class lost at the Joint Training Exam. Eri likes giving characters like Mirio and Kirishima high fives. Shinsou thinks that Mirio sees him differently after Shinsou used his quirk on Midoriya to try to escape UA. Shinsou Ui's extradition was denied, and Aizawa left in the last chapter to talk to Midoriya or Ashido, suspecting that Shinsou told them something about her on the night he tried to escape. When Aizawa has a flare up from his PTSD related to USJ, he recites his class roster as a ritual to ground himself. Ashido thought that All Might and Aizawa could have been in a romantic relationship before Shinsou told her that Aizawa and Yamada were married. Shinsou can use his quirk to take control of Eri without talking to her. Aizawa promised Shinsou that the investigation would never need to question him again, after Shinsou was forced to say The Miasma's name in an interrogation with Jun. Shinsou's first sign name, that he didn't give to Aizawa, was 'Zawa Coffee.' Shinsou has a cat plushie that looks similar to one that he had when he was a child, and both are named 'Mocha.'

The needles. The needles are in her arms and legs too deep, the blood is running over her arms and legs, pooling onto the floor, she's going to die.

"Twenny!"

She knows she's going to die and that only makes it worse, she's terrified and he can't do anything, he can't speak, he can't make him answer, he can't stop this.

"Twenny!"

He has to try, he has to do something, he doesn't care if he dies, it should be him and not her, he should be in that chair, he should take those scars and those wounds on himself.

"Twenny!"

He looks down and doesn't see the restraints. The blood isn't flowing like it should, it's running out, it's running out of her and over her arms and onto his hands.

*His hands are the restraints. He's holding her here, he's the one keeping her from getting out, he's **killing** her.*

"Twenny," Eri whines, warm, he's too warm, she's warm, her hair is in his face, she's holding onto him too tight, something bad happened, she's scared.

He jerks away, he has to know, he has to know if Chisaki's here, if he scared her, if he hurt her but he's not.

He's not at the 8 Precepts. They were rescued.

He looks down at Eri's fuller face, her cheeks rounded like they should be, her eyebrows drawn together in worry like they shouldn't. His hand is still on her shoulder, her arms aren't bandaged, aren't bleeding. She's safe, it was a nightmare, and he's worried her over that again. "Sor-"

His voice is rough and hoarse, and the pain in his throat triggers a cough that he can barely swallow down. He knows that she's caught it, she's seen too much of it by the way that her eyes widen in fear. "Twenny, you're sick-"

He shakes his head, signs 'Danger' when he realizes how loud she's being. She stops, he's too thankful that she listens this time, and spots the mug by his bed and hopes that it has something to drink inside of it. The tea is cold and bitter, but he hopes that it recovers his voice just enough. "I'm not sick, Eri. Just thirsty."

He sees Yamada sleeping in the computer chair, notices the music softly playing from the phone on the desk. Yamada was supposed to distract him, supposed to bring him this tea, but he must have fallen asleep before either of those things could help him.

He feels the pain in his throat and knows that the tea won't be enough. He won't have tea at school tomorrow, and eventually, they'll notice. They'll know when he loses his voice only because he won't be able to talk to Eri.

Eri looks at him too seriously, making him think that she knows what he's thinking, and that she disapproves. He knows that she will, she won't like it, but he needs her to agree to it. He knows he'll get better, he just needs to hide it in the meantime. "Twenny, I gotta talk to you."

He fights not to raise an eyebrow at that, how serious she sounds and how it almost sounds like she's so much older than she is. He nods, drinking more of the tea so that he can answer her.

She squirms a bit closer despite her bravado, seriousness falling away into pleading, and he knows he'll do whatever she wants so badly. "Twenny, do you have problems with my tooth whistle?"

He tries not to laugh, because that's *ridiculous*. "No, I don't. I...really like your tooth whistle," 27 answers, trying not to admit that he likes it a little *too* much. It's adorable, it's a reminder that she lost her first tooth, that she can lose her teeth here, that she's growing and thriving because she *can*.

One of her feet brushes against his leg, toes curling and picking at his pants. "I can stop if you don't like it. I know you don't, 'cause you don't wanna be around me anymore."

"Eri," 27 says, running a hand through his hair while he tries to figure out why she was being *absolutely* ridiculous. "I want to be around you and I really, *really* like your tooth whistle. And I really like you. I just... had to do a lot of stuff for the investigation. And I don't...."

He frowns, finding himself pressing a hand to his forehead to chase the small relief from his cold hand. He's not sure if he wants to admit this, if he wants to know the answer. If Eri would start to realize it if he said it.

"I don't want to remind you of the bad stuff we went through. I'm not going to wear the face masks anymore and I shouldn't have-"

Eri shakes her head, and he can tell just by how wide her eyes get that he has to remind her to be quiet with a finger pressed against his lips. She shrinks a bit at that, glancing at Yamada, and presses herself a bit closer to the bed with her hands cupped around her mouth. "I like the masks, Twenny. They're cute. And you don't remind me of bad stuff."

He knows he does. He's part of the 'bad stuff.' She's just too young to realize it, but one day she will. She'll hate him for it.

"You're the good stuff. Like when you read to me, and you sing, and I really..." Eri trails off, her toes picking at his pants, and he can feel the strain in her feet when she does it. "I really miss you. And I wanna to spend time with you. Because the good stuff here isn't good without you."

He puts the mug back on the bedside table to hold her close, knowing that she's that upset about it. He should have realized it, he's supposed to know her better than this, but he really didn't see it.

She wants him here. She still needs him like this. Even if he's just comfort to her the same way her favorite plushie is, that's enough. He can't take that away from her, they're *family*. Until Yamada and Aizawa tell her outright, he's the only family that she has, and he can't abandon her like that.

He almost did. If it worked, if waiting in the dark until he forgot everything had worked, if it had renamed him, he would have forgotten about her. He would have forgotten how small she was, every inch that she's grown since he met her. He would have forgotten things that she's left behind and grown out of, her happy hum and her dancing, all of the drawings that they lost but he still remembers.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see the picture of 50 on his desk, lit up by Yamada's phone. He could have forgotten about her too.

He can't afford to only have one thing that haunts him. He can't pick between Eri and 50. "I'm sorry. I'm just weird here."

She shakes her head, but when she finally settles, when he knows that she believes him, he has to prove that he's weird here with a request that he knows she won't like and won't understand. But he has to make it.

"I'm not going to leave, and I'm going to spend more time with you from now on. But I really need you to do something for me, even if you don't like it," 27 says, and he can tell by her pout that she already doesn't like it. "I need you to pretend that I can't talk to you anymore."

She *doesn't* like that. She shakes her head, and he knows just by the wideness of her eyes that she's going to be too loud, too angry at that, and he presses a finger back to his lips in a panic, glancing at Yamada to make sure he's still sleeping.

"I can still talk to you when we're alone, if we're really quiet. But it's really important for everyone else to think that I can't," 27 says, and he doesn't want to scare her, but he needs her to listen. He can cover everything else up, he can be more careful and he won't be so reckless with eating so much. But he knows that he's going to lose his voice, and he needs to make sure to lose it in a different way first.

Eri stills for a moment, her head tilting curiously with her horn digging into the pillow beneath her head, before he sees a spark of excitement in her eyes. "Is it a logical ruse?"

Yes. "Yep, it's a logical ruse. I'm going to trick Yamada and Aizawa, and I need you to help me with that," 27 says, relief sinking in so deeply that he nearly sinks through the bed with it. "Even if they seem really sad about it, just remember to keep it up, because it'll be even funnier when they find out because they were so worried."

Her lips twist up, unsure whether she wants to go that far, to make Yamada and Aizawa worried, but he needs to prepare her for that if it comes. He needs her to hold out despite that, to keep the lie going.

"It's just like with Class 1-A. We made them really worried, but it was really funny after that. And I want to do a logical ruse with you on Aizawa and Yamada, to prove that we're better at it than they are," 27 says, tugging on that previous excitement about the logical ruse, and her desire to spend more time with him.

He knows it's wrong, but it works. "Okay, I'm gonna act really sad-"

"No," 27 cuts off. He knows that will bring more attention to it in the worst way, Aizawa and Yamada wouldn't be able to stand it if she were upset by it. And he doubts that she could be convincing enough long term. "I want you to pretend that you're okay with it, or maybe that you're a little sad sometimes. I'm going to tell them that I can't talk to you, but I told you that it's a game that we're playing. I want them to be a little worried, but if you're sad, they'll be really sad about that too, and that's too mean for a logical ruse."

Eri nearly smiles at that, cheeks twitching in a grin that looks a bit too devious, but he can't help but smile back at it. She nods, holding up her pinky like she does for Mirio, and he takes it as she squirms even closer, trying to hide her giggling with her hand.

She's getting a little *too* excited about these kind of cons, and it will probably come back to bite him one day. But for now, he needs it. "Okay, so we're going to pretend that we're playing a game where you have to understand what I'm saying with my hands. I know you know some signs, so that'll make it easier to believe. And I can still talk to you through sign if I really need to, when we're not alone."

Eri nods, still excited about the logical ruse, and he hopes he can play it off if she slips. He doesn't want Aizawa and Yamada to be too concerned, but he doesn't want them to be suspicious either. He just needs to hide his voice for a while, and maybe they can be fooled into thinking that it's his quirk. Since there's nothing they can do for that, they'll leave it alone, and when he recovers on his own, he can convince them that it's acting normal again.

As normal as his quirk is now.

27 hears a knock on the door and nearly startles at it, unsure what to do. He waits to see if Aizawa will answer it, cursing himself that he hadn't checked his location before he started telling Eri the plan. Surely he wasn't close enough to overhear, otherwise he would have put a stop to their plans before they got underway.

He waits and hears another series of knocks, louder this time, but still not loud enough to wake Yamada. Eri jumps up to do that, shaking his arm to wake him up into a panic. "Oh, what's- fell asleep, jeez, I didn't mean to-"

The knocks are incredibly loud, the person making them seems frustrated, and 27 finds himself very content to pretend that he's still weak from vomiting while he sips at the ginger tea. Yamada seems irritated enough by the knocking to not address him or Eri trailing him at all, storming out with a scowl that must have melted away quickly when he answered the door.

"Oh, Vlad! Sorry, I didn't hear ya the first- and Monoma!"

Shit. Quirk Thief.

27 covers his eyes with his hand, chasing the cool relief from his skin despite that. Quirk Thief would know if he's lying, he's the most dangerous player in this game because of that, and he didn't even realize he would be a part of this game. Even if he seemed to be in pain after stealing his quirk the first time, he would know that his quirk has recovered somewhat. It would be impossible to lie and say that it's gotten worse when he would know the difference, when it probably wouldn't hurt him as much.

27 drinks his tea, seeking to finish it off and keep his voice from breaking if it's needed. Maybe he can postpone the con until after Quirk Thief leaves. Maybe he can discredit him if he says his quirk is fine by proving that it's not in his silence with Eri. It was already risky enough to trust her, but with Quirk Thief in the mix, this plan has become almost too dangerous.

Almost. He knows that he still needs to pull it off. He can't let them know that he's sick, he can't let Eri know either. He just needs to buy an excuse with his silence, and if his quirk can't provide a reason, maybe his broken mind can. He's already told them about the nightmares, but if he makes it sound worse, if he makes himself sound pathetic and crazy enough, maybe they won't question it. Maybe they'd just rather leave it alone and ignore it.

Eri retreats back to his room and closes the door, and he knows by her frown that she's as happy about Quirk Thief being here as he is. "Zawa's not here, so maybe we can trick Yama into making Monoma leave."

That.

That's *perfect*.

27 can't help the grin on his face, can't help but feel his chest swell with pride. Eri was *so* good at this, a little too good and he *knows* this will bite him back one day. He knows she gets away with

too much and it'll only make this worse, but right now, when he needed it? This was *perfect*. "We should do that. Aizawa told him that he just needed his help with something, but he probably didn't tell him what it was. We just need to think of something-"

He cuts himself off when he hears footsteps, and hopes that Yamada hasn't heard his voice when he opens the door. "Hey guys, Monoma's here to do some fun quirk copying tests!" *Damn it*. "It'll just take a minute, and then we can have some muffins as a snack. Does that sound good?"

Eri turns to him, and in that silent look conveys how *not* good that sounds, and how much she wants him to find a way out of it. But he can't, he knows he can't, this is beyond him and they just have to hope for the best. ' *Not good. But will.* '

Yamada sighs, cupping a hand around his mouth while his voice drops to a whisper. "He's really not that bad, and I'm keeping Vlad around to keep him in line. He's not going to do anything crazy in front of his teacher."

27 *doubted that*. One look from Eri said that she doubted that too. But with a sigh, they both resigned themselves to their fates.

If Eri wanted to hold his hand and practically hide behind him, at least he could offer her that shelter.

And if 27 happened to walk so that Yamada's taller frame was half-hiding him from the Quirk Thief and Chocula, it wasn't cowardice. It was using his environment to his advantage.

But one look at Quirk Thief's singed hair and deep set scowl makes him want to hide fully behind Yamada to take the opportunity to laugh. It seems like Blasty took matters into his own hands. "I wasn't *threatening* you! I don't know how you, a defenseless ward trapped in the devious machinations of those barbarians of Class A could be manipulated into thinking that way, but I, a hero who walks the path of justice could never *possibly* fathom even considering the possibility of-"

"Okay, we got it, turn the volume down *just* a tad, Monoma," Yamada asked, and if *Current Amplifier* was telling someone to turn it down, that was incredibly telling all by itself. "Someone *might* have gotten the wrong impression about that nice little gift you sent, and *someone* might have gotten ahold of that and taken it the wrong way. Shinsou is very sorry about that." He *was not*. "And it looks like... Todoroki or Bakugo-"

"The filthy mouthed uncouth-"

"Okay, yep, *Bakugo* will get a very stern talking to, don't worry about it," Yamada reassured, the same way someone might coo at a rabid dog just to keep it from snarling. And it worked exactly the same way. Foam still dripping from its maw in Quirk Thief's unhinged eyes, but his crossed arms and pursed lips at least seemed to promise *blissful* silence. For now.

Chocula sighs, putting groceries away and disturbingly seems to know where everything is supposed to go. "Since Eraserhead isn't here, I'll take it that I'll be finished after grading his 3-A Heroics Midterms and updating both of your gradebooks."

"Vlad, it's fine, I can take over the gradebooks since you've had enough on your plate already," Yamada says, bringing a flicker of life back into Chocula's eyes. And 27 would rather that he didn't, because his eyes settle on Eri for a bit longer than 27 would like, giving her a small wave. "You guys have both had a pretty demanding day, so I'll try to cut it a bit shorter. Monoma, I'd like you to try to copy Eri and Shinsou's quirks and see if you can use them."

Quirk Thief's eyes went a bit too wide, his grin too tight, and 27 lets Eri hide behind him fully when he realized what that meant. Quirk Thief was going to *touch* Eri and steal her quirk. And he *didn't* want that to happen.

Maybe if Eri started crying, or seemed too scared to do it, Yamada wouldn't make her. He won't let Quirk Thief *touch* her. 27 looks to see if Yamada is looking at them, maybe he could sign whisper to Eri, but it's too late. Quirk Thief is already advancing, trying to mold that too manic grimace into something reassuring, a mask that he doesn't wear enough and that makes it all the more fake.

But he kneels down, and it almost seems natural for a second, it wanes just enough to make it seem like he's not *completely* insane. "It won't hurt, and I won't have it for long. Whenever you're ready, you can give me a high five."

No. He already knew her weaknesses.

He feels Eri shift from one foot to the other, and that shuffle pulls her a little bit farther away from him. He feels the urge to pull her back but he ignores it, he knows that Yamada is insistent on this. He just keeps his eyes locked on Quirk Thief to make sure he doesn't do anything he shouldn't.

She gives him a high five, neither hard enough to hurt his hand or soft enough to bruise his ego, and 27 *wishes* that she did. It's *goddamn unnatural and Yamada needs to stop this*.

"Ah, it's a dud," Quirk Thief whines, picking at *Eri's horn on his head it needs to go away*. "It's an accumulation type quirk. Since I can only copy the fundamental abilities of a quirk, I can't copy what's already been stored."

27 takes a deep breath, and tries to force his quirk into Yamada's mind to *make him stop this*. "Oh, that's too ba- wait, sorry," Yamada says, pulling out his phone to pull it quickly to his ear. "Eraser, what's u... Wait, they *didn't*. Are you- are you kidding me?! Well, of course 1-A has to be expelled, even the ones that weren't involved probably knew about it!"

Quirk Thief gawks, mouth stretched too wide in an open grin, those unsettling eyes too focused on all of his dreams coming true. Or so he thinks.

27 has been staring, but he can't see any difference, and eventually Yamada notices that too, sighing before he gives up the ruse. "Sorry about that, Eri's quirk accumulates emotions, so I kind of thought--"

That was an overwhelming emotion. It's only a few centimeters, but it's noticeably larger, and Quirk Thief notices that too, wincing before he starts picking at the horn again. He might need to be tortured horribly to test whether he can control the quirk when it builds up to the point that it can release, but if he keeps *fondling* that horn, 27 will gladly do it.

"It doesn't work when I'm happy," Eri whispers, and 27 feels the guilt pull for not noticing. Eri and Mirio both wanted Eri's quirk to accumulate pure happiness, but if it doesn't work like that, if it can only be triggered by despair and pain, then it won't work.

"Or, *maybe* Monoma wasn't really all that happy about 1-A getting expelled," Yamada lies, shooting Quirk Thief a pleading look. 27 sees Quirk Thief's mouth drop open to protest, he *knows* that he's going to do it and he's going to devastate Eri, and 27 *will* torture him horribly for that.

But then he sighs, looking to the side to shield his expression better, to hide the lie a little bit. "It would be a bit too quiet and peaceful in the hero course without Class A. And perhaps Class B

would have to work harder to stand out as the superior class without such an easy comparison to prove it.”

Eri still doesn't believe it at first, her eyes too wide and her head tilted a bit too far, but then she finds something that amuses her. “Mono, it's okay if you wanna be friends with Class A! All the heroes should be friends, even if you've got a dark face!”

He sees the twitch throbbing under Quirk Thief's eye, but he manages to keep his expression from cracking fully. “I'll...consider that, Eri. And I do *not* have a dark face! Please disregard whoever has been feeding you such lies!”

Quirk Thief stands up, making himself far too close to 27, and looks at him. Eri swings their joined hands, her grip loosening, but he is *not* going to give Quirk Thief a high five. Not unless he can do it with a knife. *He still has that horn and he needs to stop.*

27 must have been obvious, he must have given that away and he can't even blame himself for it because it's just that *wrong*, but Quirk Thief *notices* it. There's a smirk picking at the edges of that half-reassuring smile, twisting it fully, before he brushes his hair back and his fingers caress the horn that he's stolen *obscenely*. “Do you think it suits me, Shinsou?”

27 looks at Yamada, he *has* to stop this, he has to stop 27 before 27 stops it *permanently*. But Yamada doesn't see it, he's just wincing like Quirk Thief said something odd but he doesn't realize it. He can't comprehend how unbearably, unnaturally, *abominably* wrong this is. ‘*Can I hurt him?*’

Yamada never tells him no if he asks for it. “No! You can't- Monoma, can you un-copy Eri's quirk for me? For Shinsou? It's a little-”

“No, I'm *very* sorry, Present Mic-sensei, but I seem to be unable to do that right now,” Quirk Thief *lies*, his eyes narrowed into slits but his grin is far more menacing. “It's just so *draining* to release a quirk before it's time limit, and after *everything* that Class A put me through, *especially* that undignified barbarian with a foul mouth and fouler-”

“Monoma,” Chocula calls, sighing in a certain way that seems to remind Quirk Thief of his place in the world - under Chocula's thumb. “It's not *dignified* to treat a ward like that.”

That's *weak*, and he hates Chocula all the more for it. He can't even control Quirk Thief, and even Quirk Thief seems surprised by that, before that grin returns all the wider. “Of course, I wouldn't want to upset you, Shinsou. Perhaps we can trade for it? I'll release Eri's quirk if you...”

He's *bad* at making these deals, and that's the most heroic thing about him. Quirk Thief's eyes glance over him, unsure what he wants from him but he seems to want a body part for some reason.

“Hold my hand. *Nicely*,” Quirk Thief finishes, hand outstretched and 27 *doesn't* want to do it nicely. He stares for too long, thinking of which fingers to dislocate or that ever-so-tempting pressure point right above the wrist. He wonders if he could slip up, if he could break Quirk Thief's concentration by breaking something of his, then try to blame it on his training, that he didn't *mean* to do it.

But Yamada wouldn't like that. 27 sighs, and holds onto the hope that Quirk Thief might be in some amount of agony over this. 27 is, he hates the feeling of Quirk Thief's skin on his hand, he hates that it's still warm even if it's *him*, he hates that he barely feels like jumping away from it.

He hates Quirk Thief's eyes, because they look too much like his. White pupils, pale blue irises.

But nothing changes, and he imagined that it would be the dark circles under his eyes that Quirk Thief would steal.

Nothing changes, that horn is still there, but before 27 can fix that himself by twisting Quirk Thief's hand *just right*, he sees those eyes widen a bit before the hand draws away to press against the side of his throat, too quick for 27 to stop him.

His hands move too quick, a pat on his head, a pat on his *nose*, he tries to grab his hair and that's when 27 finally catches him, catches the finger that he was most looking forward to ripping off, but before he can Yamada interrupts him. "Monoma, what's with the-"

"It's a vocal type, but what quirk exactly does he have?" Quirk Thief asks, and it's *irritating* that he can pull away so easily from 27, that he almost seems to know he can take these sorts of liberties when he's too weak to punish him for it. "Where would his quirk factor- Dear *god*, what level of quirk suppressants do you have him on? Whatever specialist you're going to needs to be fined, disbarred, imprisoned-"

"Monoma, what's going on?" Yamada asks, a bit more irritated but there's an undercurrent of concern there that 27 doesn't like.

Until he does. "I can't copy his quirk. I can't even *feel* it, it's like," Quirk Thief pauses, his fingers grasping at something in the air, eyes too wide in shock. "It's like he's completely *quirkless*."

Amazing.

Amazing.

He ignores the small part that doesn't make sense, and just *bathes* in the relief. Quirk Thief can't even steal his quirk, it's *that* messed up, it might *actually* be gone and that's nothing but good news.

Aizawa and Yamada will believe that 27 can't talk to Eri. Aizawa won't have to worry about 27's quirk being used on someone, he won't have to see it being used on Yamada. Mirio will forgive him, he'll know that he can't do something like that anymore. The hero students won't fear him, *no one* will fear him, no one will ever want to rent him or buy him because he's finally, *truly* worthless.

If Yamada wasn't lying. If he stays after the investigation.

He won't lose this.

He won't lose anything to his quirk ever again. He'll never hurt anyone, he'll never be able to, his words will be just *words* and they can be trusted, people will *talk* to him. He'll never have to worry that Aizawa won't, that Yamada won't, they'll *never* act like his mother because they'll never have to worry about that.

Yamada only seems to see the part that doesn't make sense, the part that doesn't make any sense at all. He doesn't *want* his quirk, he's never wanted it, even if it feels nice sometimes, even if he'll never feel that way again, it's *fine*. He can be kept, he can be trusted, it's a trade and it's a good one and it's *fine*. "Shinsou, it's okay, we're working on it. Just, uh."

It's fine. It's fine, it's fine, it's *fine*. He won't miss it. He wishes he never had it, he'd never have gone through that, he should have been *born* quirkless, he wouldn't feel a missing part, he would never have gone through that. He could have *never* gone through that, he could have been Shinsou Hitoshi.

“Thanks for taking the time, Monoma, I really appreciate it. You too, Vlad, help yourselves to some muffins before you guys leave,” Yamada says, practically herding them out with his arms outstretched, making sure that they grab the muffins and know exactly where the door is, and that they keep walking towards it.

“Present Mic-sensei, I really must insist that you contact a better quirk specialist-”

“Absolutely, I completely agree and thank you for letting me know that,” Yamada says, his voice shaking for some reason, it doesn’t make *sense*, none of this makes sense, he can’t *lose his fucking quirk*.

Yamada turns to him after locking the door, his green eyes too wide, Eri holding his hand too tightly. “Twenny, why’s your quirk gone? What happened to it?”

Shinsou opens his mouth and almost forgets, but he appreciates it because it only makes it more believable when he closes it. When he doesn’t know where to begin to answer her, when he doesn’t feel enough of the room and he feels too much of himself. When he remembers that he’s not supposed to. ‘*I can’t talk to her.*’

He might have made a mistake, because Yamada looks too concerned and sad right now.

*

Aizawa has made a mistake.

He should have looked harder to find Midoriya.

“Sensei! Which one looks like a ‘Rupert’?” Ashido asks, dancing around the children half her size that are far more fitting patrons for this type of store to hold up two deflated teddy bear skins.

She submitted her witness statement at the station. He knew that she was bothered by it. She asked to go to the mall, and he agreed to it by not outright refusing it.

But he didn’t plan on this.

“That one,” Aizawa says, pointing at the burnt orange skin that has lines of velvet instead of fur, and tries to say it with all the solemnity that it doesn’t deserve. Ashido nods far more seriously than the situation calls for, before sprinting towards a store worker to begin an incredibly convoluted process of ‘bringing the bear to life.’

His student wants it to be understuffed, so that it’s *lumpy*. She selects her own ‘heart’ for it, and he finds himself too relieved to be left out of that decision, but when she tries to make him join in to give this sad, lumpy bear CPR, he has to threaten to detract from her grade for every mistake that she makes to make her stop.

Eri might enjoy coming to this store one day, but he’ll make sure that Hizashi is the one that takes her. Those *skinned* plushies are unnerving. “Sensei, this boba shop has the best herbal jelly in the *world!* I bet it’s even better than your jelly pouches!”

He can still see a flicker of it behind her eyes, behind the wide grin and the sad, lumpy plushie held in her arms, and he agrees by not disagreeing outright, and follows his student to what *will* be their last destination.

Ashido orders three drinks, too complicated for both himself and the ‘boba-rista’ to keep track of, but he can ignore it while waiting somewhat patiently for the underpaid cashier to wrap his head

around it. He orders coffee with herbal jelly, and pays for all four just so he can convince Ashido a bit more easily into picking a corner booth along the wall. He sits so that he can see the full span of the shop, all of the entrances and exits and most of the mall surrounding them, and wonders if the urge rises because her name is one of the first that he recites when he needs to.

The herbal jelly is sweet, but good. He wouldn't mind if it was a flavor that came in jelly pouches.

"Ah! Tasty," Ashido says, her other two drinks wrapped up in a bag on the table, and Aizawa settles in to wait. He knows it won't take long, Ashido has never been good at hiding things and he appreciates that all too much.

It takes three sips, but he sees it. He's grateful that he's never seen his mother's eyes in hers, not with the fact that she has irises to break up the black surrounding them and that she's *nothing* like his mother. Manic at times, and irrational, but in completely different ways. There's a completely different calm that settles in before it breaks.

"They're going to make her pay for that, right? Sensei?" Ashido asks, and it's a question that seems too easy to answer at first, even if he honestly can't answer it for certain. Ashido seems too much of a child sometimes to make it difficult to lie to her. "She hurt Shinsou like that and... *everything* is her fault. They really can't let her get away with it."

"Your statement corroborated a suspicion. It's more compelling than just wanting to question her about a kidnapping that occurred over a decade ago," Aizawa states, simple facts. Cold logic. Ashido *isn't* a child, and doesn't deserve to be lied to. "It helped."

Ashido's focused stare on her to-go drinks confirms a less serious suspicion of his, and he wonders if he should pick a drink up so that Hizashi doesn't feel left out. "I hate it," Ashido says, a serious tone that he's rarely heard from her. "You don't really get it, Sensei, and it's fine. Maybe I shouldn't get it either, I just... I feel like it hurts *me*. To know that it happened, that it happened to Shinsou, and that.... Stuff like that *happens*."

There's a reason that Aizawa knew that he was meant to be an underground hero. He's known that things like that happened long enough that it doesn't hurt. Sometimes.

He's not sure how he will feel when he looks at Shinsou after this. "It's probably stupid. This doesn't really make up for it, and I know nothing will, but I don't... I don't know what to do or what to say or how to help."

"There's a certain hero that I think you're familiar with," Aizawa says, drawing the panic to still, the wound to start to close now that it's drained just a bit. "He always rushes to the scene with the same smile, and shouts 'It's fine. Why? Because I am here.'"

He doesn't try to keep the wryness out of his tone, and he notices that she catches it, and seems both amused and terrified to let him know that she's amused by it.

"I think that you resemble him a great deal in some ways," Aizawa says, and doesn't miss the pure shock that draws her eyes to widen like that. "There's something to be said about how reassuring a cheerful and honest smile can be in a dark time."

Ashido seems to flinch at that, recoiling further and further away from that cheer before she speaks. "I really can't, sometimes. I really...try, you know? I really don't want to make him sad and I just really want him to be happy, but I really can't... *fake* it. You know?"

"Honesty can't be faked," Aizawa answers, because he knows. He knows all too well that he's not

that type of hero and has never tried to be. He also knows that Ashido and Toshinori are only *similar* because of that, and the difference is far better for it. “Shinsou is a person who knows when someone is being honest or not, and he distrusts dishonest people. That’s why he seems to like you more than the others. He can trust that you’re being honest with him.”

Ashido’s smile is always honest, but it betrays a great deal because of that, and something that he said must have both been reassuring and embarrassing for her. “He doesn’t *like* like me though, right? I mean, he’s- we’re-”

Her pink skin tone almost hides that telling magenta hue on her cheeks, but he’s learned to pick things out like that. And instigate them when he’s in a mood to.

“*Okay*, maybe we’re still kind of married, but it’s been a really long time and I think I probably forced him to do it. We should probably take things slow, get to know each other again. Because *I’ve* changed! I’ve changed a whole lot as a person, I’m *perfectly* fine with eating pickled radishes now so I really can’t make him eat them for me anymore, so where does that leave us? I *forced* Shinnou into a marriage of convenience and we really need to take a step back from that-”

“*I agree*,” Aizawa interrupts, taking a very long sip of his coffee so that he can keep his eyes open rather than closing them to pretend he doesn’t have to deal with this. He didn’t want to instigate it this far. “I believe Shinsou considers you a friend. And I doubt that daycare marriage ceremonies are legally binding.”

That shouldn’t be news to her, but it seems to be a relief to hear that. Ashido’s head nearly falls onto the table as she sighs. “Thank *god*, I was a little bit popular back then, and... you know. Maybe I have 12 husbands and three wives. Kirishima and I got divorced back in 2nd grade, so we’ve got that straightened out. It would be so *awkward* if we didn’t, though.”

It would be a *nightmare* for him. Kirishima already had a tendency to go with the strongest current, and if Ashido had a stronger influence on him than she already does.... With *Kaminari* still a free agent of chaos....

He prefers teaching first years for a reason. They’re too busy being overwhelmed with UA’s expectations to form those kinds of attachments, and Nemuri *enjoys* that the second years have gotten used to it. But if Principal Nezu has his way, he will lose that one, simple joy in life and find himself as a ‘mother duck’ to *Class 1-A* all the way until graduation.

He’s irritated about that. He knows he is. He’s just unable to process that until it comes to fruition. “There’s a crepe shop I like.”

She doesn’t seem to believe it until he orders it. Hizashi laughed himself into fits for days, but Aizawa knew the owner before he moved his location to the mall to take advantage of the proximity to a selection of tween girls oriented stores and specialize in certain designs. The crepes are still delicious, even if the one he orders is bright pink, overstuffed with fruit toppings and whipped cream, and topped with two churros shaped like cat ears.

She orders the same thing, and he can see it in her eyes. She *wants* to memorialize this moment in a selfie, but she knows that it will never happen.

He still has a bite left when the bus draws close to UA, but Ashido has finished hers and her agony is all the more obvious for it. Even if it wasn’t the full crepe, just the logo from the shop and the shade of pink from what’s left would be enough to devastate his students.

She moves quick, but he knew it before she tried, chewing quickly with the wrapper hidden tight in

his fist. “Ashido.”

She looks up from her phone looking devastated enough, regret clear as she runs through every opportunity that she didn’t have the courage to seize.

“No one will believe you,” Aizawa says, earning a grimace that threatens to spill over into tears, before she throws herself back into her seat and pouts. He knows that she will *try* to convince them it happened, and she may even plot to catch him at that shop one day. But she’ll never be able to prove it.

But then, a smile works back over her face, nearly erupting into a giggle. “But I’ll know! I’ll keep your secret, Aizawa-sensei!” Her head tilts just a certain way, her eyes narrowing just a bit. “And maybe you can-”

“Blackmailing a public servant is unbecoming for a professional hero,” Aizawa interrupts, making his way to the bus’s exit while Ashido drags herself behind him morosely. “And an underground hero would know not to make unenforceable threats.”

He can’t help the grin when he sees her startle in shock, something that shouldn’t be surprising to her considering his unique method of discipline. And when he sees Hizashi’s text message, he remembers that he needs to make some threats of his own against other public servants.

“The 1-A dorm is that way,” Aizawa reminds, though he had been considering ignoring the fact that she was trailing him, already knowing her purpose. He had expected that Shinsou might appreciate the visit, and that Aizawa would appreciate the distraction of it more.

“Aw, Sensei! I just wanna hang out with Shinny for a little bit-”

“It’s not a good time for that,” Aizawa says, though there’s much more to be said about it. “Your classmates’ habit of entering the 6th floor is bad enough, but inviting yourself to my home isn’t going to be taken lightly.”

Ashido is beginning to develop Nemuri’s immunity to his glares, and he can honestly think of very few things that are more terrifying than that. “Is Shinny okay?”

“He’s fine,” Aizawa lies, “He will be at school tomorrow and subject to all that entails. But I’m not subjecting myself to it tonight.”

Ashido believes that, pouting and insisting that he take those drinks to Eri and Shinsou, and begging him to tell Shinsou to message her ‘on their very private, BFF’s only and no one else’ chat.

One day, Class 1-A’s insistence that the group chat containing Shinsou doesn’t exist won’t amuse him anymore. And it might be today.

*

He’s wished for impossible things. Maybe they shouldn’t come true.

Yamada and Aizawa haven’t said anything about it, but they’re worried. He’d rather they not say anything about it and ignore it. It’s fine.

It makes dinner more awkward, quiet. It feels more like he should talk and that’s a horrible feeling, straining against a mask he has and one he put on himself. Eri seems to be dealing with it better than he is. She’s catching on to new signs a lot quicker, and he doesn’t have to finger spell as much.

The glass of water can only do so much, and he tries to take sips of it so it's not suspicious that he's drinking so much of it. His throat is burning whether he drinks water or not, and he's going to ask Yamada how to make tea so that he can make it. He can probably flatter Yamada by drinking it as often as he plans to. It'll make it even easier to hide it.

His head hurts, his body hurts, he's *tired* and can't pick between being too cold and being too hot. It's *frustrating* and he just wants it to be over, hates thinking that it might take longer without medicine. He'll just have to hide it longer.

He tried it.

He tried to use his quirk on Eri when they were washing their hands before dinner. He knew that Yamada wouldn't see it, but it didn't matter.

It didn't work. He's quirkless.

It's fine.

He's sitting at a table with three people who have quirks, and he's the one that doesn't. It's fine. It's fine, he doesn't need it. Even if The Miasma finds him, he'll be safe. Aizawa will protect him.

Maybe.

He might.

There's a chance.

‘ *Can you teach me to make tea?* ’

Yamada does, and he takes that opportunity. Eri finds it boring, very boring compared to Aizawa's gradebook, and Aizawa decides to do his grading in the office once he catches her attention. Aizawa and Yamada have been working together as heroes for years, they've lived together, they're married. They probably do things like that all the time when he doesn't notice it.

“Shou has been trying to get a quirk specialist set up. It's a little complicated with the investigation, but don't...” Yamada talks quietly, too quietly. “Don't give up on it, you know? We'll get it fixed up, don't worry. Are you...okay with that?”

A question. He really, really *fucking* hates that and it doesn't even make sense. ‘ *It's fine. Can talk to Eri. Like this.* ’

He shouldn't have gotten what he wanted.

*

There's a panic barely muted in the effects of the medicine, and he hates that the medicine doesn't always work. That when it doesn't, when he only feels groggy and exhausted under its influence after he wakes up, it feels like it came to the scene of a disaster too late.

He knows why it doesn't work. Dr. Tenma stopped asking about his sleeping schedule years ago, but still prescribed the medication. Still told him that it's only truly effective when taken regularly, with a steady sleep schedule. He's never going to have that, and he'd rather have a medicine that *works* regardless.

Aizawa pulls himself away from Hizashi, thankful not for the first time that Hizashi doesn't know

if he's sleeping deeply enough. Hizashi stopped asking what the nightmares were, but he doesn't have to *ask* to ask. He prefers when he doesn't, because making his own tea in the dark is enough to settle him sometimes, and despite what he told Bakugo about IRT, it never works for him.

There's no way to change a part of that nightmare into something less horrifying. If anything, it only grows more monstrous.

There's a spike of fear that comes when he sees that shock of purple hair in real life, quickly followed by shame. He knows that his mind is simply more sadistic towards him after USJ, and that last nightmare was a particularly cruel one. And he knows that despite what has changed today, Shinsou is probably still suffering from nightmares.

He seems to be taking a page out of his own book, a kettle simmering on the stove while he looks through the cabinets for the tea. Aizawa takes a moment to remember that the last time he caught Shinsou in the kitchen at this hour with the stove on, he was trying to burn off a tattoo, and he's thankful at least that it's different. That it feels like progress, at least. "Nightmares?"

Shinsou startles, looking at him and nearly closing the cabinet as he does, as though he was stealing what he's completely welcome to. But he seems to remember that without reassurance, eyes falling back to half-closed, nodding. ' *Tea. Helps.* '

Aizawa nods, because it does. Not much, but a pause before attempting sleep again can have an effect, make it easier. He needs to make sure that Shinsou makes that attempt. "I'm awake for the same reason. Would you like me to make it?"

Shinsou's head tilts before he shakes his head, turning back to the cabinets. Shinsou seems to yearn for some amount of self-sufficiency in some areas, especially obvious with his desire to learn how to cook. It's good that he wants to learn those skills, bringing himself to the level that most teenagers on the cusp of adulthood are at. Things that they learned easily through observation are completely new to Shinsou. ' *Pick.* '

Shinsou holds out two tea canisters, one for chamomile and one for ginger. He's not sure why Shinsou offered the ginger, if he thinks that Aizawa is odd enough to prefer it for some reason, but he points to the chamomile then sits at the table, watching Shinsou prepare it.

There's self-sufficiency, and then there's care. Shinsou shouldn't have learned to care for another before learning to be self-sufficient, but he did. Aizawa often wonders how that came about, how deep it runs. What a 12 year old boy would do to make himself into a caretaker for a toddler. How he could *possibly* succeed at it when he had learned little else but torture and pain.

Shinsou selects his own mug, and Aizawa's. Aizawa notices that it's the solid black one that he usually drinks coffee from on Mondays because it's larger than the others. He takes it from Shinsou and wonders if there's an attempt to be spiteful in that, to use it now and hope that he wouldn't notice when it's dirty in a few hours, or if it's just being startlingly observant. Pattern recognition. "What was it about?"

Shinsou takes the seat across from him, surprisingly. He imagined that Shinsou would prefer the chair next to that to create more distance, making this conversation less intimate, more comfortable. He tries not to be concerned with that, and fails. ' *Training.* ' Shinsou signs the same way he always does, betraying nothing, but he takes a sip while the tea is still a bit too hot, possibly still steeping, and that betrays too much unsettlement. ' *New one. Training was fine.* '

Aizawa wonders if this openness about his past was possible for Shinsou because he was that unsettled by the nightmare, or if it's due to the investigation requiring nothing from him from now

on. That he had won and lost by that, unable to fight under Jun's quirk but winning peace afterwards. "Combat training?" It's a rather pointless question, completely vague and open to interpretation. Open to correction.

Shinsou nods. ' *Before other numbers. Solo. Against teacher. It was fine.* ' Aizawa imagines that nothing at Miasma was ever fine, and Shinsou's insistence on it is only more suspicious.

"With your quirk?" Aizawa asks, quietly enough that he regrets asking before he does it. He regrets it all the more as he begins to see Shinsou close himself off, just a half-shake of his head, just staring at his tea where it's raised.

Almost like a shield. Like he's being interrogated.

"It's always the same nightmare for me."

He doesn't know who is more surprised, Shinsou or himself. Aizawa doesn't talk about his nightmares, even when he knows that rationally, it would help. Rationally, he should, because he tells others to do it. He's told Hizashi a few vague things, pieces that aren't the whole of the horror, and he doesn't intend to tell Shinsou the whole of it either. Shinsou shouldn't know anything about USJ.

"A strength enhanced villain shattered my arm and my skull. I blacked out before I could know whether the people I was protecting were safe. Even though they were." He demanded to know, as soon as he regained consciousness and before he even registered that *agonizing* pain, he was screaming to know. "I think it stuck with me because I didn't know."

He never caught that nurse's name, but he's thankful for her, that she didn't try to restrain him, and didn't try to tell him to calm down first. *Your class is safe, no one was injured* . He blacked out immediately after hearing that.

But he needed to know it for himself.

Other members of staff took over meeting with his students' parents, he wasn't expected to do it. He only managed to meet with the Hagakures because they were visiting Tooru's older brother in the same hospital. He nearly bit through his lip and wept as soon as he left the room, but even though he wasn't supposed to stand up on his own, he was a fall risk until the brain damage was truly healed, he did it.

He didn't try to do it again.

Shinsou wants to say something, his hold on the mug adjusts for a sign that he doesn't use, but considers. It takes a moment, but he places the mug back on the table. ' *I didn't know E-R-I was safe. They told me. I didn't know.* '

Aizawa feels that too keenly, nodding while he stares at his own tea. It might have been worse, to agonize over one person that had relied on him for years, such a small and defenseless child, than 19 teenagers that he had known for a few months. But irrationally, he doubts it. He feels that it's probably the same. "I'm sorry that it took that long."

Shinsou doesn't wave it off, doesn't answer to that, and seems distracted by something else to say. He doesn't sign it, but it's a question in itself, hesitant all the same for it. His finger points to his cheek, on another scar, but his own isn't the one he's curious about.

"Yes," Aizawa answers, his fingers tracing that strange divot, skin made unfamiliar in a way that's only worse at his elbow, where the decaying quirk took hold. "It's the only scar I received from it."

It's a joke that few people know as a joke. He doesn't wear shirts that display the scar on his elbow, not out of avoidance but a preference that took root long before it. He walked away with more scars than those two, but he's heard awed comments on campus that he feels no need to correct. *He was attacked by that thing, and even though he was all bandaged up like a mummy, he walked away with only that one scar!*

In certain instances, and certain occasions, he can talk about it. Pieces. Not the whole of the horror, not when it doesn't serve a purpose. Not when he can scarcely remember the whole of it either, only pieces at a time. The burning in his eyes, his vision blurry and fading black. That monster's eyes dead, its beak wet with drool. The bones of its hand a vice around his head, its claws like knives in his scalp and on his face.

Pieces.

Pieces are safe.

' *Pick one*, ' Shinsou signs, then places his hands close to the middle of the table, his forearms resting on it. The tattoo is on display, he's started wearing T-shirts to sleep in shortly after Chisaki, but he knows that Shinsou is talking about the other marks that his history has left on him.

Trading scars and stories is both a child's and a hero's favorite past time, it's a fun game to play. It's not with Shinsou, not when he has more scars than some heroes and not when the biggest scars stir up a deeper horror than Aizawa can handle right now. Possibly worse than the Nomu. It could *be* a Nomu for all that he knows.

He draws a line below the second knuckle of each of his fingers on his own hand, mirroring the ones on Shinsou's left hand. He imagines that there's a story to that one, and he's surprised to see a small, amused smirk on Shinsou's face as he looks at them. ' *Punch knife quirk. Stupid. Like Now Music.* '

Aizawa smiles too for a moment, before he remembers that hospital trip. He had to use the capture scarf to hold Hizashi's wrist to his chest, to keep him from waving around those broken fingers after he tried to *punch* a lead pipe. He was probably sleep deprived enough at the time to forget that he didn't have speakers on his hands anymore. "There's a technique that can help with nightmares. Image Rehearsal Therapy."

Shinsou seems interested, as much as he seems sleep deprived. His hands are folded loosely over each other, under his chin, and Aizawa doubts the chamomile tea was that relaxing.

"You try to remember as much of the nightmare as you can, or write it down. Then try to change it so that it's not a nightmare anymore. You picture the way it's changed when you fall asleep," Aizawa says, and tries not to betray the frustration that he feels.

He's tried. Remembering the nightmare is easy, every visceral detail that only inspires his darkest fears. He's written it down hundreds of times, catalogued almost every small part of it that changes. He can't change it himself, and he can't make it any less horrifying.

He's tried to make it absurd, making himself the one that grips the Nomu's head and forces him down, forcing him into dogeza to apologize for interrupting class. He's tried to make it more vengeful, imagining a particularly nasty villain is in the Nomu's grasp and that he merely watches, content to be unable to stop it. He's even tried to make it *sexual*, to make it Hizashi who holds his skull to the concrete a bit more gently, that someone he trusts is the one pinning him down like that.

It doesn't work. The Nomu is still there, crushing someone's skull and it's often his. It's been Hizashi's too many times as well.

And now it's been Shinsou's.

Shinsou, who didn't beg him to cancel the monster's quirk, to save him from it. Shinsou, his eyes wide with silent terror, but too resigned to the monster's violence. Aizawa was standing in the water next to Asui, next to Midoriya, but the water might have well have been solid concrete because he couldn't even *move* to stop it. To throw himself at the monster if he couldn't erase his quirk, to do *anything* to stop it.

Shinsou, still silent, but his eyes closed and he seemed to fade from life before the Nomu crushed his skull into the concrete, purple hair in a dark blue fist amid a *sea* of swelling red.

Dreams are supposed to be a way that the subconscious communicates to consciousness. Dreams are supposed to have meaning, and nightmares probably do too.

Shinsou never asked him to fight the investigation, to stop it. He probably wouldn't have considered it a possibility, not when he still seems to be unable to understand that he *should* be safe. And even if he did, Aizawa would have been powerless to stop it.

Aizawa didn't cancel Jun's quirk, he sat and watched Shinsou being tortured, forced to speak and forced to feel what Miasma did to him. He's promised that it will never happen again, that Shinsou will never face another aspect of the investigation for the duration of his wardship, and he *will* keep that promise. But it might already be too late.

Shinsou's muteness may be related to his quirk, or it may simply be trauma. He may have failed Shinsou by being unable to procure a quirk specialist thus far, or he may have watched those wounds being dredged to the surface and not realized that they would fester even deeper for it. Shinsou being unable to talk to Eri now was because he simply *watched*, he closed his eyes to it and didn't try to use his quirk again to stop it. He thought that would be better than Mind Slice.

No. He's lying to himself.

He wanted more than the name of the Nomu Organization. He wanted to find those that were responsible for hurting Shinsou, for making him fear his own name, for making him call himself '27' and forcing him to *answer to that*. For making him say that 'name' instead of the one he has, instead of 'Shinsou Hitoshi.'

'*I can't*,' Shinsou signs, seeming resigned and disappointed in that, staring at his tea long before he drinks it. '*Training not scary. Scary because.*' Shinsou hesitates, his head tipping forward just a bit, as though to hide some break in his expression, one that only comes in a brief wince. '*Quirkless. Teacher found out. Worthless.*'

Aizawa isn't surprised by that. If nightmares are a way for the subconscious to communicate to the conscious, then Shinsou's fear of being quirkless and thereby being worthless was probably already known to his conscious mind.

Aizawa doesn't want to ask if Shinsou knows that his mother sold him. He knows that he does. He doesn't know if Shinsou knows what his price was.

Selfishly, *utterly* selfishly, Aizawa never wants to know it. "Then, you could dream that you have your quirk. That you could use it," Aizawa finds himself too hesitant to say it, staring at his tea, considering. Considering what would have happened to Shinsou if this new dream were his history,

if it would be a brighter one, or a shorter one. “And you could escape.”

Shinsou’s eyes widen for a moment, before he swallows. He shakes his head, but drinks his tea, likely to hide the discomfort that the idea caused. ‘ *50 still there. I wouldn’t.* ’

Shinsou’s attachment and loyalty to Furokage Mizuki was truly that deep. He wouldn’t even try to escape in a nightmare if she wasn’t there, a child clinging to an adult for the adult’s safety as well. Irrationally.

He ignores how maternal that makes Furokage Mizuki sound, that Shinsou truly wouldn’t be parted from her even for his own life. “She wasn’t the teacher?”

Shinsou’s eyes widen again, hands curling where they lay on the table, and he can’t help but notice that they curl the same way they do around a scar. It sickens him deeper than it should, to know that whoever had carved those long scars across Shinsou’s arms had been around him so much, had *trained* him in other ways. ‘ *No. Only knives. For a while.* ’

Aizawa nods, and imagines that’s why Shinsou prefers knives. He hoards pieces of joy and finds them in things that are hardly recognizable as something that would make him happy. He imagines the face masks are the same way, but worse. “You could imagine that she’s there. And it wouldn’t matter if you were quirkless. You would have someone to protect you.”

Shinsou’s hands twitch, a flinch that tells him that he’s stumbled upon a wound he hadn’t even considered. A meaning to that nightmare that makes far more sense.

“Or me,” Aizawa says, and feels the shame curling deep in his chest. He wasn’t there, not for a single moment of that nightmare, and he hasn’t forgotten that he could have been. In a million different ways, he could have gotten to Shinsou sooner. But he’s here, now. “You’re living at UA, surrounded by heroes every day. You could have your pick of any quirk or hero that would defend you.”

‘ *50,* ’ Shinsou signs, still uneasy and still unwilling to look at Aizawa, eyes focused beside his mug of tea. ‘ *Quirk would be best. For escape.* ’

Aizawa fights not to find some amusement in that, that even when creating a dream, Shinsou wants it to make sense. Tactically. Logically- “That sounds like a good plan,” Aizawa says, bringing a hand to curl around the side of his neck and fighting not to avert his gaze. “It can take practice to work, but it’s effective. I hope it works for you.”

Shinsou nods, seeming to take that as an invitation to leave, as Aizawa half-meant it as. Part of him recognizes that they rarely talk like this, that this connection through nightmares might be a deeper one than through observing Class 1-A’s training. The other part recognizes it, and irrationally wants to dismiss it. ‘ *Good night.* ’

Aizawa looks down at his tea, wondering how long it will be before he’s finished it and can attempt to sleep again, and he almost misses it. “Good night...”

Shinsou’s shock, echoing his in a far worse way, irrationally makes him laugh a bit.

“Good night, Shinsou,” Aizawa says, though his hands move with a different name. He wonders how long Shinsou has had a different name for him as well. ‘ *Sou Coffee.* ’

It’s irrational, but he likes ‘ *Zawa Coffee* ’ better.

27 lays awake for too long, swallowing cough after cough and hating that he didn't bring something to drink with him. He drank a lot of the cough medicine in the cabinet, unsure how much 30 mL really was, but it isn't doing anything other than making his head swim. He's distracted, incredibly distracted, and can hardly remember to picture the nightmare differently, the way he wants it to be.

He would have liked to dream that he and 50 escape, even if it wasn't because of a nightmare. It's been years since he dreamed of escaping with 50. And it doesn't happen tonight.

He's not training with Bug, she's not telling him to talk through the locked mask before she sends Cherry and Blossom into him. She's not scowling darker and darker, her hands pressed against the sides of his head and the imagined chittering of those bugs aren't ringing too loudly in his ears.

He's in the backroom that he first met Eri in, before he was sold to Chisaki. Chisaki is glaring in front of him, his hands are still missing but he doesn't realize that until he wakes up. He hardly notices Chisaki because he can only feel The Miasma at his back, he feels the stare of every Number and Boss and Memory and Bug.

"*You're worthless,*" Chisaki groans, his head lolling to the side like he's throwing a tantrum about it. He's disappointed before 27 even did anything, he won't have a chance to escape The Miasma, he's going to be taken back by all of them. Eri stands in the corner that he didn't send her to, crying alone so loudly. He's never going to meet her, he'll never learn her name because he doesn't have his *quirk*.

"*Hey,*" 50 calls, standing next to Chisaki but she doesn't look down at him *once*. "*We're getting out.*"

She throws Mocha at him, and he catches him, though he nearly slips through his uncoordinated fingers. When he looks up, Eri is held in 50's arms, no longer sobbing, no longer thin and small and bandaged. She's smiling, they're both smiling, he knows that if he runs to them, they'll escape. They'll all be in that field of sunshine with Yamada, Aizawa might be there too-

He wakes up.

He almost doesn't catch the cough in time, disturbs Eri when he turns quickly to bury his face in the pillow so that it isn't loud. He's grateful that she doesn't really wake up, that she stirs but when he looks, she's fast asleep.

He lays back down and glares at the ceiling, because he knows it's Aizawa's fault.

*

If he has that nightmare once during the night, he often has it again. Sometimes he wakes before it reaches the usual conclusion, he's only looking into the Nomu's eyes with the same hopelessness and frustration, or he's trying to cancel that decaying quirk to protect whoever that hand is reaching for. Sometimes he's protecting Asui, he's protecting Hizashi, he's protecting Eri. He usually succeeds, he at least protects them, despite how sadistic his mind has become.

He has that nightmare, but it's different again.

He feels the vice around his head far more clearly than he did when it happened, he feels the same strain trying to cancel the decaying quirk but this time he's trying to protect Shinsou. Shinsou stands alone in that pool, like Eri does when she's there, but instead of terror he only seems surprised by the hand reaching towards him impotently.

Aizawa knew what would happen next. Even in that dream, he was waiting for the vice to tighten before he saw the concrete rise to greet him. For a moment, he was almost bored of waiting for it, frustrated that it was taking so long, before he looked up and must have conjured him by that.

It was just a flash, a whisp. Shirakumo swinging his bo staff to send the Nomu flying in an almost comical way, and before Aizawa even registered that the vice around his head should be gone, he saw that grin. The most honest smile he's ever seen anyone wear, and hasn't seen in over 15 years.

When he realized that Shirakumo wasn't at USJ, that he couldn't be, he woke up. And shortly thereafter, cursed himself.

He shouldn't be so logical even in his *dreams*.

The Safety Sick

Chapter Summary

27 knows that he's sick, but he has a plan to keep anyone from finding out about it. He's able to go to school, but the plan quickly unravels.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Brief mention of disordered eating (Specifically, Bakugo accuses Shinsou of purging), Shinsou once again convinced he's going to die (twice), 50 mention

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou convinced Eri to pretend that he couldn't talk to her anymore to better hide that he was getting sick. In Chapter 42, Shinsou beat Yamada in a game and a bet was made that if Shinsou won, Yamada had to wear an 'Existing Amplifier' (knock off of 'Present Mic') shirt to school, and this is the first day at school post-midterms. Shinsou has a lockable 'stash box' where he puts things that he takes as trophies for meaningful events. Since Hari held Shinsou underwater by his hair when he was tortured with the bleach bath, Shinsou's hair being touched can be a trigger for him, and Shinsou had been trying to de-trigger himself by 'training.' During the Joint Training Exam, Aizawa attempted to erase Black Whip, and after discovering he couldn't, demanded that Midoriya see a quirk specialist to get answers as to why his quirk couldn't be erased and had changed so drastically. Monoma attempted to copy Shinsou's quirk and failed, saying that it felt like Shinsou was completely quirkless. On the night that Shinsou tried to escape UA, he told Midoriya that all his mother saw in him was a phone, then later told Midoriya and Ashido that his mother sold him. Shinsou can talk to anyone he has Brainwashed, and that includes Midoriya and Bakugo. At Shichi-Go-San, Shinsou had to wear a disguise just in case someone from The Miasma recognized him, and that disguise included cat ears. Shinsou plays a 'Question Game' of trading questions, only answering questions when he has one to ask himself. Shinsou thinks that the only difference between villains and criminals are that villains wear costumes and act out their deeply held personal philosophies. Aizawa and Yamada are aware that Eri seems to be terrified of Shinsou getting sick. Aizawa knows that Shinsou believed that he was sold to Aizawa, but believes he convinced Shinsou otherwise after he tried to escape from UA. Aizawa knows that Miasma was cold, and the last time that Shinsou had a dream that he was at The Miasma, covered him with a blanket to fight off the cold. Shinsou was fused with Chisaki and Nemoto at the end of the raid, and freed by Eri using Rewind, but Shinsou came away with tattoos that he didn't have before, at least one from Nemoto.

27 feels like he should just give it up.

He's aware of every little motion while he gets ready, because it's pure *agony*. Just pulling himself from his bed makes him want to collapse back into it, knowing that whatever Yamada and Aizawa

will do to him when they find him like that isn't worth the effort of this con.

But he knows it's not just for them. It's for Eri too. She can't know he's sick, she shouldn't worry about him like that. She's excited for him to wear the face masks to school, and he's excited that it'll make it easier to hide when he needs to cough.

But when Yamada comes back after waking them up wearing a sour look on his face, 27 finds it in himself to be excited for another reason. "I almost forgot that I have a little deal with you, little listener. But, if you don't want to see me dressed up as Existing Amplifier out of the kindness of your heart, I completely understand--"

Even the grin that pulls across his face hurts, and dragging his stash box from under his bed makes his arms too sore, but he wouldn't give up either of those things for the prize he won. He didn't think Yamada would actually let him do this, nonetheless remind him of it, but he's glad. He's happy enough to ignore that he probably could have made him wear this shirt to his Midterm.

Yamada sighs heavily when he holds out the shirt, like he's looking at something that will slowly kill him instead of just embarrassing him in front of the students. 'Existing Amplifier' is printed in big block letters on the top of the shirt, and the bottom half has a black and white cartoon of Present Mic with jagged, messy lines that make him look stupid. The more 27 looks at it, the more he starts to feel like it's a mistake to enforce that bet they made, the cartoon does come off as more insulting than he would have liked. "You know, there's absolutely no one else who could make me wear this, Shinsou," Yamada says, folding it in half to toss it over his shoulder. "Not even Shouta could get away with it."

Yamada says confusing things all the time, things that twist something inside 27's chest and make him feel weird. It doesn't feel like guilt anymore, but it's close to that. It feels a little bit like pride, like he's really *making* Yamada do this, but he knows he's not.

27 notices that Yamada is looking at the stash box, and 27 wonders if he's noticed that the stash is bigger, and what he feels about that. If he's really okay with 27 doing this, being this weird. Maybe he was fine with it as long as he didn't see it, and maybe the box was a better way of keeping it out of sight.

But Yamada seemed to like knowing the stories behind some of the things in there. The 'pieces of happiness,' even if they're not always like that. It's not always a happy memory, like the straw from his chocolate milk when Eri's quirk erupted, or the face mask from when he had to meet Chisaki.

But sometimes it is. 'Hair mask,' 27 signs, awkwardly with the bit of plastic from the packaging still tucked between two fingers. Yamada applied a hair mask on him because 27 asked him to, to help him get used to other people touching his hair. To quiet the screaming inside his head whenever someone did, that place that Hari dug into too tightly and left a wound inside his mind. At first, he just wanted to make sure Eri could play with his hair, he just wanted to dig out that wound and become less odd for it.

But he liked when Yamada did it anyway, regardless of whether it was training. It just felt nice. Sometimes when Ashi plays with his hair, it feels as nice as it did with the hair mask, but sometimes his nerves still act up. But not with Yamada.

Maybe it wouldn't be weird if he asked him to do it again.

"Maybe we could make our little spa day a regular thing," Yamada says, smiling but his voice is oddly strained. "You might be due for a little trim too, unless you want to grow it out. Maybe we

could do that sometime.”

27 nods, unsure if he wants to change his hair. It feels weird to have an opinion on it, especially when his opinion would be the only thing that matters in that decision.

He could grow it long, because he doesn’t have to worry about whether it would be a distraction during a job or a fight. Bug used to pull him aside once every few months and pull all of his hair into a fist at the back of his head, and cut off whatever was in that fist to make sure it wouldn’t be distracting. He got lice a few times, he still doesn’t know how, but he had to hold himself still while she buzzed all of his hair off, ignoring the nicks to his scalp and ears, and how the mask vibrated when the clippers touched the strap.

He would like to have the hair on his nape to be short again, to be soft like that. It seems odd to just get his way with something like that, to decide how he looks just because he wants to look that way.

But he likes it. ‘*Short on neck. I like hair like this.*’

Yamada smiles wider, that kind smile blooming in full and his voice returning to normal. “We can definitely pencil you in at Yamada’s Premium Boutique: Hair and More! Just a trim off the neck, and leave the party on the scalp to ‘fern’ on out!”

27 can’t help but roll his eyes. Maybe his hair doesn’t lay flat no matter what Eri tries to do to it, but he’s not going to be insulted by a guy who makes his hair stand straight up on *purpose*.

Maybe Yamada got to him too much, because when Eri insists that he needs to match and ‘rep the youth’ for Yamada’s show, he doesn’t argue. Even if he *was* looking forward to wearing one of the cooler cat designs on his face.

Yamada nearly choking on his coffee when he saw the ‘Get Your Hands Up!’ face mask made it worthwhile though, and probably made it easier for 27 to get a cup of coffee to soothe the ache in his throat.

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Aizawa already arranged for homeroom to be a time for his students to practice any new ideas that came from collaborating with 1-B, and Gym Gamma quickly fills with the sounds of his students’ quirk training. As usual, it’s loud, and it’s difficult to hold a conversation while Bakugo seems inspired to make the largest explosions he can, perhaps outdone in that special training session where Monoma copied each of his students’ quirks to offer a new perspective on them.

Each student, except for the one standing next to him, who would continue to stand next to him and lose these training opportunities as long as he didn’t see a quirk specialist.

Midoriya had a unique nervous energy about him at times, especially apparent now. His attention seemed divided between hyperfocusing on the training below, perhaps appreciating the vantage point from the elevated walkway, glancing nervously and guiltily at Aizawa, and looking at the wards who were working on their self-studies at a very deliberate distance.

Aizawa very deliberately put himself within that distance, because while Midoriya had a well of reckless determination once he set his mind to something, he was easy to frighten into submission when the stakes were less dire. And wanting to talk to Shinsou and Eri wasn’t a dire matter, it was a mere *want*, and something that Aizawa had every right to withhold from a student who wasn’t taking this odd and uncontrollable evolution of his quirk seriously.

Aizawa and Toshinori had argued back and forth all weekend through email, but Toshinori's position as a Heroics instructor and whatever unprofessional mentorship he had with Midoriya was no match for Aizawa's position as his homeroom teacher. He was forced to call on Principal Nezu to explain that to Toshinori, which finally put the conversation to an end.

Aizawa couldn't erase Midoriya's quirk if it went out of control again, and until the explanation for that was found along with a solution, Midoriya couldn't be allowed to risk quirk training.

Midoriya *knew that* and didn't remedy the situation at all. He's old enough to make his own doctor's appointments, and he's not a commuter student like several others. Mrs. Midoriya could have arranged for a quirk specialist and taken him there, *Toshinori* could have swallowed his ill-placed pride and taken care of it. Aizawa wasn't being unreasonable, but they were.

There's only so many times that Midoriya could look up at him like a kicked dog before he had to remind him of that. "Did you *attempt* to do what I asked at the Joint Training Exam?"

Midoriya fidgets with his fingers pressing against each other, too much like the young child he's acting like. "N-no. Um, All Might wanted me to see someone specific, but he hasn't been able to get in contact with them. I know why I shouldn't train until then, but I really-"

"Do you know how many students have died during quirk training or exams in UA's history?" Aizawa asks, and he's not surprised that even the walking encyclopedia Midoriya doesn't know the answer. "35."

35 *children* died on these grounds. Almost always hero students, almost always due to an incredibly destructive quirk being left unchecked or unsupervised. Aizawa's quirk might be the most effective control when his students lacked it themselves, but as a homeroom teacher for first years, he knows he needs to instill it within them before he can risk handing them off to another instructor.

"And how many do you think have died under my watch?" Midoriya mutters an answer that might not be entirely correct, but he repeats it more firmly than he feels it. "Zero."

He knows in the back of his mind, in some rational way, that he wasn't responsible for Shirakumo's death. He was a student, he was 16 years old. They weren't warned about the villain attack and the first blow was long range. The hero supervising their internship didn't know either, he wasn't prepared to lead them or defend them, and too soon Aizawa was standing alone among the rubble with children to protect, a villain to face, and a dead body that he hadn't discovered yet.

Heroes stand among the dead too often, but he refuses to let his students suffer that grim reality too soon. He refuses to let them cause it, and as much as he can tell that Midoriya's new quirk form is powerful and can be incredibly deadly, he knows that it would completely *shatter* Midoriya if it was. If he lost control and caused a casualty.

It wouldn't be easy for Aizawa to watch that happen, his quirk once again useless, but this time without All Might charging in as reinforcement. His number is zero, and the day that changes will be the day that he resigns. He's not sure what will happen after that, and he refuses to consider it.

With the Problem Child properly schooled into place, Aizawa glances back at his wards. Eri pulls at the collar of Shinsou's hoodie, pulling him out of a brief nap to help her with her workbook. Shinsou's sleep patterns were difficult to call a pattern, and it's hard to say whether his grogginess is due to the week without waking early for school or his persistent nightmares. As much as it is odd that Eri is demanding his attention so insistently, it's odd that Shinsou didn't seem to be tempted at all to watch the training below, or that he wasn't affected by the coffee that Hizashi

gave him.

He may be avoiding the sight of the students using their quirks, now that there was a fear that Shinsou had lost his.

Aizawa might have been tempted to schedule the quirk specialist appointment for Midoriya himself, just to get this pointless ordeal over with, but he had enough work cut out for him to secure Shinsou one. Naomasa reported that only one member of the Commission of Wardship Affairs had signed off on a quirk specialist, even with this new information coming to light, and that wasn't enough for Aizawa. Even if the members of that commission's names were kept off the record, supposedly untraceable, he was going to have to find them. To *talk*, and those conversations would vary wildly with whatever else he discovered about each member.

They can't let Shinsou go on like this. They can't make the kid *mute* because they refuse to sign a pointless piece of paper and accept a doctor that's already been thoroughly vetted. If the wardship wouldn't be immediately terminated when the quirk specialist logged their findings, as required by law, this would have happened far sooner.

Aizawa tries to focus on his students, but Midoriya keeps glancing at the wards, and Aizawa knows that will only invite Eri's attention. If she wasn't so insistent on getting Shinsou to spend time with her, she probably would have glued herself to his side by now.

"Zawa," Eri calls with a tug on his sleeve, probably forgetting that's a 'secret' nickname that shouldn't be used around students after the long break, though he can be relieved it isn't her other nickname for him - 'Dad.' "Can you make a quirk doctor appointment for me and take Twenny too? He's really sleepy without his quirk."

And there was the *other* secret that he didn't want his students to know. Midoriya looks completely baffled for a moment, but it pulls into deep concern when he looks at Shinsou. "Present Mic and I are going to make an appointment about that."

Aizawa doesn't offer to make that appointment for Eri, watching her face drop from pinched fear to a far deeper relief. He imagines that as terrified as she is of doctors, of their gloved hands he suspects, she would still be willing to risk it if that were the only way to take Shinsou to a quirk specialist.

He just hopes that Eri doesn't piece out what Shinsou being 'tired' really means, that this bout of severe depression isn't a burden for Eri as much as it is for Shinsou, Yamada, and himself. And he hopes that neither Eri nor his students attempt to cure it with any heartfelt but ultimately useless gestures.

"Wait, Sensei," Midoriya sputters, a realization fully formed and one that neither he, nor Shinsou based off of that grimace half-hidden by the face mask, appreciate. "Shinsou lost his quirk? How- that doesn't make any sense--"

"Midoriya," Aizawa says sharply, trying to convey in his tone and his glare that he *shouldn't* know this and shouldn't think about it now that he does. "You're not involved in this."

He would like to make some stronger threats to stop the gears still whirring in Midoriya's head, but with Eri still standing nearby, he can't make them. He can't expect a 5 year old to keep something like this a secret, and it's unfortunate that both of his wards have to spend so much time in the proximity of his students. Especially with this, and especially with Midoriya. "I know, but...if something's wrong with Shinsou's quirk...it's kind of my fault, isn't it?"

It would be easier if Aizawa could blame the Problem Child, but he can't. Midoriya had no way of knowing that his own quirk was going to go haywire at the exam, and absolutely no way of knowing that Shinsou would use his to subdue it.

"I mean, it's nearly impossible to lose a quirk, except if it's taken by All for One," Midoriya continues, his voice nearly shaking around that villain's name. "But if it's strained, or affected by certain illnesses, or--"

"I don't know what you're doing at UA if you have a doctorate in quirk studies," Aizawa interrupts. While he's very obviously not above using a student to evaluate either of his wards' quirk issues, anything that Midoriya would tell him if he continued wouldn't be new to him.

He and Hizashi both tried to find any explanation, Hizashi nearly convinced that Shinsou must have vomited a majority of his quirk factor cells out after eating too much. The strain would be convincing if Shinsou had lost his ability to talk to Eri immediately after using his quirk at the exam, and he doubts that Shinsou contracted Malaria strain H or any other incredibly rare and lethal ailment. Even if the temporary effect of those explanations would be a relief, they were only slightly more likely than being attacked by the villain who stole Ragdoll's quirk.

Aizawa doesn't have an explanation, he doesn't have *anything* to offer Shinsou as reassurance that this was temporary. He can only try to make sure that this stalemate with The Commission ends with Shinsou going to a quirk specialist, and getting answers for all of them.

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Yamada was only able to keep the smile up as long as it took the two wards to walk out the door to the staff room to wash their hands before lunch, before he fixed Shouta with the same concerned grimace he saw on his husband. "This is getting pretty bad."

Shinsou was always free to take a nap or do whatever he wanted during class, within reason, but Yamada and Shouta both knew that Shinsou liked to keep himself productive. Either reading or studying by himself, helping Eri with her workbooks, and very rarely on his phone. Shinsou sometimes got distracted during Yamada's English lectures, glancing up at the board to follow along for a bit, sometimes with a flash of a disappointed frown when one of the students didn't answer correctly. Yamada honestly looked forward to those little distracted moments, and he hoped that the whispers and giggles that the Existing Amplifier shirt inspired might bring around that devious little smirk in his ward.

But once Shinsou arrived to class, he didn't take out any of his study materials or books. He just laid his head on his arms, and hardly seemed to move unless Eri wanted to pester him. He wasn't sleeping, even if it would be understandable if he wanted to catch up on a lot of missing sleep.

He was just waiting for the time to pass, and completely uninterested in anything around him. It just wasn't *like* Shinsou to act like that, and any time that Yamada tried to check on him, all he got was a sloppily signed 'I'm fine,' and a listless gaze in answer.

The glare Aizawa directs at a wall confirms that it must have been the same for his free period. "He's withdrawing from Eri as well."

And that *definitely* wasn't like Shinsou.

Shinsou always had an eye on Eri, always ready to give her whatever she wanted, from attention to help opening a snack. Yamada knew that losing the ability to speak to her had to hurt, it could be the most painful thing that Shinsou could go through, and it must be to make him pull away from

her to isolate himself as much as he could in a crowded classroom.

And it was hurting Eri too. She made it abundantly clear yesterday that she wanted to spend more time with Shinsou, that she needed a little TLC to make up for the time he's spent away from her. Even though she seemed to be doing well enough before Shinsou came to UA, it was clear that she still wanted to use his presence as a shelter. And at her age, it wasn't unusual to want to stick close to the person who had practically raised her.

There's nothing else to be said between the two of them, and that's all the more frustrating. There's *nothing* they can do to bring Shinsou's voice back, nothing to stop this hurting from either of their wards. Try as they might to draw Shinsou out of his shell, or offer fun activities for Eri to distract her from Shinsou, it just wasn't working. It was a quick-fix, and not even a good one.

And just when Yamada thought the knot in his chest couldn't get any tighter, when the wards come back for lunch he sees the puffy red irritation around Shinsou's eyes. The kid had to have been *crying* in the bathroom, and despite how hard Shinsou was trying to hide this pain to do that, Yamada wanted nothing more than to call him out on it and take him home. Even if home had nothing to offer but familiar comfort, it was *something* he could do.

He'll probably have to face a bit of Principal Nezu's wrath when he takes a leave of absence to make sure Shinsou won't have to go to school tomorrow, or any day after that until this is taken care of, but Shinsou was hurting enough. The very *least* he could do was make sure that the kid was a little more comfortable in his sorrow.

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27 rests his forehead on the cold porcelain, trying to breathe and trying to get the strength to move again. He was lucky that this wave of nausea crashed so suddenly, that he was already close to the bathroom when it hit.

He forces himself to lean back, to clean up, to wipe the tears from his eyes that came while he was puking but he must be losing his mind completely. He feels the tears well up again when he wishes that Yamada were here to help him like he did before, and the mere thought of it sends a weight to the pit of his stomach. He's being *ridiculous*, why would he want Yamada to deal with this? To deal with him, and to deal with something so disgusting?

He's shaking when he finally pulls himself to stand up, nearly stumbles when he does. He's so *hotcoldhot*, this feeling is pure torture. It's impossible to hide as well as he thought he could, and he really doubts he can do this. He might be like this for a week, maybe more, and the thought of that is unbearable.

When he reaches for the latch on the door, he hears the door to the bathroom burst open and freezes, knowing that Eri wouldn't have the strength to throw that door open so hard that it smacked against the wall. And he should have known who it was just by how the door was opened. "It smells like fucking puke in here, why the fuck can't we do this somewhere else, Deku?"

"I'm not sure if I'm supposed to know about it, so I don't want anyone to overhear," Izuku says, and 27 nearly rolls his eyes when they don't seem to realize that someone *is* here to overhear whatever they wanted to keep private. He catches himself when he gets dizzy again, and takes the opportunity to press his forehead to the cold stall door as gently as he can to keep from making any noise. "Kacchan, do you still... not like quirkless people?"

27 feels his blood run cold. *Deku* wouldn't. The damn blabbermouth wouldn't just- "I don't have a

fucking problem with quirkless people, Deku. Good quirks, bad quirks, no quirks, I don't give a shit. Why the hell are you bringing that up?"

"Well, Shinsou talks to you more than anyone else so-"

Bakugo scoffs, and 27 can hear someone leaning against the sink counter, probably Bakugo. "He doesn't fucking talk to me, he's been ignoring all of the chats like he wants to be mute on that shit too. Either that or Mic-sei ate his fucking phone or some shit."

"It's not that," Deku mutters, and 27 wants to throw his head *through* the stall door. He was acting stupid, the phone is fine, it doesn't remind him of how little his mother sold him for. He shouldn't have said anything about it, he should have kept his mouth *shut* when he was going crazy because Deku can't keep anything to himself and he should have thought about that. He should have *thought* during any point in that night of pure insanity. "Look, I just don't want you to say anything bad about being quirkless around Shinsou. He's-"

"Not *fucking* quirkless, and you fucking know that. Seriously, what the fuck are you on about-"

27 can't stand the taste of bile still lingering on his tongue, these nosy hero students talking about him like that. Like they had to be ever-so-careful about his *feelings*, like he was really so broken that he could snap at the slightest insult. He opens the door and enjoys the sight of Deku startling so much that he throws his arms up in a defensive block, and tries to glare at him to make his terror worsen. But the way he nearly stumbles again probably makes that completely ineffective.

"Shinsou, are you okay-"

"Don't *fucking* tell me you were purging or some dumb shit you twiggy ass shit stain," Bakugo snarls with his eyes narrowed into slits. "Fucking, if you're puking so you can keep looking like a corpse I'll fucking make you into one-"

"Fuck off," 27 *tries* to say, but what comes out is a mixture of a croak and a whine, barely understandable even to his ears. He knows what that means, he has days at most before he loses his voice completely, and it won't matter if Eri continues the logical ruse, he'll still be completely mute.

Bakugo and Deku trade a look, and while Deku's concern is plain to see, 27 can see that the normal and natural anger on Bakugo's face has fallen completely away, making him look strange. 27 ignores it, walking to the closest sink to rinse his mouth and trying to ignore the burning pain in the back of his throat. "Oi, you're sick as shit. Why the fuck are you at school?"

27 *ignores* that, he wants to just ignore that this ever happened, that they *know* now and now he has to deal with that. He doesn't *want* to, and he doesn't want to so much that he can't find a way to convince them to ignore it too. He just presses a wet hand to his face selfishly, chasing the brief moment of relief while his other hand grips the side of the sink to keep himself from falling.

"Shinsou, do you need to go to Recovery Girl? You really don't-"

27 shakes his head, trying to find the strength to convince them he's not sick, but a look in the mirror shows how plain it is to see. His face is too pale, he can barely keep his eyes open, and his hands shake too much. He looks pathetic, and maybe that will work better for him. "Don't. Eri."

The whining hiss when his words fade into air only makes him sound weaker, and he hopes that it's enough to make them ignore this. He's useless, *quirkless* but only Deku knows that right now. They should just ignore him, he has nothing to offer them. "The brat's gonna have to get over that shit, you're dead on your fucking feet and you look like shit. Either you're coming with me to get some fucking medical attention or I'm dragging your ass over there, but there's no fucking way

I'm letting your plague riddled ass walk around like this."

27 pulls up the face mask and considers his options. He doesn't have the knife, but if by some stroke of luck he manages to get Bakugo in a pin, he might be able to threaten Deku into silence. He'll strike hard and fast, take them both by surprise. As soon as he can lift his arms.

"Shinsou, do Aizawa-sensei and Mic-sensei know that you're sick? You really shouldn't be at school right now," Deku says, his hand reaching out for him but 27 pulls away from it, shaking his head while he wishes that this dizziness would just *stop*. It's too difficult to hide when he feels half-drunk, when he feels more than half dead.

"Almost done, just today," 27 mutters, the hand still resting on the sink his only support when he feels his legs start to shake too. He knows this is taking too long, Eri will be worried enough by that. He just needs these two hero students to let it go, to *ignore* him. "Just today. Please."

He doesn't know how to deal with what will happen tomorrow when he's still at school, he can barely fathom tomorrow when he's just trying to get through each moment. He's so *tired*, he wants to let himself fall to the ground and he doesn't care what happens afterwards, but he has to. He can't let Eri worry about him like this.

Deku frowns, clearly opposed to the idea of letting him have even this, even this much, but he's silent. He's considering it. "You're nauseous, and you're losing your voice. Do you have a cough or a fever or-"

"Deku, you're not gonna let him-"

"Cough, maybe fever. Cold," 27 mutters, pressing the back of his hand to his temple to try to keep his eyes open. "Throat hurts. Medi-" A cough cuts him off, a wracking fit that he finds too hard to fight, even if his throat flares with the pain so much that he's sure he'll taste blood after it ends.

Izuku's hand rests on his back, he's not sure what he's trying to do with that, but something is working behind his green eyes that he hopes will help him instead of hurting him. "Okay. Ochako has some medicine for nausea, I think I have some pain killers that can reduce fevers too. It'll make it a little easier to get through the day, but you *have* to tell Aizawa-sensei and Mic-sensei that you're sick. Okay, Shinsou?"

The sigh he breathes out is pure relief, *medicine*. Medicine that easy to get, medicine traded for an empty promise he had no intention of keeping. 27 nods, he feels the tears welling up in his eyes again and he can't tell if it was just from the cough or just from the *relief*. It could be *easier*, he could get through today and worry about tomorrow later on, worry about it when he *can*.

A knock on the door reminds him of Eri, makes it easier to walk even if he feels Bakugo's glare boring a hole through him. He knows that Bakugo disapproves, but maybe Izuku could convince him. Maybe Izuku has a reason to, a plan for 27, but it doesn't matter. Whatever the cost, he'd pay it when he could. He'd do *anything* for relief from this.

Eri clings to the pocket of his pants, silent while they walk back to the staff room. Lunch is too quiet as well, he hears Aizawa and Yamada's concerns too loudly because of it. He picks at his lunch and eats the smallest morsels he can manage, slowly, slowly settling his stomach and giving him the strength to stop shaking.

After lunch, he finds himself surprised by Izuku's cunning. Instead of trying to hand the medicine to 27 in an obvious way, he calls out to 27 and Eri with two drinks that he got from a vending machine. Eri's favorite lychee soda, and an orange juice mixture for 27. And in the trade off, he

feels a paper packet held close to the can by Izuku's fingers.

Izuku answers Eri's excited gratitude and gives 27 a small nod, which 27 returns all too thankfully. Izuku wants something, he's made a debt and a promise because of a moment of weakness that he couldn't hide.

He'll deal with that later, when he can, but for now he's all too eager to take the medicine so that he can get through the day better equipped to hide it.

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If there's one good thing about Mirio, it's that he's huge. He's tall, broad shouldered, and if 27 leans close enough to his desk, he's completely hidden from Aizawa's sight. He meets Mirio's wave and a smile he doesn't believe a bit easier knowing that relief will be coming quickly. He sits in his seat and waits for Aizawa to begin the lecture so that everyone else in the room will be distracted.

But he forgot that there's a certain *ritual* to this class.

He notices Mirio's stare first and spots the timer on his phone, counting down the five minutes that Class 3-A has to 'bother them.' Usually the bothering is only done by the Big Three and Shizuo, but it seems like the entire class has focused their attention on either himself or Eri. Despite himself, he hopes it's just Eri.

"ERI!" Neji screams, running to Eri's desk to bounce on her toes, barely restraining herself from grabbing Eri by keeping her arms held behind her back. "Did you have fun at Shichi-Go-San? Did you take a nice picture and go to a festival and eat a lot of candy? If you didn't eat a lot of candy, I'm going to give you *all* the candy! You've *got* to eat all the candy at Shichi-Go-San!"

Eri looked a bit startled at first, but quickly warmed up to meet Neji's enthusiasm. "Yeah! I ate a lot of candy that Twenny got me, and I got a really good picture! I wanna show you, but Zawa said only Class A can see it if they did really good on their tests!"

Too many heads turn in unison towards Aizawa, and 27 imagines that all of them wear the same disappointed and desperate pout that Neji wears. "Aizawa-sensei! That's unfair! All of us did really good on our first year Midterms so we should get to see-"

"You did *not*," Aizawa interrupts sternly, and there's a flicker of irritation in his stare that says he was highly disappointed in that. 27 hadn't realized it before, but Aizawa must have taught this class like he teaches the current Class 1-A. He wonders if they were better or worse behaved during that time, which rooms in the dorm used to belong to the Big Three. "Seven of you received failing marks on your Heroics exam, and if I recall correctly, you failed one of your fundamentals, Nejire."

Neji looks stricken for exactly two seconds, before she finds a rebuttal. "But we did really good on our Hero Ethics Midterm, right? Right? So we should see the picture, right? *Sensei*, it's unfair! We did really good so we should see the picture too!"

Aizawa's eyebrows twitch in irritation, and Neji should probably stop bothering him when this five minute timeframe isn't supposed to target him. But he must notice that even though Neji is the only one voicing her opinion, every other student is looking to him hopefully, even Mirio. "You did pass the threshold I set for Class 1-A." Several hands raise into the air for a cheer that doesn't have a chance to begin. "But I don't have that picture."

Neji folds over on herself, nearly falling to the floor in her despair. Everyone looks disappointed, even Eri. Even Mirio.

“We can wait another day to see the picture, guys, and just be thankful that we get to see it. And you can’t ignore how cute Eri is everyday, she’s sitting right here!” Mirio tries to reassure his peers, but that smile is so fake that it’s barely a smile. 27 doesn’t know why he hasn’t seen the picture yet, but a weight settles in his chest at the thought.

Maybe this could start to make up for what he did. Maybe Mirio would forgive him for saying those things, trying to escape, threatening to kill Izuku with his quirk. He’d forgive him because he can’t do that anymore, he’s quirkless, and forget about it because he could see this picture.

27 pulls up the picture that he took of the framed one on his desk on his phone, and turns the screen to face Mirio. As soon as Mirio looks at it, he cups a hand around his mouth, eyes going wide then starting to water. “Eri, you’re *so* beautiful in this picture!”

There’s a clamor as it seems like every student jumps out of their seats to crowd around his desk, trying to look at the picture on his phone. Neji climbs on top of Shizuo’s back to look at it, and 27 hands the phone off to Mirio so he can deal with all this attention. There’s too many people crowded around him despite that, all of them cooing over the picture, and 27 feels the weight of their presence like it’s pushing him to lay his head on the desk and hope that they go away soon.

“Eh? Where’d Shin-Shin’s cat ears go?” Neji asks, her fingers combing through the hair on the sides of his head. The feeling of her fingertips on his scalp made him flinch at first, but that gentle pull that followed feels nice, nearly making his eyelids fall shut.

“Take your seats,” Aizawa snaps, and 27 jolts at the sound. He thought it was fine, even if he was distracting the students and he didn’t really mean to do that, he just wanted to show Mirio but Aizawa is angry and it’s his fault, he didn’t mean to do that.

27 scarcely breathes until the students are in their seats and 27 notices Aizawa’s stare, his expression an odd and soft concern. Aizawa nods at him, and 27 nods back, but has no idea what that *means*. He’s supposed to be angry, but he’s not, he’s *clearly* not, and that confuses 27 even more.

Mirio puts the phone on his desk, looking at 27 with an odd, wincing concern. The smile isn’t there, the one that 27 wanted to see again. The one that he probably won’t see until he finds a way to make this right. “Sorry about Neji. Are you feeling okay, Shinsou?”

27 nods, and the weakness he had before seems to double. Just three more classes, and the medicine will help.

But he has no idea how to change the way Mirio sees him.

As soon as Aizawa starts his lecture, 27 opens the juice and forces the medicine down, and no matter how he tries to swallow, the pills feel like they catch in his throat. He stops himself from chasing away too much of the burning ache with the juice, he knows he needs to ration it better to last throughout the day.

He tries to follow along with the lecture, but propping his chin on his hand makes it too easy to let his eyes fall shut, and he knows he doesn’t have the strength to sit up without it. He tries to follow along with the discussions, but the words keep turning to muted sounds, turning into wordless music that becomes too easy to fall asleep to.

He finds himself staring at Mirio's back instead, unsettled by how Mirio could be so close to him but still feel so far away. He just wants things to be normal again, he wants to take back that night desperately. In a hundred different ways, it could have gone differently. If he just fell asleep, if he drank the warm milk to make that easier, if he could have *fucking* realized that they weren't going to kill him after the investigation. Heroes are people like Mirio, heroes save people like Eri and they're too pure-hearted to even kill people like him.

He can't get Mirio's face out of his mind. The pain that he caused him to look like that, even if he was too angry at the time to feel it, he feels it a hundredfold now. He just wants it to go away. He just needs Mirio to know.

27 pulls the phone closer to himself and pulls up LNE, wincing at all the other chats that are full of messages. Even Yamada has messaged him here, but he doesn't have the strength to open any of the chats except the one that he needs to.

Mirio has messaged him a lot, almost every day. Asking how he is, what he's doing, what he's eating, how Eri is. Telling him about parts of his day. But all of that stopped after that night, and only one message was sent the day after.

Eri's Plushie Dealer: I know you're not on your phone a lot, but I hope you're really okay now. I'm sorry I didn't know that you were thinking that way, and I hope that Aizawa-sensei straightened out any misunderstandings. I'm not really the same hero I was when I went to the raid, but I hope that you feel like you can always talk to me if you're scared or worried about something.

27 holds his breath until he can control it, until his eyes only water but he knows the tears won't spill over. He really thought he was going to do that again, he was going to use his quirk to escape. Mirio felt like he needed to keep tabs on how fucked up his mind was now, how crazy. Maybe he was told to, maybe Yamada or Aizawa knew that he would slip more easily with Mirio, that he trusted him more.

And he still did. He couldn't deny that, Mirio was kind, even to a person like 27. He was still offering him the ability to talk to him, inviting him to, even if that had another purpose.

It's fine. Even if he stops talking to him once he knows he's less dangerous, he's nearly toothless and especially now. It's fine.

He might see that smile one more time. It'll be enough.

Eri's Mom: I'm quirkless. I don't know how. I can't do anything like that anymore. It's fine. I'm sorry I was stupid.

He feels his nerves singing with white electricity when Mirio puts a hand to his pocket, probably where his phone is, but he doesn't pull it out to read it in class. 27 still isn't sure if that was a mistake, he feels like he shouldn't have sent that but he just hopes that Mirio doesn't read it in class. That he doesn't try to talk to him about it.

He knows he won't. There'll be no reason for Mirio to talk to him anymore after that.

27 looks at Eri, but Eri turns her head away from him. He knows she's upset about something, she's irritated by something and it's probably him, but he can't force himself to ask what it is. He doesn't feel like he can handle knowing what he did wrong, on top of the mountain of things he's done wrong.

27 just stares at his desk, fighting the urge to just close his eyes, and waits for the day to be over.

*

With his head on his desk, 27 endures the cacophony of 1-A demanding to see the Shichi-Go-San pictures, made all the more unbearable by the headache that set in during Yamada's free period.

He's lucky, so *goddamn* lucky that Yamada seemed to think he was just tired. Yamada had stolen Aizawa's sleeping bag at some point and offered it to 27, rambling about other things like how he probably shouldn't have coffee for a while until his sleeping schedule evened out, asking if he was comfortable or if anything was bothering him.

27 agreed to anything safe to agree to, shook his head to any offers of things that wouldn't help him or questions that he couldn't answer honestly. Despite how tired he was, how oddly comfortable the sleeping bag was, he didn't sleep. He just listened to Yamada teaching Eri bits of English and JSL, listening to how much happier she was becoming with every correct answer. He must have been doing something wrong when he tried to teach her things, she's never been that happy to answer him.

"Sensei! I apologize on behalf of my fellow students' indiscretion, but Midnight-sensei did confirm that we met the requirements for-" Loud Motor is cut off by Aizawa slamming a book onto his desk, and 27 can't bring himself to look up when he knows he can't hide the wince. He wants to cover his head with his arms to block out the sound but he knows that would make him too vulnerable. If he can't bring himself to open his eyes he should at least hear what's going on.

"Since you're so full of that youthful energy, we're going to put it to good use in Gym Gamma," Aizawa orders, met with sighs and groans from these hero students who just couldn't be quiet to save their lives.

27 hides his grimace with his forehead against the desk. He was *almost* done, it was supposed to be easy, but now he had to *move* again. He could have stopped it if he just handed Eri the phone with the picture on it, he could have made them all shut up and leave him in *peace*.

Eri tugging on his sleeve reminds him why this has to be so difficult. He knows he's not hiding it well, he knows that the medicine *should* have made this easier, but it didn't. He still has to go along with it anyway.

He stands up, even if he has to hold the chair for too long to get his balance, and even if he takes Eri's hand too gratefully. He hates this.

He misses being able to talk to her. He knows he can't, he knows it was his idea and he knows why he did it, but he *hates* this. It's not the same to sign to her, it's not the same when she signs back sometimes. It's too *quiet*, everything is too quiet except when it's too loud and he hates all of it.

It's too much effort to not drag his feet at times, he just focuses on walking as normally as he can, trying to keep his eyes open. He knows Aizawa would spot it immediately if he made it anymore obvious, and he's being stupidly obvious even now. He's just grateful that Aizawa doesn't notice, he's too irritated by the hero students. He tries to follow close to Aizawa, he knows that's where they're supposed to walk and he knows very well that it keeps them safe from being pestered by the hero students.

IcyHot doesn't seem to know that, though.

He doesn't mind that Todoroki is walking beside him, he gives off a very cool air. Literally, the side of 27's body that's closest to him is colder than the other. It feels nice. He's sweating for

some reason, but maybe Todoroki's effect makes that less noticeable.

He needs to look back, he doesn't know who's behind him, which students are closer to him. Whether Blasty is going to strike soon, if he's still irritated about 27 being sick. It sounds like too many footsteps. It sounds loud, it echoes loudly, it rings in his ears and makes his head throb.

It's far worse when his owner opens the door, he's not prepared for the sunlight and it blinds him for too long, his eyes squeezed tight against the pain, against how much he *knows* he can't close his eyes now. There's people all around him, he still doesn't know who's behind him, he knows better than to not know-

"-a headache?" His owner asks, his eyes focusing on him but when they glance behind his shoulder, they narrow in warning. The heroes that were behind him file through the door, giving him a wide berth, but he knows some of them linger close by.

27 nods, and even if he does it slowly his head throbs. If he admits this, it might be all his owner needs to know, and he might stop looking at him after that. 27 might be able to find a quiet place away from the heroes, recover enough of himself to stop slipping and be aware of his surroundings. He needs to, he needs to know and he's forgetting that.

There's a blissfully cold gust of air against his forehead, his eyes have fallen closed at some point and he can't bring himself to open them again until he's felt more of that relief. He sways forward, hardly meaning to, and suddenly there's skin against his forehead. The back of someone's hand judging by knuckles, they feel oddly soft.

He opens his eyes enough to see Todoroki's face, both unnerved and reassured by how it never gives away what he feels. He needs to know, and he doesn't want to right now.

"Todoroki, take Shinsou to Recovery Girl. I don't have any painkillers on hand," his owner says. He should open his eyes to see what his face looks like, if he's looking at him or at Eri. He probably said the last part to make sure Eri doesn't think he's sick, and 27 appreciates that at least.

Small hands squeeze tight around his own, and his eyes spring open, jolting away from the hand. He looks down at Eri, and she tries to smile at him, but he knows her too well for that. Her eyes are a bit too wide, too pleading for him to believe in that toothy grimace, the one she uses far more often for the heroes than him. "It'll be okay, Twenny! You'll be back before you know it!"

She knows him too well too. Knows that he hates being ordered to leave her, but it was an order. He places his other hand on top of her head, just resting it there, and tries to find something reassuring to say back, but he *can't*, he just ignores the swimming in his head to nod.

That isn't enough, it's not *nearly* enough, but she tries to convince him it is with her nod, her hands releasing his.

Halfsies walks past him, back through the threshold 27 must have been standing at for a while, annoying the heroes while they had to walk around him. He wonders if they'll get back at him for that, these hallways becoming as dangerous as the ones at The Miasma were.

Evil Cat Owner walks slowly, but he doesn't look at him. It's a relief that he doesn't, any of the other heroes would probably stop and stare, pester him with questions or look at him with that same odd mixture of sincerity and confusion. But Polar Temperatures plays a better game than they do, he doesn't speak unless he has a plan for his words, and that makes them all the more powerful.

“You can use it again,” Todoroki says, lifting his hand up. It’s so odd that he refers to his hand as ‘it.’ It’s unnervingly similar to something 27 would say, or rather think, because he’s learned not to say things like that.

27 starts to shake his head, but the pain reminds him that Chili wouldn’t see it anyway. He wishes he could just say ‘No,’ politely refuse but make it clear in his tone that he doesn’t want any further conversation. He misses being able to convey those kind of sentiments, his words are only words when they’re signs or spoken from the phone, too bare to be half as useful.

IcyHot keeps that hand aloft at his side, but the other rises in front of his chest. 27 is directly behind him, which means he won’t see the exact moment it bursts into flames, but he’s learned how to tell by the smell. “Are you trying to hide your scars?”

The question game. Maybe Todoroki doesn’t realize that it’s far harder to play right now, or maybe that’s exactly what he wants 27 to think. He wants 27 to be confused, off-guard, or underestimate him by assuming it’s a lack of social awareness that causes him to ask.

Chili’s pace doesn’t falter. Even his feet don’t give anything away.

“Tha-at would be po-ointless. E-everyone has see-en them.” Polar Temperatures looks over his shoulder when he hears the phone start talking to him, just a slight rise in his eyebrow. Maybe surprise, maybe irritation. Maybe he wanted 27 to feel ashamed by not being able to answer, like the face mask he was wearing now was a locked metal one that he used to wear.

Either way, the game is still on. And it’s 27’s turn to ask.

“Flames do-on’t cause sca-ars like that.” Turnabout is fair play, and besides, it’s interesting. The scar on Chili’s face is too smooth, where burns wrinkle or bubble or melt.

He would like to know for more than pure curiosity, because if he answers honestly, 27 will know his weakness. Whatever caused IcyHot’s scar will make him freeze up in a fight, especially because it’s around such a sensitive area like his eye.

He thinks IcyHot knows what he’s thinking because he hesitates, weighing whether 27 will catch dishonesty in his tone if he lies. 27 probably won’t, not with the way Chili talks, but maybe the weight of his gaze can unsettle Haltsies into thinking he will.

“My mother poured boiling water on my face.”

Todoroki is good at this game. If he wanted 27 to be caught off guard, he is. He’s not sure what to call the white numbness that blooms in his chest, but he wants to call it shock, rather than sympathy. Shock is only slightly less dangerous, but maybe Todoroki knows that he’s won both.

“She’s better now. She was sick at the time,” Todoroki says, catching the silence. Maybe he realizes that silence doesn’t give anything away since he’s talking to 27, because he turns to look over his shoulder as he takes his turn. “Are you a villain?”

If it wasn’t for the effort Chili had made to measure his reaction, 27 would have thought that he wasted his opportunity. 27 might have given him something about The Miasma if he asked the right question, still distracted by wondering if his own mother had ever thought about doing something like that to stop him from quirkling her. *“A cri-imina-al.”*

Even if The Miasma had uniforms, they certainly weren’t costumes. And he certainly never did anything out of his own personal philosophy, except choosing to keep his shoplifting to under 1000 yen every time he did it. Choosing to smile at the bookstore owner, even if she didn’t see it, and

ask how her day was before he ordered her to hand him the receipt.

The owner was so odd under his quirk, he never felt the string go taut. He panicked the first time that happened, and demanded the receipt while he was still trying to figure out what had gone wrong, why he had missed. But she handed it to him with those same slow movements he was used to from his victims, even if her eyes were still brown rather than white.

Why did she react like that every time? How many times had he quirked her? Did she have symptoms of Mental Quirk Abuse? Does she live a bit better now that he's not stealing from her? What did she think when he ran out of her store that last time, falling out of his head? Did she figure out what he had done and report him to Sir Nighteye? Why wasn't he in prison for that-

Cold air on his face. He leans into it again, because he's so *hot*, he can feel sweat tickling his skin as it runs down his back and neck. Why is it so hot today?

"-seems to have a fever, and this helps," Todoroki says, words fading back from the noise. He opens his eyes to see that he's in Recovery Girl's office, the old woman standing in front of him with her clipboard held to her chest.

27 swallows down the most ill-timed cough he's ever had, teeth bared against the face mask. IcyHot shouldn't have told her that, he shouldn't have let him find out, he should have lied to Aizawa, *they can't find out he's sick*.

'Not sick.'

Recovery Girl frowns at him softly, with pity. "I'm sorry dear, I'm afraid I don't know that sign. Just take a seat on the bed, and Eraserhead will be here shortly-"

"Perhaps you could use your phone, young Shinsou?" All Might asks, 27 realizes he's standing far too close to him for him to have missed his presence.

His phone. His phone isn't in his hand anymore, not his pockets. That phone is worth more than he is-

"It's in your hand," Todoroki says. He's right, it was just his damaged one. It goes numb sometimes, and he seems to have forgotten that it's still there, attached and everything.

"I-eu-o no-ahcha." 27 gives up, the letters are too small and his hands aren't cooperating with him right now.

He's odd. He's made himself seem odd. He's made himself seem like a *child*, the way Recovery Girl just wrinkles her brow and pats his arm, Todoroki keeping his hand to his forehead as he walks him to a cot.

He feels sick and useless and he *can't be*, not now. It's not safe, Eri isn't safe.

"Do you have a headache right now?" Recovery Girl asks after he sits down, unable to keep himself upright as he slumps over onto his elbows braced on his knees. He tries to nod, but the pain flares again at the slightest movement, and just signs instead.

"That means 'yes,'" All Might translates, oddly proud of himself for knowing that, like he wants to be made useful. He shouldn't have to worry about that, though. He's *All Might*, they're never going to get rid of him even if he's not useful. His name means too much. He's so lucky for that, so blessed. 27 will never have that, 27 will always have to prove himself or he'll die.

“Did you try to use your quirk?”

“No,” All Might translates again, his voice closer now. 27 should really open his eyes, people were moving around now. He catches flickers when he tries, the pain inside his head keeping him from keeping his eyes open, the room brightening with each blink.

Something cold is pressed behind his ear, beeping frantically when it does, screaming at him but he’s too tired and sluggish to move away. He needs to get over that, quickly. “Todoroki, can you be a dear and grab a few ice packs from the fridge?” Recovery Girl asks, and the hand on his forehead retreats.

He opens his eyes enough to see what is placed in his hands, a paper cup of water and a small pill. “You need to take that, and drink two more cups of water before you can rest,” Recovery Girl tells him, a bit sternly. Perhaps irritated by how he’s just staring at it.

“Poison,” he mumbles, intending to irritate her more for being so sloppy, but his voice startles him too much.

“I-It’s not poison, young Shinsou!” All Might says, so alarmed that he doesn’t need to look up to know he’s waving his hands around nervously. “It’s medicine, and you need to take it!”

27 tries to glare at the medicine, not sure if he does. He feels so weak, like he just went through a round of quirk training for the 8 Expendables. Hari’s alone could leave him shaking sometimes, barely able to stand after his muscles were frozen for so long, and he knew it was always intentional. And Hari would usually go first when it was, then Rappa. It’s a wonder he didn’t die like that.

“Would you like me to take it to prove that it’s safe?” All Might asks. Before he can answer, still shocked that they would risk their greatest asset if he called their bluff, he calls his own, taking the pill and cup from his hands, nodding as his gaze follows them, before he puts the pill in his mouth and swallows a sip of water.

“Toshinori! That’s not safe for you!” Recovery Girl scolds. “On an empty stomach no less!”

“Oh! I have eaten, this box is for....”

Did All Might just poison himself?

Another cup of water and pill is in his hands. Recovery Girl is still scolding All Might, probably panicked that they might not be able to recover him, but he doesn’t hear what she’s saying, just her voice. She gave him an out, though. If he takes this pill, he won’t be there for the fall out, the Number that killed All Might.

It’ll keep Eri safe if he takes it, people will blame him and hunt him down if he doesn’t. She’ll be caught in the crossfire, the world raging against him for taking their symbol, the entirety of UA rioting against him at last.

He drinks every drop, even if he has to fight to swallow. He should have said something better to her, he just didn’t know it would be the last time he’d see her. He hopes she’ll be okay, that she’ll be safe. She’ll grow up to be happy, and forget about him somewhere along the way. Maybe she won’t hate him too much for this.

“Here,” Todoroki says, calling his attention before he makes a show of opening a bottle of water, the cap offering resistance before it breaks. That doesn’t really prove anything, there are many ways to tamper with a sealed bottle besides, but at this point it’s too late anyway.

He drinks it, and even if he struggles against each gulp, he tries to do it quickly. It should start working faster that way, and he's selfish enough to want it to be quick.

"Thank you, Todoroki, you can return to your class now, but please tell Aizawa to report to my office," Recovery Girl orders, and Todoroki nods. 27 wonders if he's figured out that their game has ended now, or if he's still under the impression that the poison was just medicine.

"Chiyo, I think it will be alright for now," All Might says, poking at a band that had been wrapped around 27's wrist at some point. "His fever is already beginning to break."

Recovery Girl sighs, and tells Todoroki that his owner should come at his leisure. Hopefully that means after he's dead. Hopefully he won't bring Eri, he won't let her see him.

What if he does ? What if that's what he wanted, he wanted Eri to see him, to be in pain? What if they have The Chair hidden in here, and they just want to use it one more time for another round of bullets?

He tries to stand up, tries to fight off the exhaustion inside him as it doubles. He knows his knees won't hold him, legs already shaking, but he has to get away from this somehow, has to fight it.

"Young Shinsou, you need to rest," Toshinori pleads, but even in 27's weakened state, he knows those bony arms wouldn't be able to restrain him, and the poison should be taking its toll on Toshinori first.

"Not safe," 27 slurs. It's not safe for him to rest, he'll succumb quicker. He has to fight it, Eri is in danger and *he can't protect her*.

"You are safe, Shinsou," All Might says, resting his hands on his shoulders in warning, that he will fight him if he tries to stand up again. "It's fine now."

He doesn't say the last part of his catchphrase. There's something in the tension of his grimace, the wrinkles around his eyes. Something 27 should figure out, try to read from him, especially now that he's touching him, hands on his shoulders.

But 27 is going to die. He can feel it in the unnatural heaviness in his limbs, his eyes falling closed and he can't open them anymore.

His pillow is incredibly cold, maybe they're trying to preserve his brain. Dissect it after he's dead to figure out how his quirk works or why he's so broken. Toshinori pulls a blanket over him, and he can't help but wonder why he did it, why he poisoned himself, but he kind of hopes there's an antidote he can take. He's not even sure why.

"It will be alright, young Shinsou," All Might says, while 27 tries to hold on to his slipping consciousness. Maybe All Might took the antidote beforehand. Maybe he's safe, at least. But it won't be alright for 27. He's not going to wake up from this.

"Stay," 27 mutters, trying to see if his body will obey him if he orders it to, if he's trapped under his own quirk.

Maybe he is, and the strain of trying to order himself around breaks him, because he slips into the nothingness once again.

*

The obstacle course for Class 2-A's Heroics training still hadn't been taken down in Gym Gamma,

just as Aizawa hoped. He sets his class to begin running it, keeping an eye out for any who might slip up on the sheer rock walls or fall into one of the many gaping pits. Since no quirks were required for the course, and the inability to use them would tire out his students more efficiently, Midoriya was allowed to participate. He knows that Eri doesn't need supervision, she knows how to keep herself occupied, and his class does need his attention.

But he finds himself distracted by Shinsou and Todoroki's absence. They both should have been back by now. Even Eri seems to know it by the way she's watching the students, fidgeting nervously by his side.

A series of explosions eventually drew his attention back to his class, unsurprised to see Bakugo being restrained by two of his fellow peers while Kaminari waved around that Uno card. His idiots seemed to have found a new game where whoever holds that card has immunity to whatever consequences their words would usually earn, and like most of these bizarre and childish games, Bakugo was tired of it and attempting to end it in his usual way.

By exploding it.

Aizawa can't bring himself to either antagonize Bakugo by scolding him and keeping the game going, or allow Kaminari to reap his just rewards by confiscating the card and ending it. He probably should care about his students' antics, given that it's his job, but he doesn't.

Eri seemed to be interested in what was going on, entering the sidelines of the fray and drawing Aizawa's attention back to it. "Kaminari, what's that?"

Kaminari grins, eager to brag to Eri. "This is a Reverse card, and whoever wields its mighty power can say whatever they want, because whatever anyone says to them gets reversed back on them."

"Don't tell her that stupid shit you dumbass-" Bakugo growls, only to bite back his words in a screech when Kaminari thrust the card towards him like a priest conducting an exorcism.

Aizawa fought the urge to cover his face and *pray* that he wouldn't have to deal with this for two more years. The next class *should* be better. He knows he's been telling himself that for years, but if he gives up hope now, he won't be able to go on. He needs *one* irrational thing to believe in.

"Kami, can I borrow it? Please?" Eri asks, possibly unaware that Kaminari's bravado shrinks as his face whitens, though Bakugo seemed eager for Eri to get her way, grinning menacingly.

"Y-yeah, I guess, just uh. Give it back when you're done, alright?" Kaminari agreed, and as soon as he handed over the card, began sprinting across the gym and ignoring the obstacle course's set path to do so. Aizawa ignores that, seeing as Bakugo's pursuit seemed a good enough alternative in training to run while surrounded by clear and present danger.

Aizawa was curious what exactly Eri wanted the card for, but when he notices her hesitant stare when she returns to his side, he finds himself a bit disappointed in himself. He's tried to make sure that she could always come to him with her concerns. He thought that they were past the point of fear with Eri at least.

But when she holds the card up to him, he knows that they're not. "Zawa, what's the difference between lying and a logical ruse?"

Aizawa crouches down, considering his answer. This seemed to be a much bigger question than the one that Eri was asking, but it also presented an opportunity he would be a fool to not take advantage of. "Logical ruses are only when I either play a trick on someone, or if I know about it.

Otherwise, it's lying."

It might be a bit underhanded to handicap Hizashi's ability to prank him with Eri's aid, but given how cruel he was with that power, Aizawa didn't feel guilty for it at all. And with Eri's guilty frown, he knew that there was a logical ruse in motion against him that he could reveal now and get vengeance for.

"Eri, you're not in trouble for lying to me, or being involved in a logical ruse," Aizawa reassures, drawing a hesitant and hopeful look from his ward. "In fact, there are people called 'informants' who work with me to tell me about the schemes that other people are planning. It's a very important job, and I think that you would make a very good informant. And informants get paid for telling me about those schemes, usually in candy apples."

Eri was very fortunately one of the cheapest informants he had. He gets an excited nod, though the card is still held out towards him. "Twenny's lying 'cause he can still talk to me! It was supposed to be a fun logical ruse but you and Yama are really worried so it's not fun anymore and I don't wanna do it!"

Aizawa's eyebrows rose, shock settling in first. If Shinsou *wasn't* completely mute, and he had decided to lie to both Hizashi and himself by *manipulating* Eri into this scheme. "Did...he talk to you this morning?"

Eri nodded. "He sounded really thirsty, but he can talk. I don't think he's really good at logical ruses, Zawa, they're always really mean!"

This one was particularly cruel. Hizashi and himself had been agonizing over this, over Shinsou either slipping that far into fear that he couldn't speak to Eri, or his quirk affecting his ability to speak to that degree. Over their inability to do *anything* to help him due to the circumstances of his wardship.

He had told Shinsou about his own nightmares last night, had found a connection with his ward and what he thought was a foundation of honesty and trust, but the entire time, Shinsou had been *lying* to him.

He knows they're not past the point of fear with Shinsou, and this only proves it. But it's hard to convince himself that Shinsou had *any* good reason to worry them like this. "I'm glad that you told me this, Eri. You're not in trouble."

"Is Twenny in trouble?" Eri asks, bending the card in her hands while she looks like she's considering giving it to Shinsou to protect him from any fall out from her revelation.

It takes a moment for Aizawa to find an answer to that. "No, he's not in trouble, but I will be talking to him about this after school. Lying like that is not a good thing to do."

Eri nodded, in agreement with something that she probably didn't fully understand, and he hoped that she never would. That she would never reach the point of lying and hiding things from her caregivers, and that she would always feel comfortable to come to them with her concerns. "You should teach Twenny to make good logical ruses, Zawa."

Aizawa rose to his feet with a grunt of agreement, though he doubted it would happen. Shinsou had something that he was trying to hide, and it was probably a good thing that he needed to enlist a 5 year old's help to pull it off. Shinsou was too good at hiding things when left to his own devices.

He noticed Kaminari sprinting towards him with wide and panicked eyes, Bakugo closing the

distance between them with absolutely no hesitation given to Aizawa's presence. "Eri, can I have the card back now?!"

Eri might have nodded, but Aizawa took the card and the decision from her hands. "I'm confiscating this."

Kaminari's eyes went wider, and he stopped to dodge under Bakugo's tackle, twisting and turning to try to avoid the comeuppance he had earned. "Please, Zawa-sen..."

Kaminari stopped dead in his tracks and didn't seem to be breathing. In fact, Eri was probably the only one in that gym able to do so, though Aizawa tried to give no indication of it.

He *knew* this would happen one day.

He's been called 'Dad,' he's been called 'Era-sensei,' he's been called 'Shitsei' as well. If it happens once, just one slip of the tongue, it will happen again because the first years are like lemmings. If they see one fall, they can't help but jump off the cliff themselves.

He knew Eri wouldn't be able to stop calling him that, and he's stopped trying to correct her. He accepted the threat of this in theory, but in practice, he just wants to ignore that it ever happened.

"Kaminari. I'm confiscating this," Aizawa repeats, deciding to ignore it this time. He knows it will happen again. He *knows* it. He doesn't know how long he can ignore it, but he allows himself one more irrational hope that it *won't* happen again.

"Y-yes sir," Kaminari replies weakly, unable to dodge the tackle from Bakugo that sends them tussling on the floor. Bakugo is apparently going to see if he can charge Kaminari with static electricity by dragging his knuckles over the top of his head, and as long as it doesn't earn either of them a trip to Recovery Girl, he'll allow it.

When the doors to Gym Gamma finally open, he guards himself to make sure that Shinsou won't see any of this seething resentment threatening to become apparent, but instead only sees Todoroki enter. And that irritation seems to find a new outlet as he watches Todoroki slowly make his way towards him, *too slowly* for an explanation that Aizawa sorely needs.

Todoroki glances down at Eri, his eyes going slightly wider, before he cups a hand around the corner of his mouth and still speaks too loudly to hide his words from her. "Shinsou has a severe fever. Recovery Girl asked that you go to her office at your convenience."

'Severe fever' and 'at your convenience' didn't make any sense at all, especially coming from Recovery Girl. Aizawa barely restrained himself from making his way to her office immediately, forgetting that he still had a class to supervise, and quickly checked the time on his phone to see if he could simply dismiss them to get changed under Iida's direction.

Sounded thirsty.

Aizawa fights not to roll his eyes, how had he not *seen* this? The lethargy, the vomiting yesterday, how hoarse Shinsou had sounded at the Joint Training Exam and his sudden passion for tea. He thought it was distress after Monoma's evaluation of his quirk, overeating, refusal to drink anything that wasn't sealed or made himself out of fear of being poisoned. He accepted things he shouldn't have, took the explanations by piecemeal without considering the bigger picture.

Shinsou has been sick for *days* under his watch, and he hadn't seen it. He allowed him to hide it, allowed him to *manipulate* Eri into hiding how his voice was probably still hoarse and would have given him away.

Before Aizawa calls to dismiss his class, ignoring that he'll likely receive a less forgiving warning from Principal Nezu than when he did the same on his birthday, the doors open again to his worst nightmare. "Eraserhead! How about a little joint training with Class 2-A, since you feel like you can use our setup whenever you want?"

Midnight holds the door open for her class to file in, and Aizawa *barely* holds himself back from using the capture scarf to throw her into the nearest pitfall. He didn't have *time* for this nonsense, he didn't ask for it at all, and he's not going to deal with two classes when he didn't want to deal with one.

He meets Midnight at the door, intent to tell her to gather her class and guide them back to whatever they're supposed to be doing, before he catches her wink and softened smile. "Toshinori was trying to get ahold of you. He's with Shinsou right now, and he said he'll take over Hizashi's class once you two get there. Sounds like he's got the Safety Sick really bad."

Aizawa spares a glance at Eri, standing a bit away from them but still observing the conversation. Reassured that she wasn't having the reaction he anticipated so far, he turns back to Nemuri for an explanation. "What do you mean by that?"

Nemuri puts a hand on her hip, pulling a pout. "Shou! You should remember this from the certification course! I know it's been *so long*, and you're *so* unsuited for-"

"*Nemuri*," Aizawa interrupts, regretting that he asked at all when he could be halfway to Recovery Girl's office by now.

And Nemuri *thankfully* gets to the point, dropping the act entirely to look oddly proud. "Kids are pretty amazing. Even in ways they can't really control, they try not to be vulnerable until it's safe for them. You really can't call it a wardship if they don't get sick at least once."

He remembered that. It was something that he heard a few nurses talk about while Eri was still in that persistent and feverish coma. Part of it was her quirk, but they believed that when she felt like she was free, she was truly safe, her young body was overwhelmed by it. Her brush with the outside world after years of isolation that occurred two weeks prior seemed like a more rational explanation, and that same reasoning held out for Shinsou as well. Shinsou was just *sick*, there was nothing more to it.

'You're safe.' He's told Shinsou that countless times. He thought he had proven it as much as he could, despite the demands of the investigation making that protection hollow at best. He could protect him from Miasma at least.

But if Shinsou believed him, when he proved he was safe in a different way, safe *and* free.... "Eri, we're going to see Shinsou now."

Eri offers her hand but he picks her up anyway, even if he can't allow himself to worry her by running, he feels the need to set a quick pace.

If Shinsou believed he was safe, he needed to be there.

*

27 struggled to open his eyes, his body weak and wracked with too much pain. Too *hot*, entirely too hot. He wanted to pull himself away from this smothering heat but couldn't move a muscle, *weak*. Pathetic.

He feels someone close to him, he's sure it's 10. 10 tries to stay as long as he can when he needs to

be healed by his quirk, it's more dangerous for him sometimes. Even if he's not allowed to open the mask, sometimes he can figure out what 27 needs if he looks at him, almost like a telepathy quirk. He can feel the wet rag on his forehead but it's not cold anymore, and maybe if he stares at 10 he can ask him to flip it over.

He needs to open his eyes, but just a flash of light from doing that makes him bite back an embarrassing whine. It *hurts*, and it's hard to convince himself that he's been hurt worse. It's just a fever. He doesn't remember how he got hurt, but he'll be fine as long as he recovers before the next job. He's been getting them more often but he's still not working as much as the other Numbers. As much as he should.

He hears people talking, and he doesn't know why they're there, he can't figure out who it is. Everything is mumbled, whisps of sound that he can't hold onto. It's too hot to hear anything, he's drifting in heat and pain and he just *wishes* 10 would talk to him. Sometimes he reads, sometimes he just talks. He just wants that, like a pathetic little kid.

10 takes away the rag on his forehead and replaces it with one that's ice cold, and he can't help the sigh that slips out at that. Then 10 pulls at his wrist, and he forgets himself for a moment, terrified that he's on the table in the Red Room and he just doesn't know it, but something is being ripped off of the inside of his wrist. He's pretty sure it's not supposed to be there, it doesn't hurt. It would hurt if 10 were ripping the skin off of his arm like that.

It's *cold*, whatever 10 puts on his wrist after that, it's cold and so *nice*. He feels himself shivering afterwards, the tiny shakes he can't fight shaking out pain in its wake, but 10 does the same on the other wrist, his ankles and the sides of his neck. It isn't until the last cold thing is placed on his neck that he feels rough fingers catching on his skin, callouses.

10 has soft hands, even if they're bent with age. They shake sometimes, and these hands are steady.

This isn't 10.

27 manages to open his eyes, only seeing blurs of color, tries to drag himself towards the wall but barely manages to move himself before he collapses. He blinks, trying to focus, his breath coming out too quick, too exhausted from moving. He's *weak*, 10's not here and he doesn't know what that means but he knows it's not good. He hears the voices again, clearer but he still can't make out the words. "10?"

His voice comes out too cracked and hoarse, too high and reedy and *pathetic* behind that. Whoever they are, they know he's scared, he's weak, and he can't do anything to stop this, anything to defend himself. He knows there's no point to stop himself from crying but he tries, even if they're going to kill him he doesn't want to *cry* in front of them.

He doesn't have the mask, and he knows what that means. His jaw is free, but not for long. It won't be long before he won't even feel it anymore.

He sees 10, still too blurry, and someone else that looks strange beside him. Small, white, wearing blue clothes, red eyes. They're oddly familiar. There's someone wearing black much closer to him, black clothing and a pale hand. They're a Number, but he doesn't know who, why they would be touching him, why 10 would let them do that. "...sou, it's alright."

He doesn't know that voice. How long has he been sick? Is this a new Number?

Are they going to kill him as a test? Has he been out that long? Bug must have decided he was wasting too much time to get better, but she didn't want to do it herself. This guy must be meant for

assassination, they must think that 127's workload is getting too heavy, they need another man for the job. But they want to make sure he can do it, that he can kill. He can even kill the weak and defenseless like 27. "...ou, you need to sit up. It's just me."

27 doesn't know him, he's acting irritatingly familiar with him. A hand slips under him and tries to pull him up, forearm braced against his shoulder blades. This guy is strong, whoever he is, those hands are huge.

It hurts to be moved, but not as much as moving. It's a struggle to keep his head upright until he feels his shoulder brush against a wall, tilting his head against it to chase the cold relief. The wet rag that was on his forehead falls off, landing on his stomach and he winces at the loss.

"He needs to drink all of that, but go slowly. He still seems delirious," an old woman says. 27 tries to turn his head to see where she is, but the burst of pain in his neck stops him. But when he feels something smooth pressed against his bottom lip, he finds the strength to ignore it, turning his head away from it.

"Shinsou, you need to drink this," the hitman says, his voice is weird, soft. He's either good or bad at this, trying to lure him into complacency by talking like that or the guilt is already getting to him before he even *does* the job.

27 shakes his head, trying to find where 10 is despite his blurry vision. "10, I can work. Don't... please don't..." His throat burns too much, his voice barely audible, and even if he's given up on trying not to cry he just doesn't want to sob. It can't end like this, they can't kill him like this. He's tried, he's tried so hard and he knows he'll do good, he'll get better.

"Shinsou, look at me," the hitman says, that soft voice a bit more panicked. Bug is going to be mad, he can't even finish him off quickly and he's the easiest target he'll ever have. "You're at UA. You're not there. My name is Aizawa, do you remember that?"

Something pulls at the back of his head, and he almost feels like he's falling. He doesn't know what those names mean, why he keeps calling him 'Shinsou,' but it's familiar. It's like he's supposed to know.

"You're not at Miasma, you got out. You're safe, but you're sick, and I need you to drink this," that man - Aizawa - says, and 27 opens his eyes to see a small cup with red liquid inside it, held in a pale and oddly dainty hand. That hand also seems familiar.

"50," 27 says, coming out more like a growl. If he got out, she has to be here. She's supposed to be dead, but maybe she's not. Maybe 98 lied, maybe she made it seem like she died but she escaped. She came back for him, just like in those dreams.

"50... isn't here right now, but she'll be back. You need to take this medicine before she does, or she'll be worried," Aizawa says. 27 doesn't remember him, but he must be important to 50 too if he's here. Maybe he helped her fake her death, maybe he helped get him out too.

Aizawa lifts the cup to 27's mouth and slowly tilts it so that the liquid barely trickles in. The first swallow *hurts*, enough that 27 would try to jerk away from it but he finds himself too weak, but he knows he needs to drink more to soothe this pain. It seems like Aizawa is going too slow, it takes forever to finish that bitter drink, and the flavor sits on his tongue far stronger after that.

"The medicine is a very potent fever reducer, we should be seeing an effect soon," the old woman says, as Aizawa lowers him back to the bed. "Leave the blanket off, he's still at risk of overheating."

The cold rag is back on his forehead, but 27's eyes have fallen shut, too weak to open them again. *Exhausted*, he's too weak to move until this pain fades, and he hates feeling like this. He still wishes 10 were here.

But it'll be fine, because Aizawa's here. 50 trusts him, and 27 trusts him too.

Even if he can't remember him.

*

Yamada slips and nearly falls flat on the floor when he tries to stop sprinting, holding onto the doorknob to Recovery Girl's office. Toshinori offered to watch what was left of his homeroom but he dismissed them in a panic, barely remembering to thank the retired pro for his thoughtfulness. His ward was *sick*, Shinsou was so scared of being sick and he had reasons to be, even if they weren't true anymore. Shinsou was *scared*, and *sick*, and *alone*, and he just dragged him around school all day letting him suffer like that.

He feels like he takes his first breath in the last 5 minutes when he lays eyes on Shinsou, even though it's not a pretty sight with cold compresses stuck almost *everywhere* on the poor feverish teenager. Shinsou's face is flushed, he's sweating and wincing in pain even in his sleep, and Yamada *knows* he didn't look so hot today but he didn't look *anything* like that when he handed him off to Shouta.

But despite that, despite knowing that Eri's worry was all too clear in the way the little beansprout was frowning, sitting on the cot next to Shinsou's legs, he at least knows that Shinsou is *safe*. He's not fading away into the ether or wracked with horrible boils or *dying* - it's just a fever, just a little sick, and Yamada is here to take care of it.

Or, Recovery Girl is here to do most of the 'taking care' part, and she doesn't look too pleased to jump in this late in the game. "Eraserhead, I need to talk to Present Mic in my office. Tell me if any of the monitors start calling for me."

Shouta nods, barely glancing at Yamada and even if his hair hides most of his expression, that's a sign all by itself. Shouta's just as worried, probably feeling just as guilty, but while Shouta can drown with it in every little mishap that happens with their wards, Yamada knows that's not the way forward. They fucked up a little bit, but they can get a handle on it now. They can do better, they can take care of Shinsou when he needs them to.

But when Recovery Girl closes the door to her office, sits down without a huff or a single sign of that more familiar irritation, he starts fearing the worst. "He needs to go to a hospital," Recovery Girl says, and while Yamada trusts her judgement, he clings to an instinctive and incredibly necessary hope that she's wrong. "He's deliriously feverish, and it was brought on too suddenly. If his fever spikes any further, there's nothing more I can do."

Yamada feels that worried tone in the pit of his stomach. Chiyo wouldn't lie, and she wouldn't make a mountain out of a molehill. If she's worried, he's *far beyond* worried. "He was fine. Not really fine, he seemed a little out of it, but I wouldn't have taken him to school if he didn't- Chiyo, what the hell does that *mean*-"

"Yamada," Recovery Girl cuts him off, looking up at him behind her glasses and he can see the worry all too clearly with that. "This isn't a normal illness. His temperature rose five degrees in ten minutes, and at the highest point of his fever, he was *two* degrees from a lethal temperature. Even when taking into consideration the type of emitter quirk he has."

Yamada's mouth drops open, but not a single *fucking* word can come out. He trusts Chiyo knows what she's doing far more than he does, but he knows that the people trying to kill Shinsou have their hands in hospitals too. They don't know which ones, they don't know how they operate, and they know that it would be too easy for a nurse or doctor connected to Miasma to give Shinsou something that would kill him instead of treat him. And no one would know the difference.

Chiyo might know that too. She folds her hands, staring at them for too long before she asks. "Has he used his quirk recently? Is there any other factor that I'm-"

"He... lost it," Yamada says numbly, but after he says it, he *hopes*. "Monoma tried to copy his quirk and said that he couldn't feel it, that it felt like Shinsou was quirkless. That-that didn't make sense, but if it's doing this, then-"

"It doesn't make sense, it's impossible with Shinsou's circumstances," Chiyo answers, and he's all too relieved to see a bit of irritation with that, swelling when she sighs. "Obviously, Shinsou's quirk has been abnormal before he came to UA, and though it's not the most feasible explanation, it *could* be causing this."

Yamada waits with bated breath for anything, *any* reason that Chiyo could offer him. Maybe Shouta could just erase Shinsou's quirk and he'd be right as rain right after, Shinsou wouldn't have to suffer through any more of this. He wouldn't have to worry if his ward was going to *die* from a fever that they couldn't properly treat.

"It's rare, but some developing emitter quirks have severe fevers, sometimes frequent ones. That would explain the medical notes from the hospital and the police, but..." Chiyo shakes her head, frowning to herself. "It's impossible. There's no reason why Shinsou's quirk would regress to that stage of development-"

"Rewind," Yamada mutters, barely able to breathe after that.

How had they not considered that? They've known all this time that Shinsou's quirk slips and his mutism came after the raid, but they never even *considered* that something at the raid might have caused it.

"Eri Rewound him when she Rewound Chisaki. She didn't- it was a mess, he had the tattoo and everything, she could have-"

The realization in Chiyo's widening eyes provided enough relief for Yamada to nearly *laugh*. If Shinsou's quirk was just developing again, just a piece of him caught up in the fusion and affected by Eri's quirk to a higher degree, then he would recover from this. If his quirk was tied so heavily to his voice, when it did finally reach that stability from a fully developed quirk, he might even-

Shinsou might even be able to talk again.

"We don't have any medical history from Shinsou's childhood," Chiyo says, and her muted confusion about that makes it clear that she doesn't know there might not *be* any medical history. If Shinsou's mom was such a stellar mom to hand her child over to a criminal organization like Miasma, she probably wasn't taking him to his annual checkups either. "His quirk registration file is oddly sparse as well. I have no idea if he had fevers when he presented his quirk."

"But he had to, his temperature has been up and down since the raid. He's-" Yamada stops himself, even if he wants to hope, he has to *know*. "Chiyo, it's not normal, but it's possible, right?"

Chiyo stares for too long, considering too long, before she nods. "It's *possible*, and it doesn't

change the danger that Shinsou is in. If his fever reaches that pitch again, he needs to be taken to a hospital.”

“What if Shou-”

“*No*, ” Chiyo interrupts sharply. “If his quirk is that fragile, nullifying it could cause irreparable damage. And as he is a *mental* emitter, we can’t rule out the possibility of brain damage as well.”

Yamada dares to peek out the window on the door, and relief floods him with what he sees. Shinsou just looks like he’s resting, no longer as flushed and no longer in pain, and the numbers on that monitor beside his bed tell him the reason for that, familiar yellow numbers instead of orange ones. “He’s back to 39 degrees.”

And he knows he’s the only one relieved when Chiyo wrings her hands, shaking her head. “That’s *not* a good thing. His body can’t handle going up and down like that. I’m going to write up a treatment plan, is there anything else that you’ve noticed related to this?”

Yamada nods, all those little signs that were so obvious, things that should have made him check Shinsou’s temperature more often even if he knew a fever wouldn’t be clear until it climbed too high. “He puked yesterday, he’s been tired all day. You saw that his throat was irritated Saturday but he sounded fine until he...”

No. Shinsou *wouldn’t*.

“He said he wasn’t able to talk to Eri yesterday. It’s... It’s probably his quirk,” Yamada says, throwing his hands up while he shrugs, while he smiles too much to convince himself. Shinsou was smart, but he wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t lie like that. “It really was right in front of my face, right? Jeez, what a blonde I am.”

Chiyo ignores him, focused on typing out her notes and pulling up websites to print out. “The vomiting may be related to the fever, but that only makes it more dangerous. He needs to increase his fluid intake, and especially after that kind of spell. I gathered that he was refusing to eat or drink when I evaluated his throat, and though I’m not privy to the reasoning behind that, he *needs* to eat and drink. I have a saline drip but I don’t want to use it.”

The printer in the corner of her office seems to be printing off a manifesto, and Yamada wonders if Chiyo is really going to blow through her paper supply allowance for the term just for Shinsou. Or if Principal Nezu even tries to enforce that with her, knowing that UA can’t afford to lose her.

“I have a mobile monitoring device for Shinsou’s temperature readings as well. It will alert you to any reading that crosses his warning threshold on your cell phone, so you can act quickly to avoid a severe spike in his fever. The instructions for that are in here,” Chiyo says, handing him a little novella that probably contains more information about fevers than any given medical textbook. “I’ve also included some recipes that are easy on the stomach and can soothe a sore throat, and over the counter medications that you’ll need to start him on in two hours. I’ll send you home with what I have, and plenty of cold compresses, but do *not* give him an ice bath if you see a severe spike. Only slightly colder than room temperature to disperse the heat.”

Yamada would be checking his phone constantly to make sure that spike never came, knowing that Shinsou shouldn’t have to go through any bath, no matter what temperature it was. When it would only remind him of the torture that he went through at the 8 Precepts, of his worst triggers. “Will do, Chiyo. Thank you so much for everything, we’ll get this down pat and make sure Shinsou gets through this just fine!”

And with a stack of papers an inch thick tucked under his arm, Yamada opens the door a bit too hard, swinging outwards and catching on the doorframe with a thud, but he's too grateful for it when he sees a purple haired head pop off its pillow at the sound.

Eri wastes no time in crawling closer to Shinsou, who blinks back against clear grogginess that seems to fade immediately when he realizes it's Eri. He pulls a hand to the side of his head, fingers resting on the cold compress stuck there like he wants to pull it off, before he shakes his head. "Not si-"

The coughing fit that cut him off didn't have to prove him wrong, not when Shinsou's voice sounded *horrible*. Yamada runs to the minifridge to grab a water bottle, his own throat aching in sympathy, but looks up to make sure that his little bean wasn't suffering too horribly from the proof that Shinsou was *definitely* sick.

And she wasn't. Yamada almost couldn't believe it when Eri *rolled her eyes* and huffed like she was 5 years old going on 30, putting a hand on either side of Shinsou's face when he finally caught his breath. "Twenny, it's *okay!* You don't gotta be scared of getting sick 'cause Zawa said you're not going away. And you're not 'sposed to lie either, 'cause Zawa would've let us stay home all day and we could have been watching movies *all day*. All day, Twenny! And you can't do logical ruses if Zawa doesn't know about it, okay?"

Shinsou just stared while Eri 'helped' him nod to agree, likely feeling the same kind of shock that Yamada and Shouta felt. "I'm not scared. You're...not scared."

Eri was definitely feeling pretty peeved at Shinsou over something, as she falls backwards onto the cot to express that a bit dramatically. "I'm not *scared*, Twenny! You always get really sad and scared when you get sick, and I don't want you to anymore! We could've watched movies and cuddled all day and talked and-and I'm *never* doing a logical ruse with you again! Not until you make better ones!"

Eri punctuated her little huff by crossing her arms, but despite her demands, Shinsou looked pretty 'sad' and 'scared.' Or 'guilty,' more likely.

He glanced at Yamada and Shouta with his head bent down, and Yamada glanced at Shouta to find himself surprised that the confirmation of his little suspicion wasn't news to him. And while Shouta could hide that shock and sting of betrayal with just a dry look in Yamada's direction, Yamada had to work himself up into something a bit more reassuring. "Yeah, let's not hide things like this, kiddo. You would've had a much better time at home instead of at school, and you *kind of* had us worried pretty bad."

Shinsou tensing up with that worried pinch between his eyebrows had Yamada pretty convinced that he knew that now. He probably didn't know *half* of the heart attack that Yamada nearly had, but there was no reason to kick the poor kid when he was down.

But Shinsou could have told *him* at least. Even if he didn't want Eri to know, even if he hadn't entirely warmed up to Shouta yet, he could have told *Yamada*.

And he wouldn't have had to wear this damn 'Existing Amplifier' shirt all day if he did. Nemuri has enough pictures on her phone to retire early if she sells them to a gossip rag, and he's more than a little worried that some of his students will do exactly that. Shouta faces the 'Delete Face' merch only because he's too stubborn to allow any legitimate ones to be made, but Yamada's knock-off market is *small* and he wants it to stay that way.

But far more than that, he just wants to take his kids home and settle in for a nice, long week of

taking care of Shinsou.

Lemon and Pork

Chapter Summary

27 is sick, but that only means he has a new enemy to face - Yamada, Aizawa, and Eri trying to take care of him. And that begins with a bowl of soup.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Food issues, Bug mention

Previously on Wards of UA: Everyone found out that Shinsou has been sick for a few days after he had a bad fever spike at school, and Yamada and Aizawa found out that Shinsou had only been pretending to be unable to speak to Eri in a 'logical ruse' to hide that he was sick. When Shinsou first arrived to UA, he would only eat or drink things that Eri handed to him. Shinsou has a fear of being poisoned (and coincidentally, has been poisoned a few times in this fic). Shinsou thinks that Mirio sees him as a criminal and a horrible person after trying to escape UA by threatening to kill Midoriya, who was under Shinsou's quirk at the time. Shinsou told Aizawa that the poison that he fears the most, Memory's poison, takes 10 minutes to show symptoms of the poison taking effect. Shinsou thought that Eri would be afraid if he were sick, but Eri had been trying to keep Shinsou from getting sick because when he was sick at the 8 Precepts, he was 'sad and scared.' Shinsou refers to Bug as 'Trainer' when he signs to Aizawa or Yamada, as neither of them know about Bug beyond that.

This might be plan #14, but Yamada holds out every hope that it might be the ticket. As enthusiastic as Eri was to take care of Shinsou, to cuddle with him and watch movies all day, and pretty much take advantage of the fact that Shinsou wasn't leaving this dorm anytime soon, she frowns at the tube of yogurt in her hands and drags her feet on her way to Shinsou's room.

"He's sick because he feels *safe*," Shouta mutters to himself, glaring at the pots of soup and bags of snacks and drinks that Yamada truly had no place for, his chin resting on his arms folded on top of the counter to look as miserable as Shinsou probably felt. About half as miserable as Yamada would feel if he let himself give in to the mounting worry.

Shinsou was refusing to eat.

Not the soup that Yamada made, not the smoothie, not a jelly pouch, or leftover oatmeal, or a muffin, or even a popsicle. Not a drop of the three soups that Class 1-A had delivered to their dorm after school, not any of the snacks. Since he would only drink something from a sealed container after checking it over, Yamada had been purposefully giving him water bottles in hopes that the water could stir up an appetite, but that plan didn't seem to be working either.

He promised that the nausea medication would keep him from puking. He offered to buy any take-out Shinsou wanted. He nearly *begged* Shinsou to just try a bite of anything, starting to sympathize with every mother who had to deal with a fussy baby that just *refused to eat anything when they*

had to eat.

Shinsou just shook his head before he laid it down on the counter, silencing Yamada's obvious pestering when he signed ' *Call police* ' and retreated to his room like he thought that horrifying threat might be taken as inspiration.

Yamada's *not* going to force feed Shinsou. Even if the idea is starting to look a little too tempting with every hour that passes, with every surge of paternal instincts that scream for *Shinsou to just eat something*. He barely touched his lunch, or his breakfast, *or* the dinner from last night, and while Yamada has been writing off a lot of Shinsou's bad eating habits on stress, it's more important now that Shinsou puts it aside to eat something. *Anything*. If Yamada has to drive out into the wilderness and hunt down a magical glowing stag, he won't care about any mythical wrath he incurs after that.

He just. Needs Shinsou. To eat. *Before he loses it.*

When Eri trails back to put the unopened Go-Gurt in the refrigerator, shaking her head, Yamada hands off another water bottle and *hopes* this one might do the trick. Shinsou is hopefully *unbearably* hydrated by this point, and Yamada can see on the thermometer bracelet app that his fever has been remaining steady with only a few minor blips in the wrong direction, but the medicine and cold compresses are doing the trick.

Even if Shinsou had to open the medicine himself in order to take it, and put it in his pocket with a look that almost *dared* Yamada to ask why he didn't trust him.

Shinsou *doesn't* trust him anymore. He doesn't seem to trust anyone, not even Eri. And while Yamada knew that being sick was miserable by itself, and Shinsou would likely react poorly to being so vulnerable, he didn't really expect it to get this bad.

Shouta raises himself up just to slouch against the back of his chair, his eyes still locked on the soups like they're the reason that Shinsou has completely lost his appetite. But that pull of a frown tells Yamada that he's not mad at the soups, and he's not entirely mad either. And he's probably going to say something that he knows Yamada doesn't want to hear. "Shinsou might do better if he were moved to the 1-A dorm."

Yamada froze, wracking his mind to try to figure out *what the hell* Shouta meant by that. Sure, Bakugo had some choice words to go along with a soup that was so red it made his tongue burn just looking at it, but Shouta wouldn't take his student's words *seriously*. It didn't matter if Bakugo figured out that Shinsou was sick before they did, he should have told Shouta or himself if he was that incensed about it. And Midoriya definitely knew, fessing up to giving him some medicine that he hoped didn't interact with anything that they gave him, and Midoriya *definitely* should have told them. And by the nervous hand-wringing, he *definitely* knew that.

Shouta glances at him and sighs, as if he was being *rational* when he was clearly being *fucking insane* to consider what he said anything close to *rational*. "He tells my students things that he goes to great lengths to hide from us. It's clear that he doesn't feel safe here--"

"*Shou*," Yamada says a bit too sharply, a bit too rattled to care about that either. "We are *so* not doing that and I don't want to hear about it. It's ridiculous, you can't-you *can't* expect *your students* to take care of *my ward*."

He finds himself fussing with a soup, stirring it up like he hasn't tried serving it to Shinsou already, like he won't have to toss it right out despite all the old-wives-tale-medicinal properties that Ojiro promised were in it. Shouta should know better than to keep at it when he knew that Yamada was

fussing pointlessly like this. “He probably feels more comfortable with them because he probably wasn’t tormented by someone his own age. And he was by older men.”

Yamada slams the lid on the pot a bit too hard and starts washing off the ladle in the sink, grinding his teeth at that. He’s not going to be compared to Chisaki, to Chronostasis, to *any* of those people and all of the ones he doesn’t have a name for yet. Shinsou *did* trust him, he might be a little shaken up and confused right now, and having his little con get found out like that might have set him a little more off-kilter, but what Shouta was talking about was *fucking ridiculous*. “No, and that’s all I’m going to say about it. That’s all I *need* to say to it, Shou.”

He found himself staring at the faucet just so he wouldn’t have to turn around and see that Shouta was still thinking about it. He didn’t want to see that right now and knew he wouldn’t be able to handle it if he did. He’s taken out his hearing aids at Shou far more often than his mom ever did to his mother, but he’s gotten to the point where they wouldn’t make any difference. He can hear what Shouta’s thinking about just by looking at him.

He wonders if his mom has any advice for this, or any sympathy she can offer. Or if he even deserves to have it. He definitely wasn’t as picky as Shinsou when he was a kid, but there were a few nasty bugs that made him miserable enough to inflict his suffering on everyone. *Especially* his mom.

He’d whine about his aching head to get her to do that tapping thing on his brow that no one else can do the right way. He’d pilfer popsicle after popsicle, once going through two boxes in one day, but his mom always stocked it right back with his favorite flavor. And even though he wasn’t a huge fan of soup, she’d make him the *tiniest* little finger sandwiches with the softest white bread and no crusts, and even when he felt like he couldn’t eat a single bite, she’d convince him with just *one more*.

He just needs to find Shinsou’s finger sandwiches.

And he knows exactly how to do that with plan #15.

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27 frowned at the wall as long as he could while Yamada pestered him. Why couldn’t he just make up his mind? He told him to rest, to sleep as much as he could, to make sure to drink a lot. 27 could do those things, but he wasn’t able to because Yamada just kept *pestering* him to eat.

He can do everything else. He *wants* to do anything else. But Yamada just won’t let him.

He hides nothing when he finally gives in before he does something he knows he’ll regret, deciding to show how exhausted Yamada is making him instead of how irritated he is. He follows Yamada to the kitchen while he drags his feet, and when he sits at the counter he lets his head fall to his arm to hide his face while he coughs. Why won’t the cough medicine just *work* for him?

“Doing alright there, little listener?” Yamada asks, glancing up from his phone, and 27 answers that with all the indifferent silence it deserved. *Of course* he’s not alright, he’s tired and irritated and he still *hates* this. Even if he doesn’t have to hide it, even if Aizawa will let him stay here instead of putting him somewhere that Eri won’t be, this is still *horrible*.

But Yamada just smiles at that, dragging out *another* pot. He’s not going to give it up, and neither will 27. If they’re not going to force feed him, he’s not going to eat. He can’t. His stomach knots up at everything put in front of him, his mind twists it into something dangerous, and it’s too irritating to deal with. If he can’t eat until he gets better, he just won’t eat, and it’ll be fine.

“So, we’re going to make something that you’ll want to eat. And I’m going to cook it right here, you can see every little part that goes into it and look at it if you want. But we’ve *got* to get you to eat something, Shinsou. Even if it’s just a little bit, you really need to eat, kiddo.” Yamada starts setting out cans on the counter, and 27 has to hide his face against his arm again.

Yamada knows too much, he knows too much about him. He doesn’t even seem to think it’s weird, and that’s more irritating. But if he knew so much about it, he would know why 27 can’t eat anything right now. He *knows* it’s not poisoned, but his body still thinks it is, and he’s too exhausted to fight it.

Yamada’s smile is too tight lipped, he knows that Yamada is irritated about this despite how hard he’s trying not to show it. Aizawa shows it far more easily when he takes that yogurt tube out of the refrigerator for Eri to eat while they watch a movie. Yamada just keeps nudging those cans a little closer, the scraping sound all the more irritating, and 27 gives in and looks at them.

Canned soup. Miso, chicken noodle, tomato, onion, clam chowder, pea. There are pictures under the labels that are supposed to look appetizing, but even the pictures turn his stomach. He shakes his head and lets it fall back to his arm. Maybe he could just fall asleep like this.

“Shinsou,” Yamada says, too quietly but it sounds too loud to 27 because of that. Yamada should just be mad, he should just ignore him if he’s not going to force him to do it, he shouldn’t sound like that. He shouldn’t sound so sad. “Look, I just need you to eat a few bites. Just pick a soup that sounds kind of good to you, and we can work together to make it even better. We can cook together, make up our own recipe just for us.”

27 pulls his arm closer to himself, fighting that awful feeling spreading to his chest. Yamada shouldn’t talk like that, saying ‘us’ and ‘we’ and ‘our own.’ It’s cruel to twist him up like that now, to make him feel this misery on top of misery.

“The clam chowder and chicken noodle are pretty much already made, but I always throw a little more seasoning and a few more veggies in with it. The miso is a good, fishy kind of base for a lot of recipes. A little more nori and fish, put that over rice... Kind of like that rice porridge Mirio made-”

27 doesn’t look, he just swats his hand blindly until he finds one of the cans. *Miso*. Of course it would be. Even the name sounds like Mirio.

But Yamada just smiles. “Okay, miso! Let me just find...” Yamada trails off as he picks through cabinets until he finds a thin package that he was looking for, turning it around in his hands as he holds it up to show off that it’s unopened. He puts it down on the counter in front of 27 so he can check it himself, but he doesn’t do it. There’s no point to. “And fish? Does that sound good?”

27 shakes his head. It’s enough to waste this much of Yamada’s time, but Yamada seems inspired to waste more of it. He goes through all of the food they have, asking 27’s opinion on it. Even the yogurt. 27 shakes his head to everything, he gets tired of doing that and just shrugs when it sounds like Yamada thinks it should go in the soup. The soup he’s still not going to eat.

“Okay, miso, pork, chives, nori, little bit of lemon, these seasonings... I think it’ll work out pretty well!” Yamada clearly doesn’t believe that, but he seems too happy to do it. It’s that cheeriness that he hates. It feels like Yamada thinks 27 promised him something with that, and he can’t even find himself irritated by his presumption.

‘*Not. Eat.*’ 27 sits up just long enough to sign before he lets himself rest on the counter again, but he might as well not have bothered. Yamada just shakes his head, still smiling too much, too

honestly.

“You’ll see it when you smell it! It’s better to work up an appetite when you can smell the meal coming together,” Yamada promises, and he just doesn’t *fucking* understand.

But smelling doesn’t require him to lift his head up anymore, so 27 lays his head on the cold countertop, moving when it feels like it gets too hot too quickly. Yamada notices and gives him another cold sticky thing to put on his forehead, but 27 knows it’s just a trap. Just a debt that Yamada wants him to pay, and he knows how Yamada wants him to pay it.

He rests his chin on the counter, the cold sticky thing blissful on his head, and feels his teeth rattling when another cough takes hold. Yamada gives him another water bottle, but he’s too tired to drink it, the ache in his throat enough to ignore, but Yamada clearly doesn’t want him to ignore what he’s doing.

Yamada angles himself so that 27 can always see what he’s doing to the food. He can see the rice going into the rice cooker, see the water from the faucet filling it. Yamada holds up everything for his inspection before he uses it, even the seasoning, and 27 feels like he can’t close his eyes no matter how badly he wants to. Yamada will probably be angry at the end, but this is all 27 can do. He’s *trying*.

He closes his eyes when Yamada isn’t looking, but Yamada was half-right about the smell being effective. When his eyes are closed, he can almost feel hungry, he can appreciate the pork searing on the stove, and how it changes when more seasonings are added to it. The sweet tartness of the lemon, the fishiness of the soup, even the mellow near-nothingness of the rice, these things smell nice.

But when he thinks about eating them, his gut clenches up hard enough to make his eyes water, and the frustration from that nearly makes him cry. He knows this is supposed to be easier, he knows it isn’t because he’s just that *broken*, and it’s going to irritate Yamada eventually.

He doesn’t know what will happen after that. Yamada will give up, but he might give up on 27 too. He’ll ignore that 27 needs to eat, not just when he’s sick. Even when 27 gets better, he’ll ignore it. It’ll be worse than Bug on her bad days, because the bad days will never stop, and it’ll be *worse*.

They’re not cooking together, but this will probably be the last time that they will. And that hurts more than the ache in his head or in his throat or his bones. It *hurts*.

He raises his head when Yamada starts to call for Eri, and shakes it. He doesn’t try to hide what he feels right now, he knows it doesn’t matter if Yamada sees it. It doesn’t seem to matter what he feels either, he’s told them over and over that he can’t eat and they keep ignoring that.

He stares at the bowl of soup that Yamada puts in front of him. There’s a pattern in the strips of floating nori, slices of lemon on the sides of the bowl. It looks nice, and when he closes his eyes, it smells better. He knows it’s not poisoned, he tells himself that until he starts to doubt himself by how insistent it sounds.

He wants to eat it, but he can’t. He *knows* he can’t before he even tries, when he picks up the spoon and tries not to disturb the nori, but he does. He just wets the spoon, telling himself that those few drops couldn’t hurt him even if they were nothing but poison, but it doesn’t do any good.

He lets the spoon drop before his head does. He doesn’t know what Yamada looks like right now, and he doesn’t want to. He knows what Yamada wants, and he knows that Yamada *should* know he can’t get it.

He hears Aizawa walk over, and thinks that whatever happens to him will probably come from his hands. Aizawa has been irritated enough already, as if he knew about that hazy dream that 27 had where he was there. He's probably just irritated that 27 is sick, even if he doesn't have a task for 27 to be unable to do because of it.

He doesn't lift his head until he hears the bowl slide across the counter, unreasonably offended that even if he wasn't going to eat the soup, someone would take it from him. But he sees Aizawa meet his eye, and eat a spoonful of it before setting his phone on the counter to face 27. It has a timer counting down from 10 minutes.

27 pulls his other arm onto the counter to completely hide his face. They *can't* know this much, and it's useless even if they do. They don't *fucking* understand how impossible this is.

He still feels Aizawa standing beside him at the counter, Yamada standing on the other side of it, he hears the movie that Eri is watching. He just wants to leave, he wants the ground to swallow him up and take him away from this moment. He doesn't belong here if he's going to be this troublesome.

He hears Eri approach and the feeling worsens, and he hopes that she just wants something from the heroes before he's proven wrong by the tug on his shirt. "Twenny, you gotta eat! You're not gonna get better if you don't eat!"

He grimaces with his face pressed to the counter, caught between lies and sanitized truths of 'I'm not hungry' or 'I can't eat.' He doesn't want her to know these things, he hates that he can't seem to hide anything from her. In a way that doesn't even make sense, he's unsettled because it doesn't seem to matter if he does.

She's fine with him being sick. It doesn't really scare her. Her eyes don't go wide, her fingers don't clench in his clothes when her worry becomes too much for her. She doesn't seem to *care*. And she's still angry with him, and he doesn't know why. He only knows how much it hurts, even if he can't do anything about it.

"No," 27 grates out. He can't even come up with a good lie, with anything that makes sense. It feels like his head is swimming, he wants to sleep just to escape it. He wants to pull his arms away because his face feels too hot, but he can't, he's too weak and he doesn't want to be that vulnerable.

"I'm not gonna eat 'til you do, Twenny," Eri decides for herself, and he can hear that irritation in her tone still stinging in his chest, before he realizes what she means. "I'm never ever *ever* gonna eat again. Not even if you tell me to! Even if I get really hungry, or if I have candy apples-"

"Eri," 27 snaps, the sting from his tone probably startles her more than himself, but he doesn't look up to see it. He doesn't *want* to see it. "Just... *stop*."

He presses his head against the counter harder, wanting to chase the slightest pressure from it into a bruise, into something that hurts more. He *hates* this, he hates himself, he wants to go away, he's the most *fucking* troublesome broken awful person and they can't even fathom that, because if they had the *slightest* fucking clue, they'd stop. They wouldn't bother. They'd leave him alone, and he wishes that they would.

But his chest tightens when he hears Yamada calling Eri away to help him find some blankets. It's a ridiculous task, he only says it because he wants to pull Eri away from him, because he doesn't want to deal with 27 either. And even if 27 wanted that, if he thought he wanted peace, he doesn't. He's a broken, messy person and he hates it.

He doesn't know why Aizawa doesn't leave either, and he doesn't know if he wants him to. He feels the vibrations of the timer going off against his skull, but he doesn't feel like he can eat, or even look at Aizawa to see if he's fine. He knows it won't make a difference anyway.

He feels Aizawa's arm moving closer to silence the phone even if he doesn't look, and feels the disappointed sigh more keenly than he hears it. "Is this different from usual?"

27 takes a moment before he shrugs. It is, but it isn't. It's not that different, only that he can't find a way to convince himself, and the fact that he's being pestered so much only makes it worse. He knows it doesn't make sense, that he's not really answering Aizawa, but he can't bring himself to explain what doesn't make sense to him either.

Aizawa doesn't say anything for too long, and 27 waits for him to leave. To be alone, like he wanted, when he doesn't *fucking* want that at all. Even if he deserves it. "The fever reducer that Recovery Girl prescribed can't be taken on an empty stomach. That's why Hizashi is so persistent about this. You can read the directions on the back of the medication where it says that."

Aizawa is trying to make sense out of nonsense, as though just reading the words that he already believes will make a difference. It won't. He knows it won't, he knows there's no way to change this. It's never been this bad, except at the police station, and he doesn't want to be like that again. Especially when he knows he needs to take that medicine, he needs to eat beforehand to do that, so they *have* to make sure he eats the same way the police officers did. Forcing him to live, and he doesn't even know why this time. They have The Miasma's name.

Aizawa shifts in his seat, but 27 doesn't look to see how that has changed him. He doesn't know if 27's insolent silence has gotten to him, if irritation is seeping closer to anger. If Aizawa is angry now, and what that looks like. "You've been taking care of Eri for a long time. I imagine there were times that she didn't want to eat, and you knew that she had to."

27 pulls his arms closer at that. Those words were close, but so *fucking* wrong at the same time. There were *so* many times Eri refused to eat, especially when she was younger. She didn't like oatmeal, she didn't like jello, she wanted to have her hair combed instead, she just *didn't want to*. And every time, he had to make her. Sometimes he could just beg, he could entice her by feeding her, he could praise her for every bite so that her wide red eyes would look to him when she took the next one, waiting for more praise. It only got more irritating as she got older, when she had those fits less, but more obstinately. It felt like a horrible torment just to sit there and watch her *not* eat.

"You're not a toddler. You can understand why you need to eat, and you can understand why Hizashi and I are insistent about it. We're trying to take care of you, and if there's a way to make that easier for you, I want you to tell us."

Take care of you.

It doesn't make any sense. *Why?* He's almost sure Aizawa doesn't mean it the way he should, he doesn't mean 'taking care' of a problem like 27 the usual way. And that doesn't make *sense*. They have The Miasma's name, they don't need 27 for anything, especially now that Eri is mad at him, now that he's made a lot of trouble by getting sick.

He hates that Aizawa says that, he says things that don't make sense now, now that 27 is too weak and tired to even figure out what they mean. He doesn't mean that 27 is like Eri, he doesn't mean that he's like 27, or Yamada is like 27. *Taking care*. He doesn't mean that.

No one wants to deal with 27 like this, no one should have to. 10 had to, because that was 10's job,

and 10 did it well because 27 made him feel guilty for something. When he lost his voice at the 8 Precepts, no one *had* to take care of him, and Hari barely did.

Hari would drop the tray on the ground once he opened the door, not caring that it spilled oatmeal everywhere and made a mess, and that it would sometimes make the pills fly across the room. And he'd collect his payment for that effort by taunting 27, telling him how much Chisaki likes having Eri around, how it might not matter if 27 gets better if he takes too long. Different words with the same meaning, something that 27 understood all too well.

Aizawa doesn't have a reason to care if 27 gets better, he doesn't have a reason to take care of him either. It just doesn't make *sense*.

He can't ask what Aizawa means, he can barely turn his head to the side so he can look at him. He doesn't try to look at his eyes, but his mouth is in the same frown, he's slouching in his chair with his arms crossed, but he doesn't look angry. 27 sees Aizawa turn his head towards him, before it turns back to face forward before he stiffens. "If you eat five bites, I'll make you a cup of coffee."

As insulting as that was, to be bargained with like 27 was a child, it was a little amusing to see how much it humiliated Aizawa to have to do it. He can tell by his straightened posture, the way his hands hold his arms where they're crossed, that Aizawa feels uncomfortable doing this.

27 can't ask why Aizawa is doing this, but he can see how much he means it.

'*Sleeping bag*,' 27 signs, the signing awkward because he refuses to lift his head off the counter yet. He can't remember the sign for 'Scarf,' but he hooks a finger under an invisible one around his neck and tugs. He's asking for two of the most precious things to Aizawa for a measly five bites of food. It's a horrible trade, and Aizawa should get angry just for suggesting it.

Aizawa lifts an eyebrow, and his hands loosen around his arms for a moment. "You can have the sleeping bag for the week for five bites, but the capture scarf will cost ten."

27 has never haggled for a trade like this. He's not sure what that means either. Aizawa is willing to give up the things that he treasures for something that mundane, but not as cheaply as 27 demanded. And he definitely considers the capture scarf to be more precious.

27 pulls the bowl back in front of him and feels weak just from that. He lifts his chin just enough so that it can rest on his forearm before he picks up the spoon, dragging circles across the surface of the soup to try to put the pattern back together, the way it was before Aizawa messed it up. He knows he's just stalling, he's just trying to see if he can really do this. He tries not to think about the soup as food, not medicine either. It's just his, it's something that Yamada made for him.

He dredges up some rice from the bottom because he knows it will be more filling, and tilts the spoon so that he won't spill any of the soup when he pulls it to his mouth. There's a moment where he slips, when he thinks about what he's doing instead of what he's trying to do to Aizawa, when he doubts that he can even open his mouth because he's sure he'll spit it out before he even realizes what he's doing. But he lets it pass, and focuses on the task at hand. He knows that Aizawa doesn't mean what he promised, and he's going to prove it.

It's harder to chew when his chin is so firmly placed on his arm, he feels like he's moving the top of his head more than he is. It tastes good, mostly because of the hint of lemon, and the warmth of it soothes his throat for a moment. He swallows easier than he thinks it should be, it makes him think that he's lied to Aizawa and Yamada instead of having his body lie to him.

He doesn't know what Aizawa looks like right now, and he knows he doesn't want to know. He

definitely doesn't want to know what Yamada looks like when he hears him coming back down the hallway. But he closes his eyes for a moment, just enough to convince himself that it might not matter, before he takes another bite.

27 has counted many things, he barely has to think about it sometimes, but he has to think about it now to keep himself from thinking about what he's counting. He tells himself that he's putting the food in his mouth, but that's somehow different from eating. He's not eating. He's just counting. He's just testing whether Aizawa will do this.

Yamada sets up the blankets on the couch so that Eri can watch the movie more comfortably, but 27 feels his gaze boring into him sometimes. He's sure that Yamada is mad, Yamada has tried to make him do this for hours and that he should have just done it hours ago.

It makes 27 forget what he's not doing, he's not eating. It seems to work if he doesn't think about it.

He pauses after the tenth bite, because he doesn't have a reason anymore. He's earned both prizes, and he wants to know what Aizawa's face looks like now that he has. But he also doesn't want to see it, and he feels like there's something in his stomach that needs to be filled, like he's half-hungry in a way that doesn't entirely make sense.

He eats slowly, he's sure that it won't work now. He lets his mind go blank and then he lets himself call it what it is - eating. He's eating the soup that Yamada made.

And he feels full, and warm, and tired, and *different* after eating half of it. He doesn't even know what it means, why it feels like that, what he *really* feels like to feel different. It feels like lemon tastes, but he's too tired to make sense of it.

When Yamada walks over to him, voice odd in a way he can't place, and tells him that he needs to take the medicine with the red packaging, he's too tired to do it himself. He pulls all three medicines from his pocket and puts them on the counter, letting his arm fall to his side after. If he could just stuff the medicine into his ear instead of having to raise his head to swallow it, it would be easier.

Yamada walks around the counter to show him how he pops the pills out of the packaging, that he doesn't do anything to it and doesn't do anything to the water bottle that's still in front of 27. He only hesitates to take it because he feels too exhausted now, he has too much body and not enough strength to move any of it, and he only does what he needs to in order to take the medicine.

He tries to swallow the pills dry, like he saw Bakugo do once, but they stick to the back of his tongue and taste *awful*, and he chases it with water but the taste makes him pull a face. There must be a trick to it, but at least the taste made him forget how tired he is.

And he is *tired*. Yamada wants him to move, to sit on the couch and watch movies with Eri, or to go back to his room. Yamada offers to help him do that, but unless Yamada wants to carry him, it's not going to happen. And 27 doesn't *want* Yamada to carry him.

27 closes his eyes, probably for too long because Aizawa is walking back from down the hall and he shouldn't have left without his notice. He has the sleeping bag in his arms, and the scarf in his hand. 27 can't tell what's wrong with his face, but it's different. His eyes are wider by the slightest degree, even if nothing else has changed. "Did you want to try to use the capture scarf?"

27 shakes his head, his mind too blank to catch himself. ' *Don't want.* ' He can tell that Aizawa seems surprised at that, the way his eyes nearly roll says that he's irritated. He's not sure why, he's

not sure if he can care. He probably should, but it's enough effort to keep his eyes open.

Even though Yamada is still trying to make him decide where he wants to be, as though he can't just sit at the counter, Shinsou decides none of this is worth the effort anymore. Aizawa puts the sleeping bag on the back of his chair, and the capture scarf on top of it, and Shinsou lets his eyes fall shut.

His head tilts as his strength leaves him in a rush, leaving warmth in its wake. He's warm, he's comfortable except in pieces that he's not like the strain in his neck or pressure under his chin, but it's dull enough to ignore. Even if Yamada doesn't want him to fall asleep here, even if there are more comfortable places to do it, he knows it's fine.

It's fine if he falls asleep here, because Yamada and Aizawa won't hurt him.

*

Aizawa wavers before he sets the capture scarf on top of the sleeping bag again, this time laid on top of the desk chair in Shinsou's room. The sleeping bag is no real loss, he has that odd suit that Nemuri gave him for his birthday and though it seems too tight at times, the stuffing not thinned with age, it's useful for half of the things he uses it for. But despite what he knows about Shinsou, despite how much he trusts that Shinsou wouldn't use it against him, he doesn't want to give the capture scarf up. He's never lent it to anyone, had no reason to, and feels immaturely tempted to take Shinsou's '*Don't want*' to mean he can back out of this part of the deal.

But Shinsou ate, and he wouldn't want to give him any reason not to make that effort again, especially now. Even if it makes him uncomfortable.

Hizashi grunts in exaggeration when he places Shinsou on his bed. Aizawa knows that Shinsou is hardly heavy enough for carrying him to cause a strain for a pro hero, and he knows that his husband is just relieved that Shinsou didn't wake up while he was being taken to somewhere more suitable to sleep than the kitchen counter.

Hizashi scoffs when he starts fussing at the blankets, pulling them over Shinsou only to fold them, and unfold them again, unsure whether it's too hot or too cold when it truly makes no difference. "Being such a horrible patient, falling asleep right at the kitchen counter.... I had to remind myself you don't have purple hair a few times, Shou."

Aizawa rolls his eyes, because this joke has grated on his nerves long enough. And they have far more important things to worry about. "His fever?"

"It's fine, Shou," Hizashi says softly, holding up his phone to prove it. "We've got one kiddo down for the count, and another who needs some serious movie-induced cuddling to get over some serious peeves going on."

Aizawa had noticed. Eri certainly hadn't been happy today, due to what he thought was confusion as to why Shinsou couldn't talk to her or why he seemed so tired, but seemed to stem from that 'logical ruse' that she certainly wanted no part in. And the irritation from that wasn't going away, seemingly flaring up at Shinsou in their every interaction. "Eri seems to be holding a grudge. That isn't like her."

Hizashi grinned at that, some joke that he's found amusement in when Aizawa found nothing about this situation worth smiling about. "Sold him out for a *candy apple*, of all things."

And Aizawa would have appreciated it if it happened sooner. "It's good that she did. It would have

been better if she had come to us in the first place, or if my students did.”

Hizashi raised an eyebrow at him, as though there were something that he was missing. “You know, I wouldn’t sell out my mom for a candy apple. Would you?”

Aizawa knows what he means, and even if he’s wary to call it that, it would be a step in the right direction. Certainly a rough transitional period that would be difficult to manage on its own, even if Shinsou weren’t ill, but he also can’t ignore the direct question that Hizashi had asked. “Yes.”

There were a few times that his mother had tracked him down, calling it coincidence that she happened to be lingering outside the police station for hours, or that she decided to do her grocery shopping in Mustafu rather than the prefecture that she lived in.

He invited her to the wedding only because Hizashi seemed to think someone should sit on his side of the aisle, but every interaction he’s had with her as an adult has only made him wish he could find a reason to arrest her. Her quirk isn’t offensive, he would have no cause to detain her himself, but if she had so much as spit on a crosswalk in front of him, he would have tried to report her for it.

Hizashi’s cheer turns into a wince at that, before he raises his hands as if to reason with him. “Alright, point taken. But you wouldn’t sell *my mom* out for a candy apple, right?”

“Not even for a 20 hour nap,” Aizawa answers, and he absolutely means it. Not even for his *life*.

He knows that Eri sees Shinsou as a ‘mother’ more similar to the way Hizashi sees his own, even if that is changing. That only makes it more difficult to change it, because it’s harder to change a relationship than abandon it completely, and Eri’s anger towards Shinsou was more frustration at her inability to process that.

And if Eri needed some comfort to encourage that developing degree of separation, it was a very easy task to perform. *Especially* because Aizawa could take a nap once the movie marathon began to bore him.

*

Eri thinks she might be getting sick.

She feels really, really weird when she’s around Twenny, kind of like she has a tummy ache or her skin is really itchy, and it kind of makes her mad. It’s not fun at all, and she doesn’t like being mad at Twenny, but she kind of does. Even if it’s a little scary.

Twenny is just really, really, *really* dumb sometimes.

He’s super smart about books and stuff, and Eri used to think he was the smartest person in the whole wide world. She used to think he liked her a whole lot, almost as much as she likes him, but she knows that’s not true because he keeps ignoring her to do dumb stuff, and she *hates* it.

Yama said she could sleep in her own room, and she kind of wanted to, but she knows that she needs to talk to Twenny so she goes to his room instead. But Twenny is still *sleeping*.

Twenny sleeps *way* too much. Even if Eri said it was okay if he was sleeping, it’s not really the same as being with him. She sighs and tries to sleep, even if she can’t sleep on his arm, and it doesn’t really work. His pillows are cold and too big, she can’t get comfortable, so she just huffs and stares at Twenny to try to wake him up. And it doesn’t work.

She tries tugging on his shirt, and he doesn't wake up. She shakes his shoulder, and he *still* doesn't wake up. She tries to pinch his eyes open, but he pushes away her hand and rolls over before he makes a whiney sleepy noise.

It sounds really *dumb*, just like Twenny is.

Eri doesn't *want* to spend time with dumb people who don't want to spend time with her. She wants to spend time with smart people who like her, and people who don't give her tummyaches or make her mad even when they're sleeping.

She gets a little scared at the door, because it seems really big, a whole lot bigger than it's supposed to be. She feels really small, and a little cold even when she pulls her Hello Kitty blanket over her head. Zawa and Yama let her sleep with them when one of them is doing hero stuff, but there might not be a whole lot of room if they're both trying to sleep. Even if she's got her own bed, she kind of wants to sleep on the floor more than she wants to sleep there alone.

Yama opens the door like he heard her thinking about how to sleep on the floor, but he looks down at her like he didn't think he'd see her there. "Hey there, little bean! Having some sleeping troubles?"

Eri leans on one foot before she nods, because she's not really, but she kind of is. And she wants Yama to think she is so she can get to sleep with Yama and Zawa together. Yama smiles at her and ruffles her hair over the blanket, before he looks back into his room.

"Shou, get decent for our little interloper! I'm just going to check on Shinsou real quick and then I'll be back," Yama talks a little weird, a little louder than he usually does, and Eri doesn't know what 'decent' means but when Yama walks away to Twenny's room, she peeks her head in to see if Zawa is okay.

Zawa is pulling a shirt on really slow, like he's really sleepy. Eri never saw Zawa with his shirt off before, and he looks a little like Twenny in some spots because he's got marks like Twenny does. Zawa looks up at her when he's dressed, like he's a little surprised she's there, before he pats the bed and she runs up to get there, cuddling close to Zawa's side.

"Did you have a bad dream?" Zawa asks, even if he sounds really tired. Eri curls her toes, because she didn't, but she doesn't want Zawa to tell her she needs to sleep in her room since she didn't. But she also can't lie to Zawa, because lying is bad.

"No," Eri says, even though she doesn't know what to call her sleeping troubles. She likes her bed, but she really doesn't right now. It used to be okay for her to sleep alone before Twenny got back, but now she kind of hates it again. And she really, really, *really* doesn't want to sleep alone tonight.

And maybe Zawa knows that, because he just makes a sleepy kind of hum and falls back on the bed with his arm out, and Eri curls up beside him so she's really warm and comfortable. It feels really easy to fall asleep now with Zawa being comfortable, even more comfortable than Twenny is now. "It's fine tonight, but it can't be a habit. Okay."

Zawa is really, *really* sleepy, because he kind of talks like Twenny does when he doesn't want to ask a question. But even though Eri kind of wants to pinch open his eyes, she doesn't want to enough to do it. She just nods, and thinks Zawa might forget he said that when he wakes up in the morning.

Twenny doesn't always snore a whole lot, but Zawa snores almost all the time, even if it's really quiet. And it's really easy to fall asleep with Zawa's snores.

And it's probably a good thing if Eri falls asleep before Yama gets back, because even if she likes cuddling with Yama, his snores aren't really quiet at all.

*

Yamada barely remembered to at least grab a wet rag before he went to Shinsou's room, the notification from the fever monitoring app luckily grabbing his attention before he closed his eyes for good. He'll definitely need to go back to wearing hearing aids while he sleeps for a few nights, knowing that Shouta wouldn't wake up from that little chime, even if he would for Eri having a screaming night terror.

Shinsou was still asleep, even if the pained grimace seemed to tell him he could still feel some of the effects of that sharp fever spike. Chiyo was right, it definitely wasn't normal to go from mild to hot in a few minutes, and it probably didn't feel too great either.

"Hey, listener, it's alright," Yamada says, unable to hear his own words without his hearing aids but he focuses on the way his mouth moves, *tries* to gauge how loud the volume is but that's a crapshoot at the best of times. Shinsou stirs but doesn't wake up, and Yamada drags his knuckles over the flushed kid's forehead, careful not to touch his hair. The cold compress still seems cold to him, but it might not be for Shinsou.

He starts pulling it off, but he doesn't know if he wants Shinsou to wake up to that. He's not even sure if he should pull off the cold compress if it's doing its job, but he can't just stand around without something to do with his hands.

Shinsou blinks to waking, eyes unfocused until they widen too much, and he jolts up to back up towards the wall before the fever catches up to him halfway, nearly making him drop back down. The poor kid is still breathing a little too fast when he slumps forward, making the sight all the more heart wrenching. Those nightmares probably hadn't gone away just yet, and from his own experiences, Yamada imagines that the fever and medicine to combat it might have made them worse.

He really wishes he took the time to put in his hearing aids, but luckily Shinsou doesn't need him to talk. '*It's me. It's okay. Nightmare?*'

The wet rag slaps against his hand a few times while he signs, but he has no idea what that sounds like. He sees Shinsou's head knock back against the wall when he nods, but he has no idea how loud that was or if it was hard enough to hurt him because of that.

Shinsou's eyes look a little glassy when he looks up at him, from the fever or nightmare, he doesn't know, but he can tell in that frown that the kid is too miserable to hide that it's a lot to deal with right now.

Yamada just nods, just tries to triage the situation. He needs to bring down Shinsou's fever first, but he can't just leave it at that. '*Fever bad,*' Yamada signs, and holds out the rag so that Shinsou could put it on his forehead, sure that the kid wouldn't want to be touched right now, but when he sees the teenager's hand rise just to drop, he folds a leg onto the bed to reach over and put it on for him.

Shinsou tilts his head towards the wall a bit more to keep the rag balanced, his eyes fluttering closed for a moment before he exhales. Yamada knows that's not enough to really do much, but the night medication is supposed to hold out for 8 hours and with what Shinsou's gone through already, he doesn't think his stomach can handle any double-dosing. Yamada finds his knuckles brushing the side of Shinsou's face before he remembers himself, checking his phone in hopes that

the bright light will wake him up a bit only to find that hot number trailing back down to mild.

It's *not* normal, but that might not be a bad thing. Maybe Shinsou's quirk was flaring up and getting him a little too hot, but something cooled it down. Maybe-

Maybe Eri decided to try Shinsou's room before she tried theirs.

Yamada sees out of the corner of his eye that another coughing fit has Shinsou slumped over, and traces his hand over that shuddering back even if he knows it doesn't do much. Shinsou's quirk registration file is incomplete, and they haven't been able to reach out to the doctor that created it because even that much would be a risk for Shinsou's safety. One of the sections that are missing is an evaluation of how it really works, how much of Shinsou's quirk relies on speaking and asking a question, how much is controlled by his brain.

With Eri at least, he doesn't have to talk. His quirk might have tried to reach out to her, the same way Shinsou has done before, and strained itself that way to make his fever spike. And it might have cooled back down that fast because Yamada came in.

Shinsou's quirk doesn't seem to work on anyone who is fully deaf.

The flush is fading when Shinsou sits up, and he seems a little more put together, even if he's not all the way there. He can put the rag back on his head by himself, but that miserable little frown is still there when he looks at Yamada.

Yamada feels pretty awful when he finds it too easy to smile at that little frown. Even if Shinsou is pretty miserable right now, he's miserable enough to look to Yamada for some help with that. ' *Tea? Talk?* '

Shinsou nods his head sluggishly, and Yamada gets up to brew up something to soothe Shinsou's body and mind. But once he sets the kettle to boil, he nearly jumps out of his skin when he turns to find Shinsou standing behind him, Shouta's sleeping bag wrapped around his shoulders.

Shinsou winces at whatever sound came out of Yamada's mouth in that moment of panic, but with no infrastructure damage around, he knows he didn't slip too far. Shinsou still sways a bit before Yamada pulls out a chair, wavering whether he needs to get those hearing aids or make sure that Shinsou isn't left alone, if that nightmare unsettled him enough to follow him to the kitchen.

Yamada has to keep an eye on the kettle to watch for the steam rather than listen for the scream, but he tries to keep the other on Shinsou. He's not laid out on the kitchen counter again, but his head is propped up by an arm on it, and that little support beam probably won't last long with how bad this fever is draining on Shinsou.

He adds lemon and honey to the chamomile, even if it's not so soothing with that jolt of citrus, it's better for Shinsou's throat. And Shinsou seems to like the flavor, breathing in the steam from the mug as he holds it, as they both wait for it to steep enough. But Yamada doesn't want to wait too long with this niggling worry in the back of his mind. ' *Want Sho Sleep?* '

Shouta is a little better at handling nightmares, with Eri *and* with Shinsou. He's better at getting Shinsou to eat too, even if it came down to good old fashioned bribery. He's not sure if Shinsou is just warming up to Shouta that quickly, or if there really is something about Yamada that makes him the less fun one to his wards, but he's too relieved by that small shake of a head. ' *Mom. But different.* '

Yamada takes a sip, hoping this won't go over the same way it did last time. Shinsou came to him

after repeated nightmares about his mother ‘rejecting’ him, but something that Yamada said must have peeved him off. Shinsou might have just opened up a bit too much and found himself regretting that, or maybe Yamada’s own anger became a little too apparent, and a little too offensive to Shinsou. The poor kid was talking about it being *his* fault his mother put him into the hands of Miasma, because of his quirk, and that was a little too familiar for Yamada to hear without seeing a bit of red.

‘ *Mom. But. Trainer at M-I-A-S-M-A. Mixed.* ’ Shinsou signs, hesitating quite a bit as though he’s having trouble finding the signs that he wants for the words he needs to say. ‘ *Laughing at me. Weird. Scary.* ’

Yamada nods, the fever could definitely make even a tame kind of bad dream seem like a horrible one. Especially when it was already pretty horrible to have a dream with two people mixing up and fusing. Especially for Shinsou, who experienced that in real life at the raid on the 8 Precepts, but hopefully couldn’t remember that.

‘ *Supposed to change it,* ’ Shinsou signs, his eyes falling a bit past half-closed as he stares at the tea, seeming a bit exhausted at the thought even if he seemed no less determined to do it. ‘ *Maybe. Alone. Mom and trainer not there.* ’

Yamada catches himself humming by the feeling of it in his throat, cutting it off as soon as he notices. He runs a hand through his hair, not sure if he should weigh in on it if Shinsou has it pretty much figured out for himself. If he really doesn’t need Yamada to handle it. ‘ *Maybe dream something happy?* ’

Yamada has never really had a problem with nightmares like his wards or his husband, but when he was still being fostered and not yet adopted by his mom and mother, he had a few bad bouts with them.

His mom told him it’s always a rough transition, there are always little bumps along the way, and his wasn’t that bad with just a few nightmares and moments of panic when he was worried he’d really messed things up. It was just enough of a habit for his mother to come up with a dream for him when she’d tuck him in for the night. *How about you dream about flying an airplane made of cotton candy? Or we go ice skating with some penguins in Antarctica, then warm up in an onsen full of hot chocolate?*

He didn’t have those dreams, even when he tried his hardest to. Even when he was convinced that he really had to so that he wouldn’t be sent to a bad house in the shuffle that never came. He doesn’t know what kind of dream would be a happy one for Shinsou to have, but he hopes it isn’t one where he’s just *alone*.

But judging by that unsure frown, pulling down on one corner like he can’t figure out any other options, it might be. Shinsou might be happier when he’s alone. ‘ *I don’t know.* ’ He can see the exact moment when Shinsou does know something, when he glances at Yamada before he ducks his head to run a hand through his hair. ‘ *Cook.* ’

Yamada couldn’t help but grin at that, warmth filling his chest and nearly threatening to spill over. It feels a little selfish, and he knows it probably is. He doesn’t want Shinsou to be anything close to being alone, and he *does* want Shinsou to feel more comfortable with Shouta. But he has to admit that he was feeling a little left out too.

But even if Yamada wasn’t an expert on nightmares, even if he had so many plans to get Shinsou to eat that failed, and even if Shinsou still didn’t feel like asking for help from him when he knew he was sick, he knew one thing. Shinsou definitely wasn’t going to find any happiness from

cooking with *Shouta*.

‘ *Cook best food. Your favorite food. We’ll cook together. Have fun,* ’ Yamada signs, and even if he’s talking about a dream, he’s hoping it might become real. He’s also hoping that Shinsou might finally tell him what he *likes* eating, knowing that if bribery had to come into play, the soup definitely wasn’t Shinsou’s ‘finger sandwiches.’

But instead, he sees a shrug. ‘ *I don’t know. Like food here.* ’ He gets another pause when Shinsou takes a drink of the tea, when he seems to want to look anywhere but at Yamada afterwards until he ducks his head a bit. ‘ *Your food. My favorite.* ’

Yamada has to cup a hand over his mouth to remind himself to be quiet, because he knows any squeal or peep that would come out would be *deafening*. Shinsou likes *his food*. It’s his *favorite*.

No matter how much his jobs demand from him, Yamada is never going to order take-out again.

Rat Dad

Chapter Summary

27 is sick and can't go to school, but Yamada fumbled and didn't make sure someone would take care of him while he stayed home. Fortunately, there's a friendly neighborhood animal principal at the ready.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: None!

Posted in honor of Wards reaching 20k hits! The weekend update is still on, too!

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou was discovered to be sick yesterday, and while Yamada mentioned that he would need to take time off while he was still under the impression that Shinsou was possibly depressed, he did not plan that out with Principal Nezu. Aizawa is uncomfortably unnerved by Principal Nezu. Shinsou learned to read by reading 10's Thesaurus and medical textbooks while he was at The Miasma. Ectoplasm previously mentioned that he doesn't agree with Mirio skipping classes to take care of Shinsou and Eri, and feels it is a show of irresponsibility for Aizawa and Yamada. Shinsou was under the impression that he was quirkless because Monoma couldn't 'feel' his quirk, but Yamada now believes that Shinsou's quirk is simply unstable after Eri Rewinded him at the end of the raid on the 8 Precepts. Shinsou internally refers to Principal Nezu as 'Rat Boss' after watching the UA staff have a sake toast before Midterms week, which was reminiscent to him of the right of Sakazuki. Shinsou has been avoiding using his phone or the chats for a week. Hagakure broke into Aizawa and Yamada's dorm to see if Shinsou was a murderer. When Shinsou asked Midoriya how he could transfer to the 1-A dorms, Midoriya told him that he would probably have to talk to Principal Nezu, and that the entrance exam was hard. 1-A still hasn't seen the pictures from Eri's first Shichi-Go-San. Shinsou received a book about meditation from the pile of Midterm offerings that both wards received. Shinsou wore purple cat ears and make-up as a disguise when he attended Shichi-Go-San, and still looked that way when Eri's family portrait was taken. Some of Class 1-A doesn't know that Aizawa and Yamada are married, but Shinsou confirmed it for Ashido accidentally. Shinsou's sign name for Yamada is 'Sunshine da' and Yamada's sign name for Shinsou is 'Shin Amaze.' Shinsou won the rights to Aizawa's sleeping bag for the week by eating 5 bites of soup in the previous chapter. In the previous chapter, Yamada began to suspect that Shinsou's fever was spiking when he was close to Eri because his illness could be due to his quirk trying to stabilize itself, and would get worse when his quirk tried to reach for Eri, since Shinsou is able to use his quirk on Eri without a verbal response. When Shinsou's fever made him delirious in Recovery Girl's office, Shinsou was begging 10 to say that he was well enough to work, under the impression that he was still at The Miasma and Aizawa was a Number that was going to kill him, since he didn't have the mask on his face.

Yamada liked to think he was pretty put-together as a fully functioning adult. Despite having three jobs, he seemed to fare a little better than Shouta did at remembering appointments and dates, when to pay bills or to eat at least once every day. But Yamada was also born as blonde as he was loud, and he did have a few slips now and then.

And it wasn't until he was halfway dressed that he remembered that he slipped up pretty bad this time. He hasn't asked Principal Nezu for the day off to stay home with Shinsou.

Even though Shouta has an *ungodly* amount of time off built up, it's like pulling teeth to get him to take advantage of it, even on behalf of their wards. Honestly, Shouta might fare better having his teeth pulled instead, and given how Shouta tended to forget to eat and thus forget to feed any charges in his care, Yamada had another reason not to go through any teeth pulling today.

He knows that Principal Nezu will like this early morning call about as much as he'll appreciate the incredibly late notice, but Shinsou is sick and he needs to be taken care of. He's sure that Principal Nezu can understand that, and even if he won't be too happy about it, it should be easy enough to get his classes sorted out.

He might have to pay for this. He might have to suffer *horribly* because of this blonde moment. But Shinsou needs him, and that's enough for him to eventually work up the nerve to press the call button and pretend that this is a reasonable request.

“ *Present Mic,* ” Principal Nezu says over the phone, and it's even harder to tell whether he's displeased than when they're talking in person. “ *I understand the circumstances, but I'm afraid you're unaware of my own. Toshinori seems to have come down with a cold, and Ectoplasm has instituted a ban on his cloning quirk for the next two weeks. That seems to leave us at a bit of a loss.* ”

Yamada winces, because he knows that he's probably a big influence on that ban. He knows he hasn't been putting his all into any of his jobs, it's hard to do it when Shinsou needs a lot right now and it's hard to convince himself that any of his other obligations are even important to him in the face of that. He doesn't want to do it, but he might need to pull out the big guns. “Then I'm resigning. Today.”

There's a long pause that makes him regret every *single* syllable of that. He knows it's awful, he's never quit a job with less than 3 months notice and he doesn't *want* to quit teaching at UA. Even if some of his classes drive him a little nuts sometimes, he loves it and knows he'll never find another job that's as fulfilling or willing to work with the demands of his hero work, but he *needs to be there for Shinsou*. “ *Hm. I'd rather not allow that. Perhaps instead of such drastic measures, we move forward in a different way. If Shinsou simply requires someone to supervise him, then I can watch over him today.* ”

Yamada found it a bit hard to reply to that, the Voice Hero himself at a loss for words, because he simply couldn't fathom how *bad* it could turn out.

He's not as scared of Principal Nezu as Shouta is, but he has a healthy fear and slight appreciation for what his boss can do. Principal Nezu can be *terrifying* when he wants to be, and while he mostly keeps his sadistic side to the students, there have been incidents. Yamada knows full well that he might be victim to one of them in the coming weeks thanks to his little declaration of resignation.

Putting a sadistic and terrifyingly intelligent being like Principal Nezu in charge of a vulnerable

and incredibly traumatized teenager was an absolute recipe for disaster, in the absolute worst way. “You know, maybe I’m just overreacting! Shinsou might just perk up if I pump enough coffee into him, maybe we could just have him hang out in the staff room and get everyone to spend their free periods-”

“ *Present Mic, it’s really no trouble. While I do prefer working in my office, I have a very well-designed animatronic just for these kind of occasions, and to be honest,* ” Principal Nezu says, and Yamada’s mind catches on wondering what the animatronic looks like and if he’s been fooled by it before, almost ignoring the rest of what Principal Nezu says. “ *I would like to meet with Shinsou myself. This young man is becoming quite an important fixture for the hero course, much like Eri. And I can’t help but be inspired to do what I can to help him, even in this small way.* ”

There is one thing about Principal Nezu that makes him more and less terrifying - he never lies. He might have methodically triggered every phobia and fear of every teacher over the course of the first two months, and Yamada will never forgive him for testing both insects *and* spiders on him to see if there’s a difference - there’s not. But Principal Nezu never lies, and that’s how Yamada knows that he’s not starting now.

Principal Nezu wants to help Shinsou.

“If it’s no trouble,” Yamada answers weakly, still both unsure and horrified how this could go. “I can come back on my lunch and free period, and if I can wrap up 1-C’s lesson plans quicker I can come back before the end of the day-”

“ *It’s no trouble, and I’m looking forward to it,* ” Principal Nezu says, and hangs up before Yamada can try to work out the details, to pretend that he’s a little more comfortable with this situation than he really is.

And he knows that Principal Nezu probably did that just to make sure he was a little more off kilter, and ill-prepared for whatever vengeance was coming for him.

*

He can’t believe Hizashi has done this.

Aizawa tries to focus on his students, tries to become aware of any plans to drop by the dorm to see Shinsou before they come to fruition, but his mind keeps circling back to a fear that makes him go numb. Shinsou. And *Principal Nezu*.

He doesn’t know *what* Principal Nezu intends to do, or what he’s doing to Shinsou right now, but he knows it’s not good. Torture doesn’t always look like what Shinsou is used to, and he probably won’t be able to defend himself from any of it. He can only hope that Principal Nezu isn’t inspired by Shinsou’s defenselessness, that he doesn’t run through *any* of his usual schemes. Testing phobias, weaknesses, personality tics - Principal Nezu has one of the most *terrifying* tics of all, and that’s his hobby of condensing every single student and member of staff into a file that he keeps in his office.

Aizawa has seen it. He’s only read two pages of his own before he had to stop reading it, too unsettled to go on. Principal Nezu knows things about him that *no one* should, that he *specifically* shouldn’t, and given how many files there are in those cabinets, he doesn’t think it’s a habit born out of any specific intention. Principal Nezu just *does that* for whatever reason, and he doesn’t want him to do it to Shinsou.

Principal Nezu did create those exams to test where Shinsou is in terms of his education level, but

Aizawa doesn't doubt for a *second* that he's going to do more with the opportunity given to him. It might be benign, like an IQ test, or it might be somewhat helpful like a psychological evaluation to properly diagnose Shinsou with PTSD.

It might be the phobia tests. Or worse, Principal Nezu might find himself *intrigued* by Shinsou's mental state, by the history that shaped him. He might be *interested* in learning how Shinsou ticked by taking him apart in piecemeal, peeling back scars to reveal wounds. He's not entirely convinced that Principal Nezu would know when to *stop*.

Aizawa sees Eri making another student-hop, walking away from the tic-tac-toe game she had been playing with Ojiro to wander over to Ashido, who beams at the distraction from her studying. Eri has always been allowed to mingle with the students during these free periods, and she seemed to know the proper time to do so without much explanation. She's never taken advantage of it to this degree, but it doesn't surprise Aizawa that she does.

There's an odd bit of frigidity between the two wards right now. Eri seemed to be holding a grudge about the 'logical ruse' where the two wards pretended that Shinsou had lost his ability to speak to her, coloring her every interaction with him. She seemed to be irritated at him even at breakfast, asking him repeatedly if he was going to eat even when he was eating, as though she were trying to shame him for having difficulty doing so yesterday. Hizashi had to step in, pretending to be baffled when he explained that Shinsou was eating right in front of her. Even her goodbye to Shinsou seemed to be a bit too terse.

Eri didn't seem to be lashing out in fear because Shinsou was sick, and it seemed that her insistence to keep him from getting sick beforehand was for his own benefit. Because Shinsou was 'sad and scared' when he became sick at the 8 Precepts.

Something about Shinsou and Eri's relationship had changed in a way that unsettled Eri enough to be angry with him, and pull away and into her other connections because of that. It was difficult to tell if Shinsou noticed that, or was affected by it as well with how exhausted and ill he was, but Aizawa was concerned about the fall out from that. Even though Shinsou was far older than Eri, he seemed to need her for reassurance more than she did him. Though that may be changing, given how Shinsou seemed to be opening up a bit more.

If Eri and Shinsou's relationship was changing, it was going to be a difficult task to keep them from suffering too much from the transition. Aizawa was at least somewhat hopeful that Shinsou might have the tentative connections with others to reach out to someone if it were too much, to find that he wasn't alone at UA even if Eri wasn't by his side. And Eri, of course, couldn't be lonely with all the heroes at her disposal.

But if there was one benefit from this sudden strain between Shinsou and Eri, it was that Eri was perfectly fine going to school while Shinsou stayed home, keeping her *far* away from whatever Principal Nezu had planned for the day.

Especially if the urge to hug Principal Nezu fell over her again.

*

Nezu may not have been given the opportunity to supervise any species' young like this, but he's confident that he's up to the task. It seems simple enough at the start, as Shinsou fell asleep shortly after he arrived and has continued on in that state for quite a while.

Long enough for Nezu to become, quite infuriatingly, bored.

He wouldn't call it 'snooping' as much as it is 'inspecting the living conditions that he has so thoughtfully provided his employees,' and since he regretfully left his mech suit in his office, there's little he *can* snoop through. The disadvantage of his small stature is not a new struggle, and without a helpful shoulder to perch on nor a robotic enhancement to elevate him, he grows bored again quite quickly.

Fortunately, he finds a boon in Shinsou's desk drawers - the teenager's placement exams. It's hard to say whether they're fully finished or in progress, but he takes a look anyway.

His understanding of math seems to be quite underdeveloped, and Nezu knows that he won't find much help between Aizawa and Yamada. History seems spotty as well, almost absurdly so. Quite educated on some concepts, and then some basic knowledge seems to be lacking, as though he's primarily educated by non-historical literature. Literature is astoundingly average, given his circumstances and lack of a structured education. English seems to place him among the second-years at UA, but Science holds a true conundrum.

Several basic concepts such as geology and biology are lacking, but his anatomical knowledge is highly advanced. It's as though Shinsou was being raised to be a serial killer.

It's *interesting*.

Nezu begins drafting an education plan to bring Shinsou to meet the demands of his current age, but can only do so much on his phone. He opens an online shopping app and selects textbooks, video lectures, audiobooks, and certain lesson packages that stimulate kinesthetic learning, but he would rather determine which educational methodology best suits Shinsou before checking out.

There are several things that he needs to test once Shinsou gives him the opportunity, and thankfully he doesn't have to wait long. Before Nezu refreshes his email again, almost *wanting* to find an urgent message to require his attention, he sees the teenager begin to stir, rising to look around with bleary eyes. It takes 1.06 seconds for him to find that Nezu is in the room, perhaps indicating some hyperarousal even when waking from a dead sleep. "Good morning!"

Shinsou nods, expression betraying nothing but exhaustion, and signs '*Good morning*' in response. The stare holds for 5.55 seconds before Shinsou looks away to sit up, but offers nothing further in communication.

Shinsou should be a bit unsettled to be placed in the care of a complete stranger. He should be communicating that discomfort in some way, or at least attempting to remedy it by questioning Nezu's intentions or aims here. But he's not, and that's rather worrying. "Don't mind me, I'm merely here to supervise your day of rest and recovery."

Shinsou nods, indicating understanding and agreement with that statement, but makes no attempt at either of those things. His eyes are becoming slightly clearer, more focused as the haze of sleep begins to fade, but despite the abundance of things he could be doing, things that could allow Nezu to know more about him through observation, he's not doing *anything*.

'Evidence of severe under stimulation as a child,' part of Nezu's mind supplies. 'Irritatingly boring' says another.

It's far more satisfying when he doesn't need to push, but he knows that Shinsou will make it worth his while.

"Would you like some tea? I was beginning to fancy a cup myself," Nezu offers, knowing full well that he wouldn't be able to make it without a climbable structure or human present. And though

thin, Shinsou does appear to be quite scalable.

Shinsou's eyes widen to a noticeable degree, the nod that answers him shakily done. Clear interest, yet there seems to be something to hide, some amount of guilt, perhaps. Certainly indicative of some self-worth issues or perhaps discomfort accepting small and necessary tokens like food or drink. Perhaps some fear from taking those things from a stranger.

Nezu allows himself to gently fall from the computer chair that he had difficulty getting on top of, and smiles pleasantly to invite Shinsou to rise and follow. Shinsou does follow, despite slowing to a glacial pace to match Nezu's short strides. Following, indicating further discomfort despite the fact that he is in familiar territory and has quite a physical advantage over Nezu.

He's not naive enough to believe it's being polite, though he has observed that Shinsou might be a polite young man. But learned subservience can also be disguised as manners, and Nezu is no stranger to those more palatable flavors of fear.

Once entering the kitchen, he sees another opportunity for a test. Shinsou stops and seems to realize that the stove, kettle, and absolutely every instrument necessary for making tea is inaccessible to Nezu due to his height. Nezu says nothing, observing a rising flush on the teenager's face that seems ill-suited to the situation, before he carefully steps around Nezu to begin preparing the tea.

He was able to piece out that the clearest solution to the problem was for him to make the tea himself, and didn't offer a single sign of displeasure with that, even if it were possible that Nezu may have manipulated him into it rather than asking directly. Another point towards submissiveness, though Nezu is still stumped over the cause of that odd flush still lingering.

A filled kettle is set to boil, and Shinsou begins pulling cannisters of tea onto the counter from the cabinet. There's a worrying trembling in his hands while he does this, more apparent when he holds up two cannisters for Nezu to pick from.

No further attempts at sign language, perhaps indicating that Shinsou believes that Nezu knows very little of the language. Perhaps it's an assumption made after this situation of mismatched language skills became common to Shinsou. The shaking in his hands seems a bit too violent for nerves, and Nezu notices a bit of sweat on the teenager's hairline and how his eyes are becoming a bit glassy.

It's incredibly concerning. "Chamomile is fine."

Lethargy, sweating, trembling, and rosy discoloration on the face. The last three have set in startlingly quickly, but Nezu is beginning to believe that any tests that he wanted to conduct will be compromised in the face of his suspicion. Fortunately, he is still in a position to carry out his task, perhaps with better results than Yamada and Aizawa's attempts at it. With his small stature and disarmingly adorable appearance, Shinsou may be a bit more at ease with the vulnerability that violent illness brings.

But that small stature brings about some difficulty in certain aspects of care, which is why he's watching Shinsou prepare the tea in hopes that he can finish that task. Tea, perhaps some medication if it's available and accessible to his charge, then a perhaps a return to bedrest may prevent vomiting. If necessary, Nezu might be able to climb onto the sink in the bathroom if he stands on the toilet to fetch a wet towel. It's certainly not the most pleasant course of action, but he'd hate to worry Chiyo with this.

He's relieved that Shinsou seems to know his own treatment routine. After pressing the back of his

hand to his face, he picks up a package of fever reducers and a bottle of cough syrup, taking the pill with the syrup in an act of efficiency that would probably make Aizawa proud. Changing his cold compress comes next, and Principal Nezu checks his phone after gauging how much the official Present Mic ringtone startled Shinsou.

WAIS-7 163, Type B: Shinsou's fever just spiked, just letting you know because I didn't hook his bracelet up to your phone, I should do that. Is he ok???

Me: I am aware.

Nezu allowed himself a terse grin when he placed his phone back into place. *Resignation*, as though that were something that Yamada could decide to do. Nezu has made himself more than accommodating for the transitional period that two new children had brought upon his employees, but there had to be a limit. UA's leave policy was generous for a reason, and though family leave was used far less than injury leave, such drastic measures were uncalled for.

Plenty of UA's faculty were more than willing to help with the two wards, and the trust-building and 'nesting' period should be well and over with. It was time for the new parents to turn their young over for examination and coddling from the members of the extended family, and high past the time for Principal Nezu to do some examination of his own.

For starters, the tea was brewed quite well. Not perfectly, though Nezu prefers English blends far more than weak herbal ones and may be biased as a result, but Shinsou made an assumption that served him well to not use any additives such as sugar or milk. He sees a bit of lemon juice go into Shinsou's mug, no sugar to balance it out, and no reflection of what must be a bit of a sour flavor.

Shinsou is so very guarded, and that only makes him more interesting.

"I'm not sure if you're aware, but I am fluent in Japanese Sign Language," Nezu offers, as 68% of his plans require more open communication. This revelation seems to be news to Shinsou, though Yamada or Aizawa should have revealed that before leaving the ward to his supervision. "I simply can't sign as much as I understand."

When he holds up his cute paw with an adorable tilt of his head, he notices that Shinsou's eyes dilate in a way that seems a bit unnatural to an assumed-pure homo sapien. His eyes focus and widen in a way that Nezu has seen often enough before to send a bit of dread down his spine to the end of his tail, but the way that Shinsou seems to lean back in his chair seems to promise restraint.

Restraint is a hard thing to win from a human, but Nezu appreciates it, especially in this regard. "I'm curious as to what you like to do during periods of leisure, Shinsou. I myself don't have much to offer from my own preferences, as consulting for hero agencies and running the most prestigious hero training academy in Japan leaves me little time for leisure."

Nezu won't give any indication of it, but he does know a few things that Shinsou does as provided by the surveillance system on campus. It doesn't seem quite as prying after asking the Support Department's Lead Programmer to add Shinsou to a profile where video feed of him is catalogued and sorted with a weekly report as to his activities. A worrying 17% is spent sleeping, 12% using a personal electronic device such as his laptop or phone prior to last week's anomaly of 0%. It seems like there's little that Shinsou likes to do for recreation without the presence of others, often doing things that the other enjoys in the first place.

There are many things that Nezu would like to do with Shinsou, and several things that he is determined to do. But he knows well enough that it can be difficult to discover leisurely activities after spending one's life in a cage. And he wants better for Shinsou.

‘ *I don’t know,* ’ Shinsou signs, glancing at Nezu as though to test whether he was understood. He’s understood more than he knows, more than Nezu will indicate with his answering nod.

“I suppose it can be difficult to choose something self-serving. I believe we might be alike in that we prefer to be productive,” Nezu says, knowing that he’s nudging quite a bit, but he wants to make sure this is not subservience and a genuine lack of experience instead, proven right by widened eyes and a stilted nod, expression open in surprise at the connection. The revelation, or acceptance, Nezu isn’t sure, and both may serve him well. “I suppose we may be more comfortable with a mixture of the two, productivity and leisure. You may be aware that the students of UA have periodic examinations, but the truth of the matter is that nearly everyone on campus is evaluated in some way. As long as you’re amenable to it, I propose that we work on some exams that I’ve prepared for you, with one hour of dedicated productivity and 15 minutes of leisure to start with, increasing the leisure time as we progress further in the day.”

It should be discomfoting to see an ill-teenager’s eyes brighten at the prospect of exams, but Nezu knows very well that Shinsou isn’t a typical teenager. There are things that Nezu knows, and things he suspects, but his assumptions about the ward haven’t been proven wrong thus far.

There’s only one assumption that Nezu made before coming here, that he has found to be faulty. He doesn’t feel that he can offer his guidance without feeling the memories that gave him that expertise and connection in the first place like a shadow behind his back.

Like the shadows that fell over the cage, the snap of clipboards and clicks of pens, white white *white* rooms and a hundred needle sticks, bored voices, *Today, we’ll be evaluating the subject’s anomaly in-*

“The first test is one that I believe might be the most useful to us,” Nezu says, pulling out his phone to ignore how his cute little paws feel as numb as his face. “I’m pleased to hear you have an interest in education, and at UA, you’ll certainly receive all the resources you need towards that goal. But it would be beneficial to know how those resources could be most effective for you.”

He slides the phone to Shinsou with the testing app already pulled up, and without the phone, finds himself close to *bored* again. But it’s worth it.

There are things he knows about Shinsou, and things he thinks he knows. And the discovery process makes it all the more *interesting*.

*

Mirio finds himself smiling at every mirror he passes and every window that has a reflection, almost like he has to check to make sure he’s still smiling. And he kind of feels like he has to.

It’s a bad day.

He doesn’t have a lot of bad days, but it seems like the more time passes after the raid, the bad days feel worse instead of better. He could brush it off a little easier in the beginning, but some of those little things just stick on his bad days.

Like getting permission to skip class as soon as he asks for it.

At first, that kind of helped. He could convince himself that it was a sign he was still a member of the Big Three. If his teachers weren’t worried about him missing class, that meant he was still a top hero student, it meant that they trusted he could make up for lost time just like they trusted he could when Sir Nighteye needed his help.

It's not often, but on his bad days, it doesn't make him feel like a member of the Big Three. It doesn't make him feel like a hero at all. It just sounds like, 'Well, there's not really a point even if you were in class. You don't have your quirk or anything. You should probably stop relying on Principal Nezu to keep you in the Hero Course and just head over to General Studies.'

He's asked permission from most of his teachers, and Ecto-sensei said he would sign off as long as everyone else is on board. He really doesn't think Aizawa will tell him no, but if he does, he has plenty of good reasons why he should say yes.

Shinsou kind of seems to trust Mirio a lot, even if he doesn't know why. It's not like he did *anything* to help him during the raid. It's not like he really stopped Chisaki. He ran around the complex after abandoning his team, he stalled for just a *few* minutes. He probably just made a mess of things and no one wants to tell him about it, no one wants to say that if he didn't run off, he wouldn't have been fighting alone. He could have made sure Aizawa was there to cancel Chisaki's quirk, Red Riot could have stopped that bullet, Sir Nighteye might not have-

Mirio checks his smile again before he opens the staff room door, but he feels like he actually means it when he sees Eri. "Mirio! I missed you!"

"Eri!" Mirio says, dropping to his knees for a hug. He missed her, he missed her a lot and he doesn't know if he can stand going much longer without asking why Aizawa doesn't need him to watch her while he goes out on patrol. It's a little awful, and it's plenty selfish, but the bad day just kind of melts when he feels her arms around his neck squeezing so tight, sees her bouncing on her feet in her excitement to see him.

"Mirio, *please* come over and hang out with me! I really missed you and I want to hang out with you and-and Twenny is really *dumb* and you're not!" Eri says, the bouncing becoming a stomp that only confuses him.

"That's... a little mean to say, Eri," Mirio says, still baffled that some kind of tiff could make Eri act this way. Maybe she didn't know what Shinsou was dealing with, even if Mirio didn't know it too well himself. He doesn't know *why* Shinsou said he was quirkless, but he knows pretty well what that feels like to think that. Maybe a little too much, when he sees Eri get a little guilty sulk on her face. "Did you and Shinsou have a fight?"

That guilt just twists a little more when Eri twists to flare her skirt a bit. "No... He's just... He did something *dumb*, Mirio, and I really don't like it!"

Aizawa sighs when he walks over, putting a hand on Eri's head, and Mirio doesn't miss how eager Eri is to cling onto his leg after that. She's *really* upset, and seems way too upset to really explain what's upsetting her. "Shinsou and Eri pretended that Shinsou couldn't talk to her anymore, to hide that Shinsou was sick. It was Shinsou's idea."

Mirio can't really work a smile on his face after hearing that. Shinsou was *sick*, he was hiding things, something made him think he was quirkless, *Eri* was mad at him. Shinsou sounded pretty miserable on that chat message, as short as it was, but Mirio had no idea how bad it could be. "Well, I guess I kind of had the right idea pop into my head today!"

He can kind of get that smile back if he forces it, while he stands up and pulls the permission slip out of his pocket. He kind of figured that Shinsou didn't like going to school too much, and that maybe he could use a longer break as long as Mirio was there to watch him. He just didn't really look too good in class yesterday, but being sick at school was probably a good reason to look like that.

“Shinsou messaged me and, you know, I know you guys probably have it covered,” Mirio says, finding it a little harder to say it than he thought it would be. “But he told me that he was quirkless. I don’t really know what’s going on with that, but...you know. I’m kind of the guy to talk to about that!”

It’s a bad day, it’s a *really* bad day if he can’t even say it like he wanted to. He just wanted to laugh it off, make sure that Aizawa wasn’t going to read too much into it, but he knows he messed up because he’s actually made Aizawa look *worried*.

Mirio’s not really worried, he’s fine. He knows he can get his quirk back, and it really doesn’t bother him most days. Just the bad ones. Just the ones when it’s too hard to smile.

“Togata,” Aizawa says, and even *Eri* looks up at him with a sad little frown. “I didn’t know that he did that. It...might be temporary, related to his illness. If that changes your plan-”

“Nope!” Mirio says, crossing his arms and working up a smile that he half-believes. He feels *stupidly* relieved to hear that, even if he shouldn’t be. Even if he doesn’t really know, he’s just happy that Shinsou has a better chance than he does. “I’m here to help out! Since pretty much everyone else is okay with me taking a few days off, I can watch over Shinsou and help nurse him back to health! Nurse Lemillion to the rescue!”

It’s a little hard to say that name on his bad days, but he almost doesn’t wince when he says it this time. He’s *helping*, and that’s close enough to being a hero for him. It helps, Yamada says that whatever helps, helps, as long as it helps, and this *helps*.

And Aizawa must know that, because he takes the permission slip out of his hands pretty quick and signs off on it, leaving the ‘Days Allowed’ blank.

“My lesson plans are in my office, and I can leave them open to the relevant sections starting tomorrow. If any of your teachers have any issues, you can refer them to me, and I don’t mind if you want to start today,” Aizawa says, and Mirio might have missed it before, but he definitely sounds a little worried about something. If Mirio didn’t know any better, he’d think that Ms. Joke was hiding out somewhere on campus, making him just as uncharacteristically on-edge as he was during that training camp from his first year. “I can forge Ectoplasm’s signature.”

Mirio isn’t sure what to say to that, a little shocked that Aizawa actually offered to do it. “It’s fine, Ecto-sensei said as long as you were okay with it, he’s okay with it.”

“And I didn’t think you’d be *okay* with it,” Ecto-sensei says before he sighs, stepping in through the staff room door. Mirio has learned to tell that the slightly-slower way he moves means that it isn’t *really* Ecto-sensei, it’s one of his clones, but he’s not sure why he would go through the trouble to be here. “Eraserhead, we’ve already talked about this. My students didn’t enroll in UA to be your babysitters at the cost of their studies.”

Mirio would be lying if he said he didn’t know Ecto-sensei wasn’t happy about it, but he did agree to sign off on the absences if everyone else did. It’s not like Mirio has much to gain from watching everyone else quirk train, or fill out applications for hero agencies.

“Since Present Mic is also at school, I gather that you already have someone watching over Shinsou, making this completely pointless,” Ecto-sensei says, narrowing his eyes at Aizawa. “But you, a teacher at UA, are completely willing to dismiss a student from their studies. *Why?*”

Aizawa doesn’t so much as flinch when Ecto-sensei drops to that warning kind of tone. Mirio has never seen two teachers battle it out, even if he’s theorized a lot of fake tournaments to guess who

would end up on top in a UA Battle Royale. He's always kind of rooted for Aizawa, erasing everyone else's quirks to win as long as Principal Nezu or Powerloader don't get to bring in their mech suits. But he doesn't really want to see a showdown between Ecto-sensei and Aizawa right now. "Principal Nezu is watching Shinsou today."

Something about the way Aizawa says that, and the way that Ecto-sensei steps back a bit, tells Mirio that he probably should have been betting that Principal Nezu wins the Battle Royale. "I...saw him in his office this morning--"

"He has a robot for that," Aizawa says, and that same kind of worried tone takes over, making Mirio think that Principal Nezu might be similar to Ms. Joke when he's not doing Principal-things. When he's doing things that make Aizawa sound that worried. "As much as I... appreciate his time and effort, I think it would be best if Principal Nezu returned to his duties tomorrow. Or sooner."

Ecto-sensei scoffs, raising his hand out to dismiss that. "Eraserhead, I'm sure it's fine. Principal Nezu wouldn't have agreed to it if he didn't have the time. And I'm sure it's... fine."

Mirio is starting to feel like he needs to check on Shinsou as soon as he can, whether Ecto-sensei signs that permission slip or not. Principal Nezu was plenty scary during his first year Spring Midterm exam, and Mirio will never forget the smell of diesel or that maniacal laugh that nearly made him drop his quirk while halfway inside a wall.

But he didn't think even his *teachers* were scared of Principal Nezu.

Aizawa's *hand shakes* when he pulls out his phone, his usual deadpan way of talking just a bit too dry when he talks. "Shinsou's most effective learning methodologies are: Verbal, Visual, Kinesthetic, and Reading. His IQ is 134 on the WAIS-7 scale. Observations regarding his blood type pathology--"

"*How long* has Principal Nezu had with--" Ecto-sensei starts, but Aizawa cuts him off.

"*Three* hours," Aizawa says, and that seems to mean something more to his teachers, but that worried tone is enough for Mirio.

"Ecto-sensei, I know it's starting to look like a bad habit--," Mirio starts, trying to convince his teacher that he's going to make it up, he *knows* how to cover up his absences and even if he didn't, he doesn't think he can focus in class right now, but Ecto-sensei stops him.

"No, you're right, you know your own limits and there's never been a problem before," Ecto-sensei says, "You can be excused tomorrow, but I can't excuse you from homeroom today. There's a guest who's quite insistent that she see you. Bubble Girl."

Mirio stopped trying to fake a smile after that. Just when he thought this bad day couldn't get any *worse*.

*

27 has 30 minutes of 'leisure,' and no idea what to do with it.

The Rat Boss was hard to figure out, much like whether he was a rat or a bear. He had a different way of hiding his emotions and tells, a near-permanent smile instead of Aizawa's permanent frown. He had *tests*, but they were tests that 27 didn't hate too much, for the most part. Maybe the lack of expectation was starting to unsettle him, but having a task in front of him made him feel better, made it easier to ignore the aches and coughs hardly dulled by the medicine.

He's already cheating by doing what The Rat Boss is doing - staring at the phone. But he plans to cheat a little more when he pulls up LNE and opens the group chat with Class 1-A.

He wants to get answers even quicker when he sees that they're still talking about him, even when he's not at school.

Will Die in 6 Days for Uttering the Forbidden Name: If P. Nezu attacks, do zig-zags! He's like a crocodile, he won't catch u!

Everything Floats Down Here: Fun things to do can u send the shichigosan pics???????

Froptimus Prime: Ocha needs this Shinsou. Please.

Will Die in 6 Days for Uttering the Forbidden Name: doit doit doit doooooo iiiittttt

Wed Wiot :3 : BE A BROOOO SHINBROOOOOO

RIP Shinsou, You Were Never Here Anyway: I know what leisure means, give me examples.

Dark Thots: Reading is considered to be the epitome of leisurely activities, but given your state of poor health, perhaps too taxing.

Will Die in 6 Days for Uttering the Forbidden Name: @Todoroki I can't find the Meme Manifesto and Shinbro needs it??? Pls send kthnx

Pinkie Pie: MOVIES and spa days and painting ur nails and SELF CARE BIOTCHHHHH

Flex These Arms Tape: I'm gonna loan you my weeb library, don't tell anyone what you see and don't judge me, k?

I'm Ji-Ji Now, Forever TT_TT: I like meditating during my free time. I think Iida bought a book about that for you?

RIP Shinsou, You Were Never Here Anyway: *Tap to download*

RIP Shinsou, You Were Never Here Anyway: Don't say anything about the ears, it was a disguise.

Everything Floats Down Here: hOMMGYY dfjaknfa ekdjriea

Froptimus Prime: Ocha is ascending as we speak

Wed Wiot: AAAHHHHHHHHHHH SO CUUUUUUTE!!!!

Dark Thots: I feel healed and full of life just looking at this.

Pinkie Pie: LOOK! AT! THAT! AND! TELL! ME! THEY'RE! NOT! MARRIED!!!!

I'm a Motherfuckin Scarboy: @Ashido They're not. Also, #cute.

Kwing Expwosion Murwder :3 : KAMINARI IF YOU FUCKING DO IT I'M GOING TO LITERALLY KILL YOU

Flex These Arms Tape: oh man oh god oh man who put Kaminari on that furry trip again this is so BAD

Will Die in 6 Days for Uttering the Forbidden Name: :3

Put Your Hands Down: WHERE THE FUCK IS HE?!?!?!

Silent but Deadly: Oh god no.

Will Die in 6 Days for Uttering the Forbidden Name changed RIP Shinsou, You Were Never Here

Anyway's username to Nyansou

Kwing Expwosion Murwder :3 : I FUCKING WARNED YOU.

Banished to Sensei's Shadow Realm: kaminari he's not kidding SOMEONE GET AN ADULT

Nyansou: Weak, but fine.

Will Die in 6 Days for Uttering the Forbidden Name: See? It's fi eakr reajk/rae ikl//////////

Nyansou: ?

A Cop: Shinsou, it might be best if you remain unaware of what just happened. I...would like to be unaware of it also.

Flex These Arms Tape: Delete everything, hit the gym, call a lawyer. We saw nothing.

Pinkie Pie: My new name is Bernadine Bonobos, and I'm going to live a new life in Greece as a divorcee with a dark past.

Sprakan Ze Deutch: oh mon dieu c'est beaucoup de sang

27 saw a new message from Yamada pop up among the other message notifications from his chats with Bakugo and Deku, and tapped on it quickly. He's not sure why, but he was hoping that the message would say that he was coming back to the dorm soon.

Sunshine Da: Hey listener! Things going okay at home?

Shin Amaze: Fine.

Sunshine Da: GREAT! I'm so glad to hear that!!!! I'm really sorry I couldn't stay home with you, but things are really okay? Taking your medicine? It's close to lunch, have you eaten yet? Drinking a lot of water?

Shin Amaze: Following the directions on the package. Just breakfast. Mostly tea, but will.

Sunshine Da: Good! I'm really glad to hear that! I made a bento box in the fridge, but there's plenty of other stuff, still a LOT of soup left. I can run by really quick if you need me to, but I think Principal Nezu probably has it covered.

Sunshine Da: Are things going okay with that? Having fun with him? Not

Sunshine Da: You're doing ok?

Shin Amaze: Fine. I'm running out of leisure time, will message back in an hour.

27 let the phone fall out of his hands, and rolled over on his bed so that he could hide his face in the pillow. He knows he only has a minute left, he should be watching the time to make sure he doesn't miss it, but he can't help himself.

He wants Yamada to be here.

He tries to reason with himself. He's troublesome enough by getting sick, he doesn't want to ask for more when he's getting free medicine and good food, even people to watch over him. He

shouldn't be so selfish, but Yamada makes him feel selfish at times. Yamada makes him weird, he says things that twist him up inside because it's too easy to believe them when he shouldn't, and that's all the more reason to be thankful that he's not here to put him through that when he feels so weak.

But he wants to hear Yamada's voice. He wants to see him. He wants Yamada to sit beside him and talk, even if there's nothing to talk about. Even if all that food and tea is free for the taking, it doesn't taste the same if Yamada isn't there to make it.

27 pulls himself up, finally disgusted with his own selfishness. He has perfectly fine food already made for him, he can cook for himself, he can take care of himself. That's so much more than he's ever had, he shouldn't be anything less than *grateful* for it.

The Rat Boss' voice reminds him how out of lines his actions have been, rolling around on the bed like a child, completely forgetting that he was being watched. "Ah, it's time for lunch. Yamada prepared something for you, but would you like anything specific? I can have something from Lunch Rush delivered."

27 shakes his head, standing up only to find himself nearly losing his balance. He might be weakened, but he's been weaker. He's done far more with less capability to do it, he's felt worse under Deidoro's quirk and still fought him. He can make his *own* food just fine.

He doesn't want to get close enough to the Rat Boss sitting in his chair to get the recipes in his desk, so he just drags himself to the kitchen to see what he can make. It's probably better not to try something from those recipes, he doesn't know how to make them right. He needs Yamada to-

No. He doesn't *need* Yamada. At all. He's being selfish again.

He looks at the refrigerator and finds a lot of food that's already made, with notes that have numbers and instructions to add water to it before microwaving it or to add something else. He sees his bento box too, but he doesn't want that. He doesn't want anything that Yamada made, because he's not here to make it.

He doesn't *need* to be here to make it. 27 can make his own food.

He's seen Yamada make rice and eggs enough times that he doesn't doubt he could do it himself. Even if neither of those things seem as delicious as the leftovers, he tells himself that they are. He's just being selfish again, he would have done anything for just a handful of plain rice at The Miasma. Even if it wasn't cooked, it would have been *different*, and that's enough. That's more than enough, he shouldn't care what he eats because it's all so different and that's what makes it good.

The Rat Boss' presence reminds him to make tea, and he starts that before grabbing a water bottle for himself. The rice cooker is already on the counter, so he fills it up with water then adds a cup of rice to it, knowing that it will take some time before it's ready.

He leans on the counter and closes his eyes for just a moment. He's weak, but he's fine if he keeps busy, keeps his task ahead of him and his body moving towards his goal. He needs more of some of the medicines, to change the cold sticky thing. He does those things, he hands more tea to the Rat Boss, and then starts making the eggs even if they'll be done long before the rice is.

He cracks the eggs into the pan *perfectly*. There's no bits of shell that he had to pick out when he made tamago, he doesn't even let the yolk drip on the counter or floor when he throws them away. He wonders if Yamada would be proud of that, if he'd smile and say he was getting better, if he'd

make it into a bigger deal than it is.

The Rat Boss pulls some leftovers from the refrigerator, and just holds it in his hands after closing the door. It's odd until 27 figures out that he can't reach the microwave, so he takes the food and follows the instructions, grateful to have something to do other than picking at the eggs.

He didn't want to scramble them, he wanted to fry them like Yamada usually does. He likes the flavor of the yolk, he *really* likes it.

But when he looks at the pan, he notices that the yolks broke. The runny orange-yellow is turning more yellow at the edges, it's running into the pan and cooking too quick, and he can't stop that. He tries to, he picks at the parts that have run out so that maybe some of it can be saved, he can cook the clear part into white but keep the orange-yellow from turning yellow, but it just runs *more* and he has to scramble them and he *didn't want that* he just wanted Yamada to come home.

"Shinsou?" 27 wipes at his face, he tries to make the tears go away but the tightness in his chest just feels worse. His skin feels too hot but he feels *cold*, he hates this, he *fucking hates this*. "Is there something wrong with the eggs?"

There's *not*, they're perfectly fine, scrambled is *fine*, he's being selfishuselesstroublesome, he's *awful*, he's *pathetic*, he's *crying* and he can't stop and he *just wants Yamada here*.

27 shakes his head, and turns off the stove before he throws the eggs away. He's not hungry, he's not going to eat. It might be wasteful, but he doesn't *care* right now. He doesn't know what he wants, what's reasonable to want, he doesn't know what to do so he just sits at the table and hides his face in his folded arms.

He knows he's throwing a fit like Eri does sometimes, especially the way that he's acting exactly like she does. He never imagined that just hiding his face and giving up like this would feel this *relieving*. Even if he knows he's being watched, that this is probably a test because everything with the Rat Boss is a test and he's probably failing, he doesn't *care*. He just wants Yamada here, and that's all he can think about, he can't even try to tell himself he's being selfish.

He feels five soft things on his arm, patting him, and he can feel how smooth they are. It matches how pink they are, in a way he can't really explain, but it's distracting enough that he doesn't feel this overwhelming pressure hanging over him anymore. "This is quite a trying time for you, I know. I think a bit of tea, a bit of food, and a return to sleep will work wonders."

27 lifts his head a bit, just resting his chin on the counter to peer over his arms to look at the Rat Boss. He's still wearing that smile, but his hand is pulling away, only a flash of pink and he wants more of it. He knows it will make him feel better.

He knows how to ask without asking, how to not be so reckless, but he's too desperate for *something* to make him feel more than this hot, muggy oppression over him. Something more than the stinging in his eyes, or the ache in his throat. He lifts a hand and flares his fingers, and doesn't even consider that he might not be answered.

He is. The Rat Boss tilts his head in amusement, eyes closing for a moment, but he lifts his hand and flares his toebeans in answer. It's enough, those smooth pink bumps are enough. If 27 had his quirk, he would probably take more, he would probably make him show them off constantly, but it's *enough*. He won't be selfish.

27 drags himself to make his own tea, he gives the Rat Boss' food to him then takes out the bento box. There's always parts that are supposed to be eaten cold, and 27 picks at them until he's had

enough. It's *enough*, he just has to remind himself of that.

The Rat Boss doesn't give him any indication whether he's really allowed to just go back to sleep. There were supposed to be more tests, more leisure, more things to do and sleep wasn't one of them, but the Rat Boss just climbs onto the chair again and waits for 27 to do something.

He knows what to do, but he wants to do it differently. He feels a sting of apprehension when he walks to the chair but he feels too many other things to let it be anything but dull, and takes the sleeping bag from the back of it. It's probably weird to sleep in a sleeping bag on top of a bed, but he's cold and he wants nothing more than to be the farthest thing from that. Pulling the comforter over the sleeping bag should help with that eventually.

27 should be more afraid of restricting his movements like this. Unzipping himself will cost him seconds that would decide his fate if he were attacked, but he finds himself too concerned with how cold he is. He tries to curl into himself to feel warm, but he doesn't, and he wishes he could just feel warm.

He just wishes he could feel anything but what he feels when he thinks of Yamada not being here.

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Yamada isn't entirely surprised that Nejire and Amajiki know when he has his free period, or that he always spends it in his classroom now that he has two wards that love to learn from a real teacher. He is a little surprised that they do, because even though it was clear to see Mirio was having a bit of trouble with a reminder of his quirklessness, unfortunately thanks to his ward, he didn't really think his best friends would come to *him* for help. He might be their teacher, but he kind of figured that Shouta would be the one they would go to if Ectoplasm didn't seem approachable.

But then he sees that all-too-familiar permission slip and realizes that the Big Three want a team-up, even if Suneater and Nejire-chan are a little late to the game.

"Yamada-sensei, we know that Mirio has already gotten permission to stay with Shinsou while he's sick, but we think it would be easier to care for him if we were there too," Amajiki says, and even if Yamada knows who he's trying to talk about when he says 'care for him,' he's not entirely convinced that Shinsou is the only person he's concerned about.

"Eri!" Nejire calls, as distractible as ever when she spots the five year old who is very insistent about learning English today and no sign language whatsoever. "Why aren't you staying home with Shin-Shin? Don'tcha know it's way more fun to stay home instead of going to school?"

Eri seemed to already have an idea about what was going to happen once Yamada signed those permission slips, and she didn't seem too happy about home becoming a place where the Big Three and Shinsou were, when school wasn't. "School is really fun, Neji! And it's really important to go if you're gonna be a good hero! You've got to go to school tomorrow so you get to be a good hero!"

Miss 'Why Do We Gotta Learn a WHOLE Language, Mic-Sensei' herself seemed a little chided, her enthusiasm falling just a bit while she tried to protest that she *was* a good hero, a *really* good hero, a *super* good hero who just needed to take make-up exams sometimes. Yamada had no worries about Amajiki, the poor soul who probably carried Mirio and Nejire through the school subjects that they clued into a lot less easily than their Heroics classes. And Amajiki's subtle hints that he would find it easier to keep Nejire and Mirio to task if he was also there on their days off didn't come off as too subtle when he slid the permission slips a little higher on Yamada's desk.

Yamada understood that all too well. While Shirakumo was a complete *disaster* at most subjects, Shouta had been a particularly stubborn case. Shirakumo would try to laugh off a genuine inability to grasp certain things, while Shouta would flippantly write them off. 'I just need to pass, it's fine,' Shouta would say when Yamada covered *exactly* 70% of the material for their upcoming exam. Shouta even marked off his stopping point a few times when he was feeling particularly surly about his personal training time getting gutted for exam weeks.

"Well, it's only a few months before graduation when you herolets will *really* be kicked out of the nest, so if you think you're up for it, I can't really stop you now," Yamada says, signing off on his line before he notices that Shouta's is strangely absent. Particularly odd, considering his third year Hero Ethics class was right before his free period. "What's with Eraserhead's missing autograph? Didn't want to wake him up from a nap or something?"

Amajiki wilts a bit, as though standing in front of all those empty desks at the front of the room seemed to cause a flashback to a time when they were full of his peers, while he stares at the permission slips pensively. "Aizawa-sensei would prefer if we watched Shinsou on separate days.... That's fine, but...."

Yamada rolled his eyes before signing off *for* his stubborn and ungrateful husband. Watching over a sick kid was enough of a favor, and more than enough to pay it back in kind by hosting a little hang-out in their dorm. Even if it *would* be nice to have some extra hands on deck if Mirio decided to get back to his studies, he's sure that Principal Nezu isn't doing anything horrible to Shinsou like Shouta is worried about.

And he's decently sure that the 'leisure time' thing is harmless. Shinsou can be a little vague, but he can use his phone to call for help if he needs it. Yamada is halfway sure he doesn't need to be rescued.

But he'll probably find it a lot easier to breathe once he makes sure of that. "We've got plenty of snacks and food that you can help yourselves to, but if you want anything in particular, I can whip it up for you guys! I really appreciate you doing this, and I know Shinsou will feel a lot better with someone he knows and trusts there to watch over him."

Amajiki nods, still a little unsure of something, but Yamada isn't sure he likes what he thinks it is. "Mirio said that this illness could be related to his quirk. Can he still use it?"

There's just something in his tone, something in Amajiki's stare and the way it holds like it does when he's taking something seriously, that Yamada instinctively bristles at. Even if he works hard to make sure that doesn't come to the surface. "Nope! It seems like all systems are offline for that little reboot, not that the poor kid probably feels like using it. He's feeling pretty miserable with the puking, the horrible fever, all the other cruddy stuff going on. Nope, I think my little brainwasher is all out of the washing, and I hope you weren't thinking of getting a demonstration for some weird reason."

It still boils beneath the surface and probably comes out enough to make Amajiki notice, judging by that subtle flinch. Yamada *should* care, but he doesn't, not when he can't convince himself that Amajiki didn't mean what he's convinced he meant.

The participants in the raid were just told Shinsou could control people by talking to them, but he imagines that Mirio clued them into a few more specifics. He doesn't like thinking about it, but Mirio might have given them an update after that night that Shinsou tried to use his quirk to run away. That Shinsou could control one person, and had been trying to get a second under his control, but couldn't.

And that three people being there would be enough to mitigate that.

Nejire blows a raspberry at Amajiki, pouting with her arms wrapped around Eri to hold her close. “Tamaki doesn’t have enough brain to wash! He’s just asking dumb-dumb questions.”

To his credit, Amajiki manages to shoot a glare in return instead of just taking that insult on the chin, but that bravado is completely lost when he looks back at Yamada. “I didn’t mean any offense by that, I was just curious. It’s better to be prepared, especially when Mirio...seems to mean a lot to Shinsou....”

Yamada isn’t entirely sure what Tamaki really means, but he trusts that it’s nothing too serious. As much as Mirio does mean to Shinsou - and he means a whole lot, considering how often Shinsou will open up to him in a rough spot when Yamada can’t even get his foot through the door - Shinsou means a lot to Mirio too. He knows that Mirio wouldn’t just stand by if Amajiki were suspicious of Shinsou just because of the quirk he was born with, not with how worried he had been when he learned that Shinsou thought it was villainous. Or how devastated he was when he found out that Shinsou’s mutism might be related to thinking of his quirk that way.

Yamada doesn’t like thinking about it, but he knows that even some of the herolets in Shinsou’s inner circle have had some pretty awful thoughts about Shinsou’s quirk. If his theory about this big sick is right, and Shinsou does come out of it with his quirk in a more stable spot, he doesn’t want to hear a single *word* about anyone taking that as bad news.

Shinsou knows more about what a villain looks like than even the pro heroes on staff, and Yamada won’t tolerate *anyone* comparing his kid to that sort of person.

“Let me know if you run into any trouble with Ectoplasm! He might have made you *think* he’s the reigning King of Karaoke, but trust me, no one wants to see me challenge him for the title,” Yamada says with a grin that he usually wears when he plays the villain in training scenarios, one that definitely rattles Nejire with a reminder of her first year more than Amajiki. But Amajiki looks rattled enough without a memory to look back on, and that’s enough for him.

For now.

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Aizawa expected many things. Some were less rational than others. He anticipated coming back to a dorm that had been completely refurnished to suit what he’s seen of Principal Nezu’s personal living conditions, slowly returning to normal with the aid of a few robots. He found it more likely that Shinsou would be asleep, but was also prepared to find him shaking with terror if Principal Nezu stumbled upon a particularly sore wound that might have *interested* him too much to stop pecking at.

But he didn’t expect to see *this*.

Hizashi is frozen in place, and he knows that doesn’t bode well for him. He knows the fear that paralyzes him might thaw at the worst time, and he’s tempted to steal his phone to keep him from *doing* what he knows he wants to, a desire so strong that it only makes the terror worsen.

Principal Nezu’s mouth drops open, but Aizawa doesn’t believe for a *second* that he had lost track of time. That Principal Nezu would allow himself to be seen like this if he didn’t will it, that he

would be unaware what the sight of that outfit was doing to him, especially knowing that it had to be tailor-made for the animal principal. That he must have prepared it, and that he must have been planning something like this for a while.

He doesn't want to think about that implication. That Principal Nezu prepared this. That he went to the effort of making it, and he's had it in his possession for some undetermined amount of time. Possibly *years*.

"I believe we have reached the end of our time together, Shinsou. It was quite an enjoyable day on my part," Principal Nezu says, pulling the capture scarf replica from around his neck, but the memory of it taints an otherwise benign black jumpsuit. Even if it would be odd enough to see the animal principal without his usual suit and tie, *this* is haunting for another reason. "I believe there is a ritual to report the day's events to the primary caregivers in this kind of scenario. Yamada?"

Aizawa hands Eri off to his husband to keep his hands occupied and *far* away from his phone, and though he doesn't have words to convey his intentions, Principal Nezu follows him out of the dorm with his usual clothing laid across his arm.

He knows he should say something, that Principal Nezu probably *wants* him to slip up and address it, but he refuses. He has never felt closer to death than this moment. "There were no emergencies that went unreported. Shinsou took his medicine and drank plenty of water without any reminder, though lunch was a bit more difficult, and honestly lacking. I've already forwarded the results of most of my examinations, but there were a few things that I hadn't mentioned yet."

Aizawa can't ask outright what Principal Nezu means by that. He knows if he says *anything*, it will be the wrong thing, he'll be asking *why the hell Principal Nezu has an Eraserhead cosplay on hand*, so he just nods. He hopes whatever Principal Nezu has to say, that it's quick to say, and Aizawa can end this horror and try to repress it to the best of his abilities.

"Shinsou has a disturbing propensity not to question things," Principal Nezu says with a flick of his paw gesturing to his outfit, and Aizawa didn't need a reminder that he was wearing it. "Knowing about his feverish bouts of delirium, I was curious whether he could be convinced that you had been affected by a quirk that would change your appearance to one like mine, but he didn't make a single comment on the change. Even when I tried to prompt him, he seemed to easily accept that I was in fact you, and that he had simply imagined that you were a human this entire time."

Aizawa finds his stomach turning even if the rest of him feels paralyzed. He *knew* that Principal Nezu would do something like this, he would take advantage of Shinsou's weakness to mentally scar him, as if the scars he already carried weren't enough. He feels the need to lash out against this like a boiling heat under his skin, but he can't force himself to move or answer to it. This is still *Principal Nezu*, and he can still do nothing against him.

"There are many reasons why Shinsou's inability to communicate is a problem, but this poses an entirely new threat," Principal Nezu says, folding his hands behind his back and disturbingly enough, seems honestly *concerned*. "His previous history only compounds that issue. There's no way to know what Shinsou truly thinks about his new environment at UA. In the best case scenario, I would hope that he's made no ill-suited assumptions, but I find myself quite concerned. I can only hope that he would feel more comfortable with you or Yamada if he felt unsafe here."

Only himself and Hizashi knew that what Principal Nezu feared had already come to fruition. That Shinsou had been convinced that he had been sold instead of being designated as a ward, and that he would be killed if he wasn't useful to the investigation. He's not sure if Shinsou *would* come to himself or Hizashi if something like that rose up again, if Shinsou didn't already have a concern

that he was hiding, but he's not sure how to explain absolutely everything that is new to Shinsou, or where to even *begin*. "Thank you for letting me know that, and for taking the time to watch Shinsou today. As grateful as I am, Togata offered to watch him tomorrow, and I think that it helps him to spend time with the wards to take his mind off of certain things."

Principal Nezu seemed to genuinely brighten at that, tilting his head a bit farther than usual. "It was no trouble on my part, though I had realized throughout the day that there are certain aspects of care that I would be ill-equipped for. I'm sure that Togata is far better suited to it, but the offer still stands if it's needed again."

Aizawa returns the wave from Principal Nezu, watching him turn around and leave, and though he's reassured that Shinsou didn't seem to be visibly suffering, he will *never* allow Principal Nezu to be alone with either of his wards again.

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27 feels too weak, and it's too hard to hide things. He knows that the face mask would help, especially with this near smile that pulls when Yamada asks how things went while his eyes are asking why the Rat Boss looked like that. He nearly laughs when he answers, '*Joke. Rat Boss tried to trick. Trick Rat Boss.*'

He's just too happy that Yamada and Eri are home, even though Eri still seems mad at him. But he knows how to make it up to her. She was excited to watch movies with him and he wants to do that. Even if it'll be hard to stay awake, especially with how warm and comfortable the sleeping bag is, he can take it off and give it to her if it becomes a problem. It's his for the week, Aizawa said so himself.

Yamada goes to the kitchen to start making a snack or something, frowning at the bento box before he starts making something else. Eri walks up to him, her hands on his knees, and he can still see that she's unsettled by something.

"How wa-" 27 turns away when the cough comes too suddenly to stop it, the hand curled around his mouth starts to feel so much colder on his face. He must be more exhausted than he knew, or more reassured to see Eri because his head swims, but he pulls himself back up to look at her. "School?"

It's weird that she hasn't told him. She tells Aizawa or Yamada everything that they miss out on when they're away, but she doesn't look like she wants to tell him. "Okay. Everyone wants to see you, and big brother Mirio is worried about you."

27 can't hide the frown either, not when he knows he should look at the chat so that he doesn't have to see him face to face. He doesn't want Mirio to worry, even if he's sure he's not worried, he's just unsettled enough to seem that way to Eri. "Sorry. I'll get better soon. I know you don't like it either."

Eri doesn't answer that, but she pulls herself to sit beside him on the couch, too still before she notices that the fishes' bowl has been changed. "Fishie and Fishio's home is gone!"

27 nods, zipping himself up a little more when he starts to feel colder. "It was too small. Rat Bear did it. This is better for them."

27 feels his eyes falling shut, but he tries to fight it. He needs to watch movies with Eri, he needs to spend time with her because she wants that. She's mad about something, probably him, and he needs to stop that and make it better. He just has to.

He feels cold fingers on his forehead, colder than the sticky thing, and he knows he should open his eyes more but he can't, his head is starting to hurt too much. "You okay in there?"

Yamada sounds worried, and maybe he should be. This feels bad, so cold, the headache keeps building behind his eyes and it's building too fast, it's not like his quirk but he knows he has risks. Things 10 told him, things he's supposed to avoid but he hasn't done any of them. He shouldn't pass out but

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Aizawa had thought Hizashi was being ridiculous, that it was wishful thinking. The same way that Nemuri seemed to think that Shinsou's illness was related to him feeling 'safe,' it was outlandish to think that a near-inevitable sickness was due to Shinsou's quirk.

But given how it couldn't be more poorly timed, he should have been prepared to be wrong about it.

Hizashi is kneeling beside Shinsou's bed, his fingers brushing against his sweaty temple while he keeps glancing between his phone and the unconscious teenager, until he notices Aizawa's presence at the door. He knows the tension in that smile too much to trust the teasing words that follow. "So, Shinsou's a little allergic to Eri right now."

Toshinori's text that reminded him that someone needed to take over 1-A's dorm shifts made him bristle at first, but at least there will be some use to the assignment. "And it's settling down with you?"

Hizashi nods, looking back at Shinsou when the teenager turns his head to the side with a pained whine. The sweat means the fever is breaking, and if the fever means what Hizashi thinks it does, then his quirk is settling without a target to reach for.

It's not good enough for The Commission, but it's good enough for Aizawa. If they try to challenge whether Hizashi is fit to be Shinsou's caretaker, this is a good indication that they will fail. It's a good sign that Shinsou's quirk truly can't affect Hizashi due to his hearing loss. "His fever falls with you, but Shinsou didn't have any issue with Principal Nezu. It might just be with Eri, or other people that Shinsou has used his quirk on."

Hizashi sighs, dropping his head to the mattress. "I don't want to risk it, Shou. I know that Mirio is going to be fine, but I just..."

Hizashi doesn't need to finish that sentence. Aizawa can see it too clearly in the way that his husband looks at Shinsou now, the fingers brushing away sweat and jumping away as though he forgets that he's touching Shinsou. He's given up on trying to convince Hizashi not to cross that line, even if he knows it will only hurt worse when they're faced with the inevitable.

And he's past due for a check-in to see if the inevitable is approaching soon. He knows that Shinsou Ui's extradition was approved, but he has no idea where Sansa and Naomasa are with their other leads, and he knows it's unlike him to not know.

He's been finding it too easy to forget about the investigation when Shinsou seems more like a fixture in their dorm than a temporary assignment. "I have to cover Toshinori's dorm shifts. That can keep Eri away from Shinsou."

He doesn't like being away from his husband, already accustomed to falling asleep beside him during the week within a month of being taken off of his patrols. He knows that Hizashi doesn't

like it either with that grimace, but it pulls too quickly into concern when Shinsou makes another sound of discomfort, and Hizashi sighs. “I think he already misses her. This is rough enough stuff, but I hope it blows over quick.”

Aizawa wants that too, but for different reasons. He wants Shinsou well, he wants to protect him in any way that he can, and too often he’s found that he can’t. He didn’t imagine any of this when Hizashi took on Shinsou’s wardship, even when he tried to prepare for the worst.

He hears it again, even if it could be mistaken for a sigh. He wants Shinsou to stop uttering that number when he sleeps, when he’s feverish and delirious.

He doesn’t want to know who ‘10’ is, or why Shinsou is so afraid of them. Why Shinsou pleaded with them to believe that he could ‘work.’

He’s refused to look at it this long, but he knows that he has to. There’s little that Aizawa can do to protect Shinsou, but he can protect him like this. He can use every source of information he has to end the investigation before The Commission finds another way to meddle in it.

Aizawa takes the reviews that Shiori gave him when he packs for himself and Eri to go to the 1-A dorm that night, including the reviews about the ‘jobs’ that ‘27’ did.

Chapter End Notes

1-A Groupchat Usernames:

Will Die in 6 Days for Uttering the Forbidden Name - Kaminari Denki (Who called Aizawa "Zawa-sensei")

Pinkie Pie - Ashido Mina

2 Fast 2b Furious > A Cop - Iida Tenya

Eri’s New Mom > Yaoyorozu - Yaoyorozu Momo

RIP Shinsou, You Were Never Here Anyway > Nyansou - Shinsou Hitoshi

Flex These Arms Tape - Sero Hanta

Kwing Expwosion Muwrder :3 - Bakugo Katsuki

Banished to Sensei’s Shadow Realm - Midoriya Izuku (Who can't train with his quirk until he sees a quirk specialist after Aizawa couldn't cancel his quirk at the Midterm exam)

Everything Floats Down Here - Uraraka Ochako

Froptimus Prime - Asui Tsuyu

Wed Wiot :3 - Kirishima Eijirou

Dark Thots - Tokoyami Fumikage

I’m Ji-Ji Now, Forever TT_TT - Ojirou Masharao

Put Your Hands Down - Jirou Kyouka

Silent but Deadly - Shouji Mezo

Sprakan Ze Deutch - Aoyama Yuga

Mama Mirio

Chapter Summary

Aizawa brings himself to go through the reviews written for '27,' then finds an unlikely visitor to the Safe Room. Eri is still conflicted about her feelings towards Twenny, and finds a council of siblings created by the hero students. 27 wants to prove that he's not sick, that he doesn't need to be watched by Mirio today.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Vague reference to how Shinsou's quirk could be used for sexual assault in the review that begins with '27 is getting some flak here', cough syrup abuse (Don't do what Shinsou does, kiddos!), vomiting

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou's first job at The Miasma was for Honzo when he was 6 years old (In Wards), where Shinsou was beaten within an inch of his life to force a police officer to tell Honzo the information he wanted. Midoriya's Black Whip quirk can't be cancelled by Aizawa's Erasure, and Aizawa has forbidden Midoriya from using his quirk until he sees a quirk specialist to get an explanation, as Aizawa doesn't know about One For All. Eri gets emotionally volatile after using her quirk, and she sees it as the only time that she truly gets angry with Shinsou. Eri requires 'horn tricks' where Shinsou flicks her horn to loosen the built up mucus when her horn grows to a certain length. The first time Shinsou made tamago, he didn't use enough sugar and Eri commented on the lack of sweetness, and Aizawa didn't tell him that it's easier to roll the tamago with a rectangular pan and allowed him to use a circular one. Yamada, while concussed, was moved to tears when Mirio made lunch in Chapter 51. Mirio has a ritual of ordering a black coffee with five sugar packets barely mixed in as a way to mourn Sir Nighteye when he feels particularly overwhelmed, as that was Sir Nighteye's favorite coffee order. Eri calls Shinsou "Twenny," while Nejire calls him "Shin-Shin." Shinsou is Yamada's ward because The Commission of Wardship Affairs believes that Shinsou's quirk wouldn't work on him, because he is deaf, and it's a requirement for heroes to be unaffected by their wards' quirks, but as Shinsou is selectively mute, they have not tested it. Mirio gave Shinsou a specially enlarged Gengar plushie, big enough that when Shinsou hugs it, he looks like a little kid holding a plushie too big for him (Fan art of that in the notes!). Mirio called Yamada 'Dad' to encourage Eri to call him that after discovering she wanted to, but was too shy to do it, but has been putting more consideration into how he feels about Yamada after that.

It's not surprising that Eri wants to see Yaoyorozu as soon as they arrive to the 1-A dorm, and Aizawa doesn't feel the need to protest. He trusts that his students can take care of Eri, and if there are any problems, he can be aware of them through the surveillance cameras.

He watches them while he calls Naomasa, but he's not paying attention to the cameras at all.

They were able to gather 25 named organizations from the reviews on that ‘Villain Yelp’ website that Shiori gave him, from ‘127’s’ reviews. Naomasa and Sansa have been able to meet with some low-level members of those organizations, some higher ones that are imprisoned. No one has talked yet, and Naomasa is as hopeful about that possibility as Aizawa is. Miasma’s ability to silence any loose ends is apparently well-known, and the way they operate is well-hidden.

Numbers that are rented are delivered to the location where their ‘jobs’ are performed. There’s no mention of a central location that any of the reviewers visited, and the locations of the reviewers themselves isn’t an indication of where they operate. They don’t know where Miasma *is*.

When Shinsou was compelled to answer under Jun’s quirk, he said that Numbers were gathered in four ways - volunteers, debtors, orphans, ‘unwanted.’

He can’t imagine anyone ‘volunteering’ to enter Miasma’s fold, given that they’ve never recovered a body or a survivor without extensive scarring. They’ve never encountered a Number who came to regret that choice and exited freely, and Shinsou’s reluctance to speak about Miasma isn’t just to keep himself from being taken from Eri. As much as there were things that occurred at the 8 Precepts that were too nightmarish to speak about, *worse* seemed to occur at Miasma.

Furokage Itsuki was a debtor, he was a drug addict as a teenager and ran up an impressive debt that Miasma offered to cover if he performed their ‘jobs.’ The specifics were kept secret, Furokage Itsuki was instructed to be prepared to be away from his family and friends, to say goodbye, until his older sister Mizuki covered the debt with her life, becoming ‘50.’

Aizawa knows that ‘orphans’ implies that Miasma may have a hand in Family Services to pick up runaways or difficult children - *children* that society may have given up on and wouldn’t miss. He knows that Shinsou wasn’t one of them. The Ashidos and Kirishimas remembered Shinsou Ui to be ‘struggling’ as a single mother, even after 12 years had gone by, but Family Services has no record of a complaint or call.

Ashido said that Shinsou was sold. Shinsou told her and Midoriya that the night he tried to escape UA. Shinsou was sold by his *mother* when he was four years old, and he believed it was due to his quirk. A quirk that Miasma would undoubtedly find valuable for their criminal endeavors, a quirk that Shinsou believed drove his mother insane.

Aizawa doesn’t know if Shinsou Ui is insane. He knows he should be there tomorrow to see for himself, to set eyes on the woman who set all of this into motion for Shinsou 12 years ago. Shinsou’s mother was the first person who placed a price on that child who was sold or ‘rented’ too many times since. But Aizawa knows he won’t do it.

Naomasa doesn’t ask because he assumes, but he assumes wrong. Aizawa *won’t* be at the station when Shinsou Ui is questioned for her connection to Miasma. He won’t force himself to look at her when he knows it will change the way he looks at Shinsou.

The Nomus. The other side of Miasma’s operation, and the focus of The Commission’s attention into this organization.

There hasn’t been a Nomu sighting since the attack on Endeavor, but that attack was disturbing enough for the general public. Careful editing obscured the full horror of the situation - the creature thought and planned and *spoke*, it was living when previous Nomus were *dead*. The corpse of the Nomu that attacked Endeavor was recovered, and identified in some ways. The majority of its DNA belonged to an underground fighter who had been arrested for that lifestyle a few times. The corpse has four tattoos - one tribal symbol on its shoulder, and three numbers. 383, 332, and 3144.

Three Numbers, one fighter, but *six* quirks were demonstrated in that fight. Only the specialists examining the corpse can know what that means, but Aizawa doubts that there's another organization working in tandem with Miasma to supply the parts for Nomus. There was a mention of Miasma silencing their competitors near the end of 127's reviews, a complaint that it was hard enough to rent specialized talent like that in the first place, and Miasma made it harder in order to monopolize the demand. And beginning two years ago, they seemed reluctant to meet that demand anyway.

Aizawa doesn't want to read the reviews in his hand, but he doesn't want to hand them over to Naomasa blindly. Despite what he heard Shinsou say, Shinsou *isn't* '27.' Even if Shinsou believes that, Aizawa never will.

It's hard enough to look at the scars. It's hard enough to imagine the wounds they once were. In the back of his mind, Aizawa knows he wouldn't know half of what he does if he relied on Shinsou to admit it, to tell him, and it feels wrong to know it despite that.

But he needs to know for the investigation. For Shinsou as well. He can't turn a blind eye to what Shinsou has gone through when he needs to be a caretaker to him. They live together, Aizawa has tried to help him through nightmares and through panic without knowing what caused those nightmares or panic in the first place. He knows half of the horror, and he needs to know more.

He immediately hates that he has to learn it from those that created that horror in the first place.

'27: DAMAGED GOODS WARNING! First off, this one is a fucking baby. They gave us a freaking preschooler for crying out loud. Boss still made it work, but if you see this one come up in the future? Get the discount, because Boss had to make it work the hard way. Not gonna work for interrogations like they tell you it will, Miasma's a pack of liars.'

Aizawa looks up from the file only to see Eri cooking with Yaoyorozu and Sato, and looks away with nausea boiling in his stomach. He knows what Shinsou looked like at four years old, even if he doesn't know what 'damaged goods' means. But he can imagine. The scars on his stomach that are like the ones on his arms, but unfathomably more disturbing.

Aizawa forces himself to read the rest, to keep his mind from wandering to thoughts that are too gruesome.

He knows he could skim, to just pick out names, but he absorbs it all. The dates at the ends of those messages stick out to him the most. Shinsou was 6 years old when the first review was created, but there's a three year gap between that and the next one. Aizawa hopes there was a three year gap for Shinsou, even if he doubts that he should.

'Damaged goods warning? Ain't that bad. Creepy as hell, but 27 did the job he was supposed to. Freaked out the comp, got a better deal out of it.'

'27 - stupid as shit. Can't think under pressure, nearly got us busted. Don't rely on this one.'

'27 is fucking hilarious. Think that big bad mask is holding something big under there? NOPE! Kid has a stutter. The fuckheads that tried to get to the boss still got got, but you can't take this kid seriously when he can't even talk right.'

'27 is getting some flak here, and I've got to say, it's not really deserved. Kid is pretty spookable, but he did the job pretty good. Didn't even think about the last half of the plan, but he had it covered. And DAMN, what I'd do for that quirk and a room full of supermodels, you know what I mean?'

'27 is trash. Get 58, get 34, don't waste your money. We got a refund but we'll never get that opportunity again.'

Aizawa didn't want to know if Shinsou was good at his 'jobs,' but he didn't want to know if he was bad at them either. He knows the implications behind renting muscle like Miasma does, and he's seen shades of it in organizations who keep hired hands in less than willing conditions. He's never seen an organization this deep, this *black*, without a single survivor that made it out alive except for Shinsou.

When an organization places a price on a human life, when they derive their funds from renting out muscle, they have an incentive to keep the profit rolling in. He knows it gets worse as it goes on, the worst trafficking ring he's ever uncovered had been in operation for 12 years by that point, and the warehouse where the victims were housed looked more like a cattle corral than any place for humans to live. Isolation was always at play, dehumanization tactics came later, but punishment came somewhere in the middle and seemed to evolve the longer it was left to fester.

Aizawa doesn't want to imagine the wounds that Shinsou's scars were, but he imagines that he always knew *why* they were there.

He has three names, and he sends them to Naomasa with only a sentence to explain where he got them from. He knows that he should turn these reviews over so that they can be catalogued into the other investigation files. He knows that it's policy to turn them in as soon as he receives them.

He'll hand these reviews over in person, because he doesn't want to keep them. Irrationally, he wants to get rid of everything he has in his office that's related to the investigation, to hand the entirety of it to Naomasa and merely wait until Naomasa has news about a raid.

He doesn't want to peel back the scars to see wounds anymore, he wants to take all of it away for Shinsou. He wants Shinsou to *be* Shinsou, as though the past 12 years never happened to him at all.

Aizawa can't do that, so he works with what he has. He has a child in his care that was taught that bad things will happen to him if he doesn't produce profit for his captors, a child that has probably learned horrifying consequences to being sick or injured. He has a child that is sick, that isn't coping with that well, and his usual outlet for comfort in Eri is being taken from him because Eri makes him more ill.

He doesn't know how to approach that situation at all, how to make it any easier, and he's utterly distracted from it when he sees Midoriya knocking on the Safe Room door.

"Aizawa-sensei? I need to talk to you about my quirk...."

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Eri doesn't know why, but her tummy still feels sick about Twenny.

She can still eat a lot of tasty cinnamon rolls though. Momo and Sa-Sa made a whole bunch, and Sa-Sa joked that they're all for her, but the other heroes still come down to eat them. Eri doesn't know if she's really sharing them, but she would even if she was asked.

"Eri, I need your help!" Ocha says when she's done being mad at Ugo, even though she still looks really mad when she looks at Eri. "Shinsou liked my soup better, right? Or at least Ojiro's! He definitely didn't like Bakugo's soup at all, right?"

Eri's tummy does a big twist when Ocha says that, and she feels itchy and weird and really mad

that she does. “Twenny didn’t eat any soup ‘cause he’s *dumb*. You shouldn’t make soup for him, Ocha, he’s not gonna eat it ‘cause he’s dumb!”

A lot of heroes look at her really weird, a lot like Mirio did. They look at her like she said something really mean, and maybe she did, but she doesn’t know *why*. Her quirk hasn’t been bad for a long time, and only her quirk makes her mean, but Twenny made her quirk work a couple times with his quirk, so maybe he’s doing that again to make her mean. Because Twenny is *dumb*.

Ugo tries to do a horn trick on Eri when he flicks her horn, and a lot of heroes get really mad and yell at him for that, but Ugo is kind of like Yama because he can stop hearing things sometimes. “The fuck is with you and Shitsou? Yeah, he’s fucking dumb, but you’re not supposed to know that yet.”

Eri gets really itchy and her tummy gets really flippy when Ugo says that, and she even feels her face getting really hot. “Twenny’s not dumb, Ugo! You can’t say that!”

Eri’s not supposed to yell so big except with Yama, but she feels like she can’t yell enough. Ugo looks like she yelled a whole lot, but she still feels flippy and itchy and *mad*.

But Tsu-Tsu puts a hand on Ugo’s shoulder to make him go back before Eri does another big mad, and she shakes her head. “Bakugo, you shouldn’t get involved in this as an only child, kero. You can’t relate.”

Eri really hopes that Tsu-Tsu can ‘relate.’ She wants to stop feeling so sick and so itchy and *somad* at Twenny, even though she still thinks he’s really dumb. But a lot of heroes are supposed to be able to relate to her, and they all talk about how they can help. Iida, Haga, Shoji, and Todo are all supposed to be able to relate to her, even though Todo doesn’t really look like he wants to.

All the heroes that can relate to her look at each other, until Tsu-Tsu just sighs. “Eri, was there something specific that Shinsou did to make you mad, kero?”

Eri kicks her feet a few times to help think. She can’t really think of why Twenny is dumb. He tried to hide that he was sick, and that was kind of dumb, and he likes to do dumb things without her sometimes, and that’s really dumb too. But she knows it’s kind of not.

Yama and Zawa do stuff without each other a whole lot, and it doesn’t make them flippy or itchy or mad. The heroes that hang out with each other all the time sometimes do stuff that isn’t together, and that doesn’t make them mad. And Izuku and his mom are away from each other a whole lot, but they’re never *ever* mad at each other because of that.

Eri just shakes her head, because Twenny just makes her mad now, and she doesn’t like it. She never felt mad like this before, she never *ever* got mad at Twenny like she really means it, except when her quirk was making her mad. And she really wants to stop feeling mad at Twenny because it makes her tummy flippy and her skin itchy, and it kind of makes her really scared.

Iida puts his hand under his chin, even though he starts moving it around when he talks. “That’s unfortunately common for sibling relationships. Even though I’ve always held my brother in high regard, there were times that I was angry at him for no apparent reason. It was quite frustrating, especially given how much I still cared for him during that time.”

“I’m not sure if I can really help,” Shoji says with his real mouth instead of his arm-mouths, because his arms are crossed like he’s a little cold. “I’m a lot older than Mizuno, so I’ve never felt that aggravated at her. There were only a few times when she was younger and really wanted my attention, but it was easy to remember that she was only acting that way because of her age.”

Tsu-Tsu tilts her head at Shoji, like he said something a little weird. “That’s exactly why you should weigh in, kero. I’m also the eldest, and that means that we can relate to how Shinsou feels, kero, especially because Mizuno is the same age as Eri. The others can relate to Eri as younger siblings, kero.”

Haga moves her hands, but Eri can’t really see what they’re doing since she’s not wearing her cute gloves. “Ah, but I’m, like, *way* younger than my brother, so I don’t really know him like that. I probably can’t help at all.”

“I’ve never had this problem either,” Todo says, and Eri kind of wishes that he did, because she thinks Todo would know exactly what to do to make it all better.

Eri kicks her feet again, because the heroes are supposed to help her with everything because she’s little, but they’re not really fixing it. “I don’t like being mad at Twenny. He’s dumb but I still like him. But I don’t.”

Tsu-Tsu hums like that’s okay, but it’s really not. Eri’s not supposed to get mad at Twenny because he’s her mom and because he’s always taken care of her. He’s always read her stories and combed her hair and played games with her, and he used to be really happy to do that stuff. But he’s not happy after they got rescued, and maybe that’s her fault. Maybe Twenny would have been happier if they didn’t live with heroes, because he doesn’t really like it sometimes.

“Siblings are very complicated, kero,” Tsu-Tsu says, and Eri hopes that she’s still right even if she’s not a younger sibling. “You always care about each other, even if you don’t always like each other. Sometimes you expect each other to know what you need without even talking about it, and that can cause problems, kero.”

Eri slaps her hands on the table, because Tsu-Tsu is really, really, *really* right! “That’s why Twenny’s dumb! He used to know everything and do everything right, but he’s not doing it here! He keeps doing stuff with Zawa and Yama and you guys and I don’t want him to!”

The heroes look like she said something kind of bad, or maybe because they know that they’re doing bad stuff by doing stuff with Twenny without her. But maybe they know that they’re not.

Eri just wants Twenny to like her again, but she can’t really make him like her when she’s being bad like this and being mad. It’s really ‘complicated,’ like Tsu-Tsu said, and she doesn’t want it to be.

She likes being at UA with all the heroes, but she doesn’t really like Twenny being away from her. She knows that Chisaki can’t take them back because he’s dead, and she doesn’t really want him to.

But she really wants Twenny to be like he was back then, and care about her all the time like he used to.

“You know, Shinsou still cares about you even when he’s doing other things,” Shoji says, kind of quiet because everyone else is quiet. “Mizuno also got angry when I was trying to study, or trying to do things that I enjoyed that she wouldn’t. I didn’t always want to spend time with my little sister, but I always cared about her.”

Eri just sighs, because that doesn’t really help at all. “Twenny always *did*. ”

Eri has to move her cinnamon rolls out of the way to cover up her head on the table, but she doesn’t want to look at all the heroes right now, and they’re not helping anyway.

Twenny always liked spending time with her. *Always*. Eri used to be a lot of fun to be around, and now she's not, and Twenny doesn't like her anymore. And maybe Twenny's not dumb, he just doesn't like her, but thinking about Twenny really not liking her makes her sad all the way to her toes, and it makes it hard to breathe when she really just wants to cry instead.

Eri looks up when she hears a lot of loud running, before the door to the stairs opens up at Zawa comes out looking kind of mad, and Izuku looks kind of worried behind him. But Zawa looks kind of worried when he looks at her. "Is something wrong, Eri?"

Eri shakes her head, because Zawa already told her to just tell Twenny to spend more time with her, and that didn't really work out. "I'm just tired."

Zawa looks around at all the heroes, before he sighs. "Can I trust that you can watch over Eri and not destroy the dorm?"

Iida does a big salute and promises that they can, and Zawa nods before he goes back to looking mad again. Izuku says that they'll be back, but he looks really worried about being gone, and he looks even more worried than Twenny used to when he said he was going to be gone for a trip outside.

Eri really hopes that Izuku's going to be okay, but she kind of forgets about that when Ocha and Momo and Ashi and Tsu-Tsu promise to do her hair and read her bedtime stories so she can sleep really good tonight.

And even if they don't read bedtime stories like Twenny does, they still make her feel warm and comfy like they're supposed to.

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Aizawa already didn't feel guilty for interrupting Toshinori's recovery period for a cold, but when he picks the lock and finds Toshinori looking ill-rested but not *sick*, he realizes that he needed to believe he was sick.

Toshinori looks away from the computer screen with extensive bags under his eyes. He looks like he hasn't slept in a few days, but that's not enough to force the anger boiling under his skin to settle for any notion of sympathy or *mercy*. "Midoriya. Wait outside."

Aizawa slams the door behind him to reinforce that, and locks the door to enforce it, before he turns to face Toshinori and has to remind himself to *breathe*. He's not going to murder the Symbol of Peace on campus grounds, only four doors down from his own dorm room.

Even in the face of his rage, he's rational enough to know that he should do it where it won't be tracked back to him.

"Young Aizawa, what-" Aizawa bristles at the familiarity, when it's never been more ill-deserved.

"Your *quirk*," Aizawa grates out, and he struggles to call it anything but that. The quirk that the Symbol of Peace held, the quirk that *was* the Symbol of Peace in ways he knew before he even knew it. "One for All. You passed it down to a *child*."

Toshinori glances at the door, shock but not blame, and that's why he's still breathing. Why he thought he could hide this *at all* is beyond Aizawa, but if he thought he could be that familiar, to call him 'Young Aizawa,' to offer ill-suited advice or the odd compliment like an old retired pro before he even retired, he should have *thought* to tell Aizawa about this sooner.

“An untested, untried 14 year old. A child, not a hero. You put that on his shoulders and you *knew* what that would make him,” Aizawa growls, and he finds it hard not to blame Toshinori for illogical things. The attack at USJ, the League of Villains nigh-unending focus on his homeroom class. He nearly expelled a seedling of the Symbol of Peace, and he probably would have been better off if he did.

Toshinori folds his hands in his lap guiltily, but his eyes don't reflect that guilt at all. “I saw a great deal of potential in young Midoriya. I saw a hero, even if he was quirkless, or young. A successor was needed, and mine to choose. I've never regretted it.”

“You should have,” Aizawa says, even if he doesn't say that he should *now*. “What were you planning to do if I expelled him? Were you going to strong-arm another school into overlooking that? What do you plan to do if he *dies*? That kid out there is a *kid*, and we both know the villains he's going to face better than he does.”

Toshinori probably doesn't, because Aizawa has never forgotten the reason why his trademark is a smile. The bastard has a quirk that's never failed him, he's the Symbol of Peace for a reason, but Aizawa still can't believe that quirk now belongs to Midoriya after how many times it's failed him in worse ways than the usual ones. “I believe in young Midoriya, and I have reasons to. He's more than proven himself, and you can't tell me you don't see that.”

Aizawa sees near misses and strokes of pure, unadulterated *luck*. Miracles, and he doesn't trust in miracles. He wouldn't trust miracles with a child's *life*.

This is different from any other student. He's known that his students will face monsters, they will face death time and time again. But he knows that UA is a nest, they don't have to fly until they're prepared. They don't get that attention from villains until it's earned and so far it's always been *met*. But *this* is different. This feels like he's the only one who *didn't* know, and it feels like the League of Villains *did*.

“How long were you going to let this go on?” Aizawa asks, and he wonders why it went on this long at all. He's known about All for One from whispers and myths, from criminals that he's arrested before Naomasa ever told him that it was true. He understands that One for All shouldn't be known to villains, even if he doubts that it isn't. But he doesn't know if he's the only other hero who knows it too.

“I should have told you, young Aizawa. I know that very well now,” Toshinori admits, guilt finally settling in his eyes, and Aizawa shouldn't feel like he's properly scolded a student when he's talking to the former Symbol of Peace, but he *does*. “It wasn't from lack of trust, but... I'm very reluctant to let anyone know about this. About what it has meant for me.”

Aizawa has stood on far murkier ground than most pro heroes, and he knows that. He won't say that the fall of the Symbol of Peace didn't rattle him, because it did. But Aizawa could have known this from the beginning, and nothing would have changed for him. “One for All allowed Midoriya to gain another quirk. I can't cancel it anymore, like I can't cancel a Nomu's.”

Toshinori winces at the comparison, but Aizawa won't sugarcoat the reality of it when it's not necessary. His erasure quirk has only failed him twice, and the comparison has to be made because of that. “I don't believe it's like that at all, but... I've never experienced what young Midoriya has. I've never gained another quirk, or met the previous holders of One for All. And young Midoriya was able to do that under the influence of young Shinsou's quirk.”

“And that's *not* going to happen again,” Aizawa promises, more than incensed when he takes Toshinori's words as an implication that he won't tolerate. “I'm not going to allow my ward to be

used like that, any more than I want the Problem Child running around with *eight* unstoppable quirks.”

Toshinori looks horrified, but likely not for the right reasons. It’s not an accusation against Toshinori, but it’s something that he needs to understand regardless. This is the reality that Aizawa will accept, and he *won’t* fathom using Shinsou for his quirk the same way Miasma and Chisaki did.

And he doesn’t want to *imagine* the teenager standing outside of Toshinori’s door running around with *eight goddamn quirks* while he’s Aizawa’s problem.

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27 can’t be sick anymore.

He winces and nearly whines when he wakes up to a body of agony. *Everything* hurts from his eyes and head down to his feet, every joint protests movement and he just wants to collapse into the side of the bed that he rolls into, that feels colder.

He can’t. He *can’t* be sick anymore, because they think that Eri is making him sick. They think that his quirk is making him sick. They think that people need to watch him while he’s sick, and they think that *Mirio* should watch him today.

27. Can’t. Be sick.

He pulls himself out of his bed, stumbling while he does, but he stares at the closed door until he can remind himself. He can’t act like this when he opens that door, he has to prove that he’s not sick. He knows exactly how to prove it.

He gets dressed and doesn’t care about what he wears, everything feels too *hot* and uncomfortable. It takes too long to convince himself to turn the doorknob, it takes too long to comb his hair when his arms feel so weak and heavy, but he does it. He’s awake before Yamada, and it’s too tempting to let the exhaustion take hold over him again, but he refuses to.

He needs to prove that he’s not sick, and he can do that before Yamada wakes up.

He takes his medicine even if it’s a little too early, and he makes sure to take more cough medicine than he’s supposed to because it’s always been his most obvious tell. He takes off the cold compress and throws it away, convinces himself he won’t miss the cold relief, before he stares at the coffee tins and the coffee machine. It looked easier when Yamada or Aizawa used it, but he thinks he did it right. The coffee comes out really dark then really watery, but it smells right, so it should be.

Yamada always makes breakfast and lunch on a school day, but 27 hopes that he wakes up in time to make lunch. It’s too tempting to just make cereal, but he has to prove that he’s not sick anymore, so it can’t be that easy.

He starts making tamago again, because he remembers how to do it. He knows it should be sweeter, so he uses five spoonfuls of sugar when the recipe told him to use one. He hates stirring it so much when his arms are so weak and heavy, and he has to stop a few times, but he uses the pan that he was *supposed* to use the first time, and he thinks it turns out better. It still doesn’t look perfect, it’s loosely rolled and kind of thin, but he made it.

He’s making breakfast, so he’s not sick.

He starts peeling some oranges, but he completely forgets that he should make some rice until he hears Yamada's door open and hears him yawn. 27 knows it doesn't take long for Yamada to see that 27 isn't in his room and walk to the kitchen, but he feels like it's a lot longer with how straight he has to stand to make himself look like he's not sick.

"Good morning, little early bird," Yamada says, and it must be earlier than he thought because he's not even dressed as Present Mic yet. "Oh, feeling like some tamago? You could have woke me up, you know, that's really easy to whip up."

27 shakes his head, even if it makes his head swim. ' *Not sick. Feel better.* '

27 sees that Yamada doesn't look convinced with that raised eyebrow and falling smile, so he turns around to prove it. Yamada doesn't prefer any specific coffee mug like Aizawa does, but he picks the 'Saturday' one to make Yamada a cup of coffee. One spoonful of sugar, and then Yamada adds creamer before he adds coffee, which seems weird to 27-

He drops it.

27 doesn't know why he doesn't move to fix it immediately, staring at the bottle of creamer spilling out onto the floor. He doesn't know if it's because he can't believe he did something that *stupid*, that *wasteful*, or if he just doesn't think he can stand up after he bends down to clean it up, but he forces himself to crouch down and put the bottle upright, even if he loses his balance and has to catch himself.

Maybe he can make Yamada think he just slipped.

"Hey, I'll get this, don't worry about it, Shinsou," Yamada says, crouching down beside him with some paper towels but 27 just shakes his head. He wasn't supposed to *drop it*, he was supposed to make breakfast for Yamada, and Yamada was supposed to think he was better, and Yamada liked it so much when Mirio cooked for him and he wanted to see that. "Hey, it's really okay! It was just an accident, and I really appreciate the little breakfast setup here! It's really nice, Shou never-you're not in trouble, you know?"

Yamada is too close, and whenever he's too close it feels too easy to fall into him. 27 doesn't know why, but he thinks about it a lot, just letting his head fall into Yamada's back or his shoulder and just resting there. It's weird, and 27 is weird enough, but he doesn't want to do it because Yamada will know that he's sick and exhausted if he does.

Yamada already thinks that he's crying for some weird reason, and even if 27 *is* crying, it should be easier to hide. He wipes at the corner of his eye, and he tries to take the paper towels but his hands are acting weird again and he can't even move them halfway before his arm falls back.

27 just tries not to fall from where he's crouched, even if it's tempting to fall sideways into Yamada. It's *stupid*. He could knock Yamada over, and that's worse than spilling his creamer and making a mess, it's basically attacking him.

"Here, let's get you to the table and then I'll take care of this," Yamada says, pulling 27 up to stand with his hands under 27's arm, and his hand pats his shoulder while he walks and nearly drags 27 to the table. "And then we can have breakfast together, just us! I can't wait to see what my little chef whipped up!"

He 'whipped up' two things, it's not even breakfast. Just tamago and coffee, he didn't even finish the oranges. He was going to try to make it look nice, to slice up the tamago and lay it down so that the slices are half-stacked on each other, to put the orange slices in some pattern that he hadn't

decided on yet. He wanted to make it look like Yamada made it, he wanted it to look nice even if it's pointless for food to look that way.

But he probably couldn't make it look as nice as Yamada makes it look. The slices of oranges are lined up in two circles, and the tamago slices form a smile. Yamada always gives him a mug that has a cat on it, and this one is waving its paw at him. Yamada always makes everything look nice, but 27 wanted to do it for once, and he *fucked up*. He couldn't even make breakfast.

He's not really hungry, but he'll eat before Yamada tells him to. He wants to see what Yamada thinks of the tamago, if he made it right this time.

Yamada already seems to think that it was made right, with how wide he's smiling and how happy he looks. "Shou told me the tamago you made last time was delicious! Can't wait to try it out myself, little listener!"

Yamada drinks his coffee, but 27 didn't even realize that he messed that up too. Yamada's eyes go a little too wide, like 27 *spit* in it or something, and he hopes that Yamada doesn't think that he did. He doesn't know what went wrong, but something did, even if it smelled right it didn't look right when it was dripping out.

"It's great!" Yamada says, smiling too wide, and 27 realized that he *really* didn't make it right. There are coffee grounds on Yamada's teeth. "And this tamago-" The roll starts to unravel at one of the places where it was rolled too loosely, and Yamada has to quickly put it in his mouth before it falls apart. And he chews it. For too long. Before he swallows. "Wow, that is tasty. It's kind of like a crepe, like a...tama-pe? Or a crep-o?"

27 lets his head fall on the table as he feels like everything that was keeping him upright falls out of him. He fucked up *breakfast*. He spilled the creamer, he didn't make anything right. He wouldn't be surprised if the oranges are bad just because he touched them.

Yamada should just throw it all away, he should throw *him* away too. He's so worthless, so useless, it's not even pathetic in a way that earns sympathy, it's *beyond* pathetic. He can't even lift his head anymore. "Okay, maybe that was pretty lame. I'll leave the clever names to you, little listener."

27 can't name anything. He'd probably mess that up too.

"Let's see, we've got a little time before Eri and Shou get back, and I don't think Mirio and the gang will mind if you catch a little more shut eye while they get here. It's almost time for your medicine-"

' *T-O-O-K*, ' 27 fingerspells, because he can do that without lifting his head. He doesn't think he should move it anymore, he's starting to feel dizzy even if he's not moving at all.

"Oh, let's try to get some food in you before we do that next time. Not super..." Yamada trails off, before he stands up and walks to the kitchen counter like something's wrong, like 27 messed up the *kitchen counter* somehow. "Did you use the little cup for the cough medicine? Like, the little one, not one of our cups..."

27 lets his head roll to the side so he can look at Yamada. He knows he *should* use the little plastic cup, and he always does it when someone is watching. But he hasn't been able to swallow against these coughing fits like he used to, and he didn't want anyone to know he was still sick at school. ' *Yes.* '

Yamada looks at the nearly empty bottle, and 27 realizes that he shouldn't have left that out. He

realizes he probably shouldn't have drank all of that, it's *medicine*, and medicine is hard to get for a person like him. It's probably hard to get for Yamada, he probably messed up and became more troublesome for him.

'*Maybe.*' He took two cups before he just drank from the bottle.

Yamada's eyes get too wide, before he puts down the bottle and starts walking over to 27, pulling him up to sit by his shoulders. "Okay, we need to get some food into you pretty quick to soak some of that up, it shouldn't- Shinsou, I *really* need you to not do that, I probably shouldn't have- we're going to take over the medicine thing from now on, okay kiddo?"

27 messed up *so bad*, and he feels like Deidoro's quirk is too strong right now. His head is spinning and it looks like Yamada is dancing in a spinning room when he knows he's just walking to get his phone. 27 knows he should move his hand, to eat something like Yamada told him to, but his hand won't move at all now.

"Shinsou, I really need you to-" Yamada stops, but 27 doesn't know what he does, his eyes are blinking weird, one at a time and too heavy, too hard to open them. He hears Yamada walk closer, but it's muffled. "Okay, open up for me? Say 'ah'?"

27 opens his eyes to see Yamada with his mouth open, holding a pair of chopsticks with a slice of tamago between them. He wants to tell him he can't say 'ah,' he can't say *anything*, and if he could he'd probably ask why Yamada is trying to feed him like this. He's not *Eri*.

"Shou has done this a few times, so I really need you to eat a bit, just," Yamada's face pinches up, he looks at the chopsticks before he runs his finger and thumb over his mustache. "Shinsou, can you eat for me? I know it's...hard, and this is weird, but please?"

It's weird. As weird as *everything* is right now, how it spins and how it feels, opening his mouth for Yamada feels *weird*. But Yamada looks so relieved, he sighs, and when 27 chews the tamago he actually smiles like he's happy.

27 has to chew slowly, he forgets what he's doing when he blinks too long, but he eats a few of the tamago that Yamada feeds him. He loses count and then loses the ability to count, just staring at a spinning room while he tries to remember how to swallow. "Okay, so let's get you to bed to sleep it off, and *not* do this again. As fun as it is being sick-"

"N' sick," 27 mumbles, his voice cracking when he does and he can feel the cracks in his throat where it hurts so bad. Yamada almost lets him fall forward, but he catches him with a hand on his shoulder to keep him upright.

"No, we're still a little sick, kiddo. I know it's not fun, but," Yamada stops talking for some reason, but 27 can't open his eyes to see what it is. "You know nothing bad is going to happen, right? You're at UA, and we're going to take care of you. We're going to fix you up and make it all better, alright?"

27 still can't open his eyes when Yamada moves him, pulls an arm that feels too big inside his skin to drape over Yamada's shoulders. Yamada has to nearly drag him with a hand on his wrist and around his ribs, 27 loses his feet too much, but he just wants to fall apart. He wants to fall into Yamada like he's fusing with him, so Yamada won't leave.

But when Yamada puts him back in his bed and pulls the blankets over him, he can't make his arm move to stop him from leaving. "Just get some shut-eye, Shinsou. We'll take care of everything else, alright?"

There's a hand on his chest, and he wants to grab it, to keep him there, but there's a darkness behind his eyelids that swallows him first.

*

Yuuyu and Shizuo used to crack jokes about how Mirio was starting to look like a 'new parent' when Eri first came to UA.

He knows it really wasn't that bad. He did find it harder to get up in the morning, and he knew that the under-eye circles could get pretty bad at times when Aizawa had a lot of patrols and Neji and Tamaki didn't offer to watch Eri for a few nights. He might have felt a little frazzled at times, and that wasn't all Eri. It was just hard to adjust from using his quirk every day to not having a quirk in the first place. He felt like he had enough energy to fry a power grid one day, then he felt completely drained the next.

Yamada and Aizawa have started to get that 'new parent' look since Shinsou came to UA, but he never saw Yamada have as bad as he did this morning. Yamada already seemed to have enough energy to fry a power grid, but when he was running through the medicine schedule and giving a half-tour that really wasn't needed, he seemed like he could fry *every* power grid in Japan.

But it seemed like the Big Three wouldn't have anything to do for a while, since Shinsou decided to take a lot of cough medicine and probably wouldn't be anything but comatose for most of the day. That should be a good thing, to play hooky from school with nothing really to do, but that's definitely not what Mirio wanted.

As much as Nejire didn't want to study for her fundamental classes, and as much as Tamaki probably didn't want to make her, Mirio didn't want to go another day wondering if Shinsou was okay.

He's not going to say that Yamada and Aizawa don't have it covered with Shinsou, because he knows there's no one better to take care of him. But Mirio doesn't see a lot of Shinsou, and the things that he does see don't look pretty.

Seeing Shinsou worked into such a deserved panic before he had to see Chisaki, seeing Shinsou after he locked himself in his room while he was mourning that '50' person. Seeing Shinsou after that last interview that rattled him bad enough for him to be a suicide risk, having all those nightmares and then seeing him shaking so bad with Midoriya under his quirk's control, threatening to *kill* Midoriya so he could run away from UA.

Mirio knows that Yamada and Aizawa are better suited to take care of Shinsou than he is, but Mirio can't help but want to find a way to be there more. Sometimes, he just wants to stop by just to see how things are, even if he knows it'd probably be a bother for his teachers. Sometimes, he just wants to see Shinsou, but it's different from the way he wants to see Eri. He likes spending time with Eri when he feels a bad day coming on, but he feels like he needs to see Shinsou just to make sure he's okay.

Tamaki just shoots him a look when Mirio takes a lot of 'bathroom trips,' but Nejire just laughs at him. Sure, he has the fever monitoring app so he doesn't really need to check Shinsou's forehead with the back of his hand, but he kind of has to. He can't just sit around waiting for lunch when they're supposed to get Shinsou to eat and take his medicine.

He's kind of avoiding his phone too, because Bubble Girl has been texting him a lot.

It was nice to talk to her yesterday, despite how much he had been dreading it. After the

presentation in homeroom, talking about how different quirks were vital to recon and support roles even if they weren't great at offense, she held him back and convinced him to show her to a good coffee shop.

It was nice, because he missed Bubble Girl. It was nice to tell those same inside jokes that no one else really knows. It was good to just *see* her and know that even if she's stressed out, she's doing okay. He knows he can always stop by the agency, and she made sure to tell him that.

He just doesn't feel ready for it. And it was kind of hard to tell her why.

It was harder to order a black coffee to go with five sugar packets, because he knew that she would know who it was for. He knew that she made that same order for years before he even came into the picture, and it was hard to let her see that.

He's not ready, and she saw that too. It was hard to admit it, but it's the truth. It probably worried her a lot, and it's clear with all the texting, but he's getting better at accepting truths like that and finding ways to deal with it. It's a lot easier to deal with it by finding something that doesn't make him feel so useless, to prove that even if he can't walk into the agency without breaking into tears when Sir Nighteye isn't there, he's still not *useless*. He's quirkless, but he's a hero. Heroes help, and that *helps*.

He doesn't really feel like sitting around studying Quirk Science is really helping anyone, so he's a little too excited when he hears a thud from Shinsou's room. He jumps up and nearly runs over there, and he makes it just in time to see Shinsou nearly falling out of the bed. "Whoops, not head-first! Let's try feet first next time!"

Shinsou just blinks at him, looking around the room while he lays him back on the bed. Shinsou is probably too messed up on the cough syrup to know where he is or who Mirio is, but when he looks at Nejire, he seems to think she's someone else. "Eri?"

Shinsou starts coughing, and Mirio starts rubbing his arm to hope it helps. Nejire's eyes widen, but she smiles with her hands clasped behind her back, waiting for Shinsou to realize that she's *not* Eri. But that doesn't seem to be happening when Shinsou settles down and just stares.

Tamaki tries to hide it, hiding in the hallway out of sight, but a snort comes out and makes Nejire whirl around to glare at him. They've *kind of* assumed that something like this was going on, just because Shinsou warmed up to Nejire in a *kind of* similar way. He pats her head and waves at her when she's throwing a fake fit, a lot like he does for Eri. Nejire might *act* like a five year old sometimes, but it's kind of a sore spot when someone calls her out on it.

And she definitely doesn't like that Shinsou is pretty much calling her a five year old without really meaning it. "Shin-Shin?"

Tamaki peeks in, but Mirio doesn't know what he looks so worried about. Mirio looks down at Shinsou to see if he's realizing where he is yet, but he starts to get worried when he sees Shinsou's face pinch up into tears. "Hey, Shinsou, what's wrong?"

Shinsou shakes his head, and Nejire drops to kneel beside the bed, stroking his purple hair before Mirio can stop and remind her not to. "Shin-Shin, what's wrong?"

"Forgot," Shinsou gasps, his voice sounds worse than it did at first and Mirio isn't sure if it's just because of the tears. "Wanted...y-you to, but..."

Mirio glances at Nejire, who still looks a lot like Eri for some reason. Sure, they both have long,

light colored hair and big eyes, but Nejire definitely looks different in *a lot* of ways. In a lot of *big* ways, not that Mirio really looks at that. He only knows her cup size because she complains about it a lot, but he's not going to be that gross kind of guy who would look at a friend that way.

But it would probably help Shinsou out if he could spot those differences, before Nejire starts to combust.

Nejire acts the way she does, she likes acting cute and looking cute too. But she doesn't want to be treated like she's a child, no matter what way she acts, and sometimes she gets mad when people don't get that. But Nejire is wicked smart in a lot of ways that people don't expect, and in a sigh she seems to just shrug it off. "Shin-Shin, I'm not gonna forget about you. You were always there for me, you know?"

Shinsou sniffs hard, trying to settle down, but his eyes are fixed on Nejire right now. She just strokes his hair and smiles, in that gentle way that can't be anything but soothing, that seems so different from any fit or pout she's ever thrown when she feels a little needy.

"I really couldn't have grown up to be the person I am without you, Shin-Shin," Nejire says, trying to play into whatever state of mind Shinsou's mixed up in thanks to the cough syrup, and not-so-subtly trying to remind him that she *is* pretty grown up. Even if she's still 'Eri,' she at least wants to be an older Eri.

Shinsou makes a half-sigh, half-squeak kind of sound when he nods, but before Mirio can ask Tamaki to get him something to drink, his eyes shut and the medicine seems to knock him out again.

And then Tamaki can really start laughing, and Nejire can really whirl around and wail on him for it. But Mirio's not going to leave this room again.

Not when he sees Shinsou's fever starting to climb.

*

27 feels *coldcoldcold*, it *hurts*, he swims in the cold and the dark and the hurt but he just wants to come up from it.

He does, he hears voices and he tries to grasp at them, he feels like he can breathe when he hears them. He can't hear the words, he doesn't *care* about the words, he just wants the voices to keep coming. He wants to *breathe*.

There's something *coldcoldcold* under his arms, his neck and his head, it should hurt but it doesn't, he can't even feel it when he feels warm fingertips on his head. "*Shinsou*."

Is that his name? Can he breathe if he answers to it? Can he feel warm if he isn't 27, if he can pull out that piece of The Miasma from his skin?

He can't move, not in this sea of cold and pain, but he tries. He can't speak, not in his sea of cold and pain, but he *tries*. 27 can't answer, he knows it gets colder and darker for longer if he does, but Shinsou is *supposed to*. He wants to be Shinsou.

He tries. It's a whine, it's a crack in his throat that leaks fire through his mouth, it *hurts burns hurts* but he doesn't know if it's enough. He feels his breath catch again in his chest, he feels like he'll cough, he's not sure if he swallowed the bleach but it burns all the same.

He knew it would hurt, he knew that Bug would hurt him eventually, every time he messed up.

He's supposed to be silent, he's supposed to have a mask. He's supposed to *obey* or something *badbadbad* will happen.

There are points of warmth on his skin, on his face, dragging bliss with them. It feels so *nice*, it doesn't hurt. He's not afraid, he's afraid it will stop and he'll drown. "*Shinsou, it'll be alright.*"

He wants to say 'I know.' He wants to say he believes that, he wants to make it real. He wants to say anything so that this bliss won't stop, this peace won't leave, he doesn't want to *drown*. He wants those voices not to *stop*. The words don't have to be words, he knows by the way that they're spoken that they're *kind*.

He can't open his eyes, but he can move his hand. He feels *hothothot*, like he's burning himself when he moves, he doesn't know where anything is in this dark, in this pain, but he knows one anchor and tries to grab it.

He has a hand under his hand, it's bigger, he knows it's strong. He knows what Rikiya's knuckles feel like, he knows 98's, but he knows this hand doesn't belong to either of them because even if it's big it feels soft. It brings bliss and he doesn't want it to stop, whines another crack in his throat when it does.

It keeps stroking, comfort and bliss, and he can open his eyes to blurs of color. A person, he can see that at least, he blinks to try to see but he only feels tears hot and flowing.

He feels hot, feels cold, feels tears down his back and on his hair but not under his arms where it feels *cold*, but he feels his breath catch in his throat and saliva behind his teeth before his stomach lurches. It feels too easy to twist to his side, and the sound that comes out of his mouth feels more solid than air, but it's not solid yet.

"Toilet, toilet!" someone calls, before they grab him under the arms and everything around him is a blur, he blinks with tile under his knees but his eyes squeeze tight before he can see the toilet that he grabs.

It's cold porcelain under his arms, *fire* through his throat and out of his mouth, warm bliss stroking his hair and that's where he wants to be as it goes on, as he feels like he *drowns*. His body lurches and heaves, shakes during and after, he wants it to end long before it does and once it does he wants it to *end* because his head has never hurt this bad. It splits and splinters, white agony, the hand tries to pull him up and a cracked sob escapes because it *hurts*.

He can't open his eyes because it's too bright, even behind his eyelids, but he knows what those hands want from him. A cup of water pressed to his lips, words tell him what to do but he barely hears them. He spits and wants to collapse, wants something cold enough to freeze him, but big hands hold him, try to make him sit up on his own, but he *can't*.

"Okay, let's get back to bed," he knows that voice, a name prickles in the back of his mind, but he doesn't need a name to trust it. Arms fold him up between them, under his back and under his knees, he should be able to hold his head up but he can't. He just hides his face in a chest to hide from the light.

He's sweating, sweating and shaking and weak, but when he's placed back on the bed, he whines without meaning to because he *doesn't* want the blankets over him again, he'll *die*. He'll get too hot and *die*.

But the person thinks it's something different, and it's better that way. They sit next to his legs and stroke his face, his hairline where the sweat gathers and runs. It's probably disgusting, but it feels

nice and he doesn't want it to stop. "Uh, do you guys think you can-"

"Yup!" a shrill voice says, too *loud*, and Shinsou screws his eyes as tight as he can to try to block out the sound. "Mama Mirio doesn't have to worry about a thing, alright?"

The person huffs and 27 goes still. *Mirio*. Mirio was touching him, Mirio had to deal with him. *Mirio* saw him puking and had to deal with that. "I just don't..."

The girl giggles, and Mirio sighs.

"Don't make the tea too hot, he should probably drink it pretty quick," Mirio mumbles, and it sounds more muffled at the end, like he's covering his mouth to stop talking. The girl laughs loudly, and he hears another snort from further away, and even if he doesn't open his eyes, he feels like he's alone with Mirio.

He feels coldhot in another way, because he likes this. He likes what Mirio is doing, tracing those lines over his forehead that don't make sense, but he knows he doesn't deserve it. He doesn't know why Mirio is still doing it, he doesn't have to. He *shouldn't*, not after what 27 did. What he said.

27 opens his eyes but tries not to open them too much, he wants to see Mirio but he doesn't want Mirio to see him. But he does, that worried look gets replaced with a smile, and it's almost too bright to look at. "Feeling a little better?"

Mirio asks that a lot. 'Feeling better?' 'Feeling better now?' He might never believe it, but 27 will never do that again. He'll never say things like that. He just wishes that he didn't in the first place.

27 tries to sit up when Neji and Tamaki come back in, but barely rises from the bed before he falls back. He feels like he's shaking too much after that, feels like he's shaking like he should be cold, but he's not, he doesn't even know whether he's hot or cold until Mirio puts an arm under his back and pulls him up.

He feels too *hot*, feels like Mirio is too hot, and he doesn't want to feel like he's sweating from his eyes when he thinks about that.

"It's *not* too hot, Mama Mirio. I checked it myself," Neji says when she hands over the mug, and 27 wishes that he could just lift his hands when Mirio takes it.

"Thank you, Auntie Neji," Mirio jokes, but Neji preens, and 27 doesn't know what to feel about it. If Neji is an aunt now, if she's a big sister like she said she wanted to be so many times. He knows Mirio *isn't* a mother, it feels weird to just think about it like that. Mirio is the farthest thing from his mother and it feels wrong to put those two words so close together. "Just a few slow sips at first, don't want to upset your stomach again."

"I brought some electrolyte drinks too," Tamaki says, but 27 barely hears it. The mug pressed against his lips seems too loud.

He drinks, and it doesn't taste any better when the ginger tea is hot instead of cold. But he drinks it because Mirio told him to, and he drinks it exactly like he told him to. He feels like he drinks more than it looks like he did before Mirio trades Tamaki for an electrolyte drink, but 27 is recovered enough to take it from him.

He's just too tired to open it, or really hold it upright, and Mirio starts to laugh at that when he opens it for him. "This will really do the trick. It's a good thing Tamaki's prepared for everything!"

It really does, after a few drinks 27 can hold it himself, and he could probably move further away

from Mirio but he doesn't. He knows he's stealing sympathy, stealing Mirio's warmth, but he can't even begin to feel guilty about it. Especially when he still feels cold.

Mirio is on his phone for a bit, but he puts it down and presses the back of his hand to Shinsou's forehead. "Doing better now, and that's good! Feeling a little more awake?"

Shinsou nods, his eyelids aren't heavy anymore. He doesn't want to move away from Mirio but he feels an itch under his skin to *move*, he feels like he's wasting away in this bed and he wants to leave it but he probably can't.

"Let's pull up a movie or something, it's a waste of time being sick if you're not watching a ton of TV in bed!" Mirio says, and it's a weird thing to say. 27 knows that being sick is a waste of time in different ways, it wastes other people's time and resources, it's expensive. But 27 isn't expensive, he's not sure what he is. What he's worth, but he doesn't want to ask. He doesn't think he'll like the answer, and sometimes wonders if the answer is more complicated now.

Mirio starts to get up, probably to get the TV because he looks like he could carry that big TV set into here easily, but Shinsou's hand moves when it shouldn't. It doesn't grab Mirio but it almost did, even if he didn't want those intentions, didn't communicate them. Even if he still means them, and Mirio seems to understand.

"On the laptop!" Mirio decides when he sits back down, and Neji hums when she skips over to the desk but she whines when Mirio takes it and settles himself and 27 against the wall.

"*Mirio*, you're hogging Shin-Shin!" Neji says with a stomp, and she's still too *loud*, and he's too grateful when Mirio pouts at her.

"Yup, I'm hogging Shinsou! We're going to watch some trash TV, so you guys can work on studying or something," Mirio says, and it's weird that he sounds too much like he's bragging. 27 has been a thing that people have, but no one has ever felt possessive over him like this. It's weird, and it's warm in his chest, almost warm enough to make him cough.

"It's almost time for lunch, so make sure he doesn't fall asleep," Tamaki says, and he drags Neji away with a tentacle from his arm when it looks like she was going to jump on top of Mirio to fight him for his spot.

"Yep, just gonna relax, but not too much," Mirio says, and he relaxes a lot. It's too easy to feel it with their arms pressed together in a place that's too warm.

He doesn't know why Mirio relaxes, why he should feel relaxed around 27. He knows what he did, and what he can do. He's seen Midoriya's eyes glazed over like that, he should be more aware of how dangerous 27 can be. Even if 27 can't be dangerous to him, he would *never* hurt Mirio or use his quirk on him, he has to know that he could. He can't trust that he wouldn't.

"Let's see, on Herotube... You like cats a lot, don'tcha?" Mirio says with a laugh, all the videos on the screen have pictures of cats like it will only show him what he's watched, instead of all the videos that he knows are on Herotube. "It's cute!"

It's not *cute*. Cats are cute. 27 doesn't look at cats the same way Eri does, he doesn't think that cats can protect anyone. They're just cute, with their wide eyes and soft toes, softer fur and unique personalities. Cats aren't like dogs, they'll never obey, and 27 envies that too much. They're impossible to fully tame and no one expects any different from them, unless they're wrong.

Chisaki would have never named him 'Cat,' but it would have been an honor if he did. If 27 could

have been able to meet his eyes just once in that compound. If he could have stopped their walk to The Chair and took Eri's hand, if he could have taken her away and damned the consequences, forgotten fear. If he could have been a better person.

If 27 could have been brave like that, just once, he could probably find it easier to look at Mirio right now instead of only feeling the warmth of his arm, ignoring that the arm is his.

"Whenever I'm sick, I like to watch a lot of reality TV, like Divorce Court or Dr. Ozimandys. It's a little weird, especially because I know it's all fake, but it's kind of entertaining in a rot-your-brain-out kind of way," Mirio says while he types, and the pictures for those videos have dramatic titles. 'Wife Wants House, 100,000 Yen Monthl...', 'Man Believes Child Isn't His Because Quirk...'

27 stares at the videos, waiting for Mirio to pick one. He doesn't care about which one he picks, they all look interesting. Even if it's fake, these problems look so normal. He's a little curious whether the judge is really going to get that angry at the man who hasn't had sex with his wife in five years.

"You can pick whatever we watch! We can definitely watch some cute cat videos too," Mirio says, scrolling around the page too quick to really see anything, his voice strained like there's something he's trying to hide. "Even if it really sucks to be sick sometimes, it's nice to kind of get to be King for a Day, you know? You can watch whatever you want to watch or eat whatever you want to eat. There's a ton of popsicles in the fridge, too!"

He doesn't really care about what he watches, or what he eats, and he's never had a popsicle before but it sounds hard to eat with how weak he feels. Being 'King for a Day' sounds exhausting, and despite how much it sounds like Mirio wants him to pick something to do, there's only one thing 27 wants.

He wants to feel like Mirio has forgiven him. Even if things feel so normal, they don't. Even if he doesn't see Mirio's face change to the pain he saw that night, it's still there. He still made Mirio hurt like that, made him realize how stupid 27 is.

He wants to close his eyes and imagine it didn't happen. He wants to close his eyes and fall asleep so he doesn't think about it. But Mirio doesn't want him to, so he can't, even if his headache is a dull throb it's still enough of an excuse to blink slower and focus on the warmth on his arm.

"You know, I really hope that Yamada is right about your quirk," Mirio says, his voice not strained or enthusiastic, just quiet. Just quiet, and it's too loud because of that, 27 feels it in his bones like it stings. "It really sucks to get sick like this, but maybe if it's just because your quirk is getting sorted out, it'll be a good thing. Maybe, it'll kind of feel like things at UA are less scary, you know?"

It wouldn't be a good thing, it would make things *more* scary. Aizawa was already worried, he called Quirk Thief to evaluate how dangerous his quirk could be, if they needed to use a mask. If he could control Yamada, they would probably use one. It might be padded, but it might be worse. It might be more than a mask, his door might be locked, they might turn out the lights and forget to feed him. They might not *forget*.

"It's not like I'm scared or anything, without my quirk," Mirio says with a laugh, and it's ridiculous that he thought 27 would think that. "It's just that... It does feel a little... wobbly. Like I've got to run with a leg tied behind my back. And it's easy for me, because I know that Tamaki and Neji are always there, pretty much all the time, but..."

Maybe Mirio should forget about only using Eri's quirk if it's born from happiness. It's not happiness when 27 uses it, but it would work. Mirio wouldn't feel like this, he wouldn't feel wobbly or incomplete. He'd definitely forgive 27 then.

"You can tell me if you're scared, you know," Mirio says, his voice high and strained, unnatural. He hates it, hates the way he feels those words under his skin. "It's probably really hard to do that, when it's not easy, but I don't want it to feel hard for any other reason. You can always talk to me, and I can... kind of be a hero like that...."

The words under his skin make him feel like he needs to *run*, the warmth is cold now. He doesn't know what Mirio wants to hear, what will make his voice return to normal, what can pull this feeling out of him. 27 thinks about lies first but they fade in front of the truth, what 27 *wants* to ask about. He wants to know if Mirio really means that.

He tugs on a corner of the laptop and Mirio easily moves it to his lap. He only needs the search bar, he knows what he wants to say is short. He's just not sure how to say it.

'I don'

'I'm not'

'I don't want you to think I'm a bad person.'

27 curls his fingers after he types it, Mirio's silence makes him cold. He should stop talking, *stop talking*, the mask isn't enough anymore and he just needs to *stop*.

He was never *good*. Not for Bug, not for his clients, not for Chisaki, and even if he tries he's not good here. He doesn't even know what that *means* here, he wishes it were easier. If he could be ignored more, if he could be alone. He wouldn't feel cold because of silence.

"I don't think you're a bad person," Mirio says, but it's quiet. It's not really Mirio, and that makes him cold. "You were really scared, and I know that. I knew you were really mixed up that night, and I don't think you were thinking like yourself. I don't think it was you."

'It was.' His hands feel hot and cold after, red singes before it burns to ash. That was his quirk, Mirio has never seen it, but 27 can *do that*. If they want him to get his quirk back so bad, they have to understand that's what it means. He just needs an answer and he can do *anything*, sometimes they don't even remember what happened.

"Nope," Mirio says, and it's startling how normal that sounds, how easy it is to believe because of that. "I don't believe it for a second, because if it was you? I'm pretty sure you'd make Midoriya make you some coffee or something. Or steal Todoroki's secret cat. And I definitely don't think you'd leave Eri like that. Not unless you were really scared that something bad was going to happen."

27 curls his hands because it's so *cold*, cold in his bones because it's *true*. Mirio shouldn't know him like this but he does, and 27 doesn't doubt that. Probably not the part about making him coffee or stealing that demon cat, but he knows he wouldn't leave Eri. That he didn't want to, but he had to. He had to live.

"And I think that a lot of bad stuff has happened," Mirio says, turning his head and 27 knows he's looking at 50. He's never met her, 27 hasn't told her about that picture and what it means, but he thinks they'd be so similar that if they met they'd practically melt into one person. "But nothing bad is going to happen at UA. I wouldn't let it. I won't let anything bad happen to you from now

on, Shinsou.... And it doesn't matter if you're a good or bad person."

It does. It's always mattered. Even if he wasn't a person, it mattered whether he was good or bad. Good at his job, bad at it, it *mattered*. It could cost him his life if he slipped up.

"But you're really an amazing person," Mirio says, his arm lifting away with its warmth only to come back warmer than before, around 27's shoulders and holding him close into a chest, almost too tight. "And I'm really glad that I get to be your friend."

Mirio...isn't really his friend.

Friends are strange here, friends are warm. Friends don't need things to be warm and that's odd, but Mirio isn't just *warm*. He's blisteringly hot, and 27 doesn't need to be this close to feel warm because of him. Being this close almost burns him, because Mirio isn't a *friend*.

Mirio is a hero, and he's more, he's things that 27 doesn't have words for and can't even describe. He's things that 27 doesn't want to describe because that would make them less powerful.

Mirio is powerful, in ways that 27 doesn't want him to lose. In ways that his quirk has nothing to do with. He was the light that came to the 8 Precepts for Eri, he was the man standing in that hallway staring down Chisaki, he was the red cape that 27 needed to remember.

Mirio is still warm, warm in a way that never grows cold, warm in a way that thaws his bones until his fingers feel too loose on the keyboard. 'This is weird, but can you call me Shinsou.'

"Shinsou," Mirio says, that light and normal way he talks, that half-laugh that he has when he's happy. "You don't want me to call you Shin-Shin?"

27 shakes his head. 'Not Shinny either. It's fine but Shinsou with you.'

Mirio pouts and sighs. "I get it, only *girls* can call you cute nicknames. Jeez, I see how it is, *Shinsou*."

Shinsou taps on a 'Cats Pouncing Into Boxes' compilation, shrugging, but he doesn't want to shrug off Mirio's arm, and he's glad Mirio knows that.

It's better if Mirio doesn't know what he means about the name either, because he doesn't want it to stop.

*

"Aw, it's so *cu-*" Mirio has to shush Nejire again because she was getting too loud, but she doesn't even pout because she's too busy taking pictures.

And it's kind of *stupidly cute*.

Shinsou actually ate a decent amount at lunch, and just a few more cat videos later, he was passed out on Mirio's shoulder. Nejire already heard about the story behind the Gengar, and wanted to have her own picture of Shinsou holding it, and figured it would be even better if he was cuddling with it while he was asleep.

That's when Nejire found out that Shinsou kind of has the cutest habit in the entire world. When he's asleep, he'll kind of grab onto anything.

Shinsou's arms are pretty stuffed with the Gengar and three cat plushies, but Nejire raided Eri's

room and now Shinsou is *surrounded*. Unicorns, teddy bears, a whole lot of cats and Mirio only remembers buying half of those. Shinsou definitely can't move without disturbing them, but with how sick he is, he's definitely not moving when he sleeps.

Yamada got pretty worried when Mirio told him that they had to use ice packs under Shinsou's arms because his fever got that severe, but Mirio and Tamaki have been trading off who has their eyes glued to the phone. There hasn't been a bad spike like that since, but after seeing how fast it came on, they can't risk being unaware for even a second.

Nejire sighs and stomps her feet, and Mirio has to shush her again, beginning to not feel bad for the reason why she's so frustrated right now. "Why'd Yuu-Yuu have to get sick? It's so hard to pick who's cuter to take care of!"

"Yuuyu said she can take care of herself, and besides, we might need you if Shinsou starts missing Eri," Tamaki says, staring at the phone but he still manages to dodge most of Nejire's fake punches.

"Tama *ki*, I'm super sexy! I'm not like Eri at all! I'm super grown up and you know it, you big-big *meanie!*" Nejire gives Tamaki a punch that isn't quite so fake, before she huffs and settles with another stomp. "I'm gonna play nurse with Yuu-yuu and we're going to have a lot of fun, and you're *not* invited to help out!"

Nejire storms off, and Tamaki *bravely* waits until she's gone before he rolls her eyes. "Neji might want to play nurse, but I'm pretty sure Yuuyu wants to play 'doctor.' And the sooner they can sort that out, the better."

Mirio tries not to laugh, but he's kind of right. Yuuyu is pretty obvious, and Nejire is pretty oblivious, but she still manages to be really *obvious*. They'd really be a cute couple once someone makes the first move, and someone should probably make it soon. Especially with graduation coming up for them.

It'd really be a shame if no one said anything, and the world went on without it. Without anything being said. Without anyone even trying to risk it. But it would probably be really awkward, because they have a great thing, but what if they don't after that? And it's probably scary to even think about it when they have no idea what's going to happen after graduation. There's a chance things will fall apart anyway, since hero work is so demanding, and Osaka is so far away.

"Yeah, maybe they'll get it worked out," Mirio says, laughing a little too much when he does. He glances over at Shinsou and almost hopes that he wakes up, but all he sees is Shinsou pulling the plushies a little tighter and making another sigh-kind of squeak. It's *kind of super cute*.

Tamaki looks at Shinsou too before he looks at the phone, but he starts pulling at the point of his ear. That's always been a sign that he's worried about something. A really kind of cute sign, but he hates when Mirio calls it that.

"You've been kinda quiet today," Mirio says, sprawling out on the floor so he winds up a little closer. Tamaki huffs and looks away, because he hasn't really been quiet. Just...away. And that comes off as a little quiet.

He'd just kind of been hoping that he was wrong about the reason that Tamaki seems like he's away, but another glance at Shinsou makes him worry that he's not. "I felt like you wanted to talk to him, about stuff that we don't really know about. And stuff that Aizawa-sensei and Yamada-sensei aren't really telling you."

Mirio lifts himself up on his elbows, because he *kind of* didn't want to get into that again. Tamaki might be able to manifest anything he eats, plant or animal or otherwise in an emergency, but Mirio sometimes wonders if he was raised on a bulldog's milk. He might wilt in front of attention, but there's a side of Tamaki that just digs its heels in if there's something worth defending.

But Mirio doesn't want Tamaki to dig his heels in and start growling at Yamada and Aizawa.

"You know they really can't, and you know I don't really want to know," Mirio says, because he's said it before. He's not involved with the investigation and he knows he shouldn't be, and honestly? He doesn't *want* to be. He knows it's bad, and he doesn't want to see it. He thinks it might be better for Shinsou that he doesn't know, so he can see Shinsou as he is and not how he was. Not what he's been through.

But there are some things he probably should have known. Like how Shinsou had been *sold*.

He doesn't even know how to feel about it, if he can ever really feel how horrible it is. How it's somehow worse because Shinsou *knew* he had been sold, and how it's definitely worse that he didn't seem to think it was wrong. That it was *normal*. Something so horrifying that Mirio can't really grasp it is *normal* to Shinsou.

Eri had a different kind of normal, but it was easier to see. She could be happy about how things weren't 'normal' to her, like getting treats or getting plushies, or getting to play games with him. But he's known that Shinsou is scared, even at UA, and he knows that he won't talk about what scares him, and that's what scares Mirio.

If Shinsou thinks that being sold is normal, he doesn't have a *clue* what could scare him.

"Mic-sensei pretty much said you're his hero," Tamaki says, and even if he knows Mirio doesn't want to talk about this, he knows that he can still talk about it if he plays with his hair. Tamaki always messes up the gel, but he always fixes it before he leaves, and Mirio kind of likes feeling his long fingers on his scalp too much to complain if he didn't. "I think he sees the sun."

Mirio tilts his head away without meaning to, because he knows Tamaki isn't talking about *The* sun. "I think he's just warming up to me a little! He probably knows I'm a big dork, and maybe Eri's talked me up a little bit."

Mirio doesn't want to be 'The Sun' for anyone, and definitely not Shinsou. He's not some crazy impressive guy who deserves it. He just wants to be someone to talk to, someone that Shinsou feels like he can talk to. He thinks that 'Mirio' would be way better for Shinsou than 'The Sun.'

And Tamaki pretty much points out the reason why, when he sighs and looks at Shinsou again.

"It's harder to be like that in front of someone that you admire," Tamaki says, his hand resting almost in front of his mouth where it's propped under his chin. While Mirio's stomach does an interesting little flip when his ear catches on 'admire,' when he almost takes it as something other than their usual competitiveness and *respect*, which is just a little bit different from 'admire.' He doesn't ignore what Tamaki's talking about.

The first time Tamaki had an anxiety attack in front of Mirio, he tried to end their friendship. He ignored him for three days until Mirio brought back all of the video games he borrowed and almost broke down into tears begging to know what was wrong. 'Nothing' turned into 'I don't want you to' turned into ' *Now you know I can't be a hero.* '

They both cried, until Mirio reared back and headbutted his best friend.

He's still not sure *why* he picked headbutting. Tamaki definitely doesn't know, and definitely didn't at the time. But it just seemed so *stupid* once he stopped thinking about how awful Tamaki must have felt to think that way, because even when some things get to be too much for Tamaki, he's still definitely a hero. Mirio told him that as long as he wanted to be a hero, he could be one, and that his anxiety was just another part of his hero training. They could learn how to manage it just like learning to use their quirks.

And he was right. Tamaki is going to get his fully fledged hero license soon, even though he said he still wants to work with Fat Gum after graduation as a sidekick. He wants to get more experience, get more confidence.

Sometimes, that sounds like Tamaki is holding himself back, waiting for Mirio to get his quirk back so all three of them can open their own agency like they've planned since last year. He knows if that were the case, Tamaki wouldn't tell him, because he'd know that Mirio would convince him not to. But he knows that Tamaki knows Mirio is going to live in Mustafu, somehow, and Osaka is pretty far away. If Tamaki was holding himself back to be with Mirio, he wouldn't be moving so far away.

"You know, I think you should hang out with Shinsou more often. You kind of get that kind of stuff better," Mirio says, but he gets a lean away from him and a tug to his hair instead of that nervous hunch, which he marks down as an improvement.

"I'm not that inspiring," Tamaki answers, but it's stupid enough to make Mirio want to headbutt him again.

"You *are*, Tamaki. Not just with the anxiety stuff, you're the most inspiring guy I know. And you know, Shinsou won't make you eat any flowers to show him how they grow," Mirio teases, but it was *so cute* to see Eri's little science side, her eyes so big and Tamaki's face so *red*.

Tamaki's face is just a little bit red before he sighs, and tugs at Mirio's hair a little harder before he leans towards and over him, and Mirio would be surprised if his own face wasn't a little more colorful at that. It's kind of stupid, but these kind of things that were normal are starting to feel very *not*. "You're way better with them. With kids. And it's...really cool."

Mirio is only barely thinking of that pause, wondering what Tamaki was going to say, because he's thinking of things that he probably shouldn't when Tamaki is this close. Things like his lips, or his eyes, or his blush, or how his hair is hanging down and giving the impression that he's getting *closer* and-

"THE BIG THREE WHEN YOU'RE IN NEED!" Yamada shouts, and a door that Mirio hadn't even heard open shuts after that, startling him into sitting up and almost knocking into Tamaki's head as he does. Yamada must have run to the door, grinning until his mouth drops open into a wider grin, despite the plushies that Mirio is starting to believe aren't *falling* to the ground as much as being shoved. "Looks like Nejire took some liberties."

Mirio looks to see Shinsou give up, collapsing face-first into the Gengar, his arm hanging off the bed next to a row of disturbed plushies. "She did, and she has pictures."

Yamada returns his thumbs up, but Mirio isn't totally surprised by the pitiful attempt to protest, what could have been a moody whine comes out as a painful and hoarse growl. But Yamada makes his way over to kneel next to Shinsou anyway, patting his shoulder before he starts mouthing, 'Has he been doing that?'

Mirio nods, cupping a hand beside his mouth before he realizes it's not necessary, mouthing back,

‘Talked a little. But he was still messed up on the syrup.’

Yamada nods, not as happy and hopeful as Mirio can’t help to be, but it is kind of hard to smile when you’re looking at a poor sick kid like Shinsou. “Well, tell Nejire that even if she doesn’t need the extra credit this late in the game, she kind of owes me after what she did to the studio. Because *I* need those pictures, and I won’t let her graduate until she sends them to me.”

“Will do!” Mirio agrees, and he’s sure that Nejire won’t have any problems with that. Even if she’ll try to pretend that she does. “Did 1-C give you too much trouble again?”

Yamada sighs, and Mirio already figured that was the case. “Three troubles, so they struck out and I dismissed them. I’ve really got to talk to Principal Nezu because this *has* to be my last year doing that class. But! That means that you guys are free to bounce, spend your babysitting money however you-”

“I don’t-” Mirio *tries* to say, because even if he hasn’t figured out the whole after-graduation-living-situation, he’s sure that he could *buy* a small house after Yamada forced him to take that check from him.

“You *do*, and there’s some hazard pay for the stomach upset in here too,” Yamada says, taking Mirio’s hand to force him to take the cash, before he hands two more wads to Tamaki. “I know it’s not fun, but I really do appreciate you guys doing this. And I appreciate Ectoplasm for not wringing my neck too. I really don’t know how me and Shou could have gotten this far without you guys.”

There’s another kind of flip, but it feels heavier when Yamada says that. When Mirio feels like he has to remind Tamaki that they’re supposed to be heading for the door now that Yamada is back to take over. “It’s really no problem, and really, anytime you need me is fine! I’m totally cool with skipping school, you know!”

“And we all know how much Mirio means to Eri and Shinsou,” Tamaki says, a hand on Mirio’s shoulder but his eyes are a little too focused on Yamada. Mirio can practically *hear* the bulldog growling, and he *really didn’t want to*.

“Of course! This is a Lemillion fan household, through and through,” Yamada says, and it’s hard to keep the smile on his face when Mirio hears that. It’s not a *bad* day, but it still stings a little inside, and tends to sting more as winter break and graduation loom closer. “You know you guys can stop by whenever you want, I can trust the Big Three to be a bit more responsible than those first year herolets.”

Mirio and Tamaki both tell Shinsou bye, but Mirio doesn’t think he’ll get more than that wave that was more like a hand rising and falling back down. Shinsou is *wiped* out, and hopefully this bug will get kicked soon.

Yamada walks them to the door, even if Mirio is pretty sure he doesn’t want to since Shinsou is feeling so bad, but he stops Mirio before he starts saying his goodbyes. “You know, things really have been crazy lately, and Midterms were crazy too, but you guys really can come whenever you want. You’ve got my number and all, and I’d never say no, you know?”

Mirio isn’t sure if he should take that ‘never say no’ at face value, but he’s tempted to. If something rough was going on with Shinsou, maybe it would help if he could try to be there during instead of just after. “Of course! Things have been crazy, but that just means me and Eri have a lot of catching up to do! Maybe that could free you guys up for a date night or something!”

Yamada laughs, a bit too long in a way that’s a little depressing, reminding Mirio that five jobs

probably doesn't leave a lot of room for date nights.

“Can you *imagine* trying to spruce Shou up into something that's ‘date night’ material? Kiddo, I lost that fight a long time ago. I'm just happy to have some family nights.” Yamada almost wilts like Tamaki does when he rubs the back of his neck, before he shrugs. “And, you know. You guys are invited to those too. Like my mother used to say, ‘If you come to this house, you're family.’”

Mirio feels like wilting at that, just to try to be smaller so he can understand the *big* thing that Yamada was talking about. Something that seemed too big to take on at first, but every text from Yamada that he answers as soon as he gets it seems to make it shrink a little more. Even if it makes all the texts from his father that he still barely answers seem bigger.

Yamada's dorm has always felt more ‘homey’ to Mirio than his own, and maybe a little more than Tamaki's which was basically his second home, and maybe there was a reason for that. Maybe it was something that he shouldn't run away from.

“We should do that,” Mirio says, and even if he says ‘we,’ he almost forgets that Tamaki is there until he feels a familiar hand on the back of his arm. “But I have to warn you, Tamaki is kind of a beast at Scrabble with all the Latin names for plants and stuff that he knows.”

Yamada just grins that kind of menacing smile that Mirio doesn't blame Tamaki for shrinking away from. “*Oh*. The Emperor of Scrabble is up for a challenge, little herolet.”

And there are so many reasons Mirio would love to see that go down, but it would probably take a lot of convincing for Tamaki to work up the courage to meet that challenge. Probably half as much courage as Mirio would need to show up if Nejire wasn't there.

If that ‘Family Night’ felt more like bringing his crush over to meet his dad.

Boiling The Frog

Chapter Summary

With Shouta and Eri away on dorm duty at 1-A's dorm, Yamada looks forward to a nice night in to take care of Shinsou, who seems pretty miserable with how sick he is at this point.

One of the one of the worst parts about a fever is when it breaks.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Forced retraumatization

Previously on Wards of UA: In the last chapter, the Big Three were watching Shinsou during the school day, and Amajiki and Mirio were in Shinsou's room as his fever had spiked severely in a matter of minutes on their watch. Shinsou sometimes refuses to eat, sometimes out of paranoia that what he's supposed to eat is poisoned, and it took several hours for Yamada and Aizawa to convince Shinsou to eat a bowl of soup on the first day that they learned Shinsou was sick. Shinsou has asked Mirio to call him 'Shinsou' instead of a nickname like Nejire or Eri do, because he wants to think of himself as 'Shinsou' instead of '27.' Shinsou has been wishing Yamada would stay home to take care of him, and Yamada has wanted to do that as well, but as Ectoplasm is the member of staff that is able to create a clone and cover his classes and has so far refused to do that, he's been unable to stay home. Chronostasis would torture Shinsou by forcing him into a bath treated with bleach and dunk him under by his hair. Chronostasis would also call Shinsou a 'Good Dog' while he used the bleach torture. Shinsou thinks of meeting 50 in a 'field of sunshine' if they could ever meet again now that she's dead, and gave Yamada the sign name 'Sunshine da,' which translates to 'Sunshine field' when taking the meaning of the name 'Yamada' which means 'rice field.' Another one of Shinsou's triggers related to the bleach torture is having his hair touched. Toshinori is also a member of staff who could take over Yamada's classes, but Toshinori had been faking a cold so that he could research previous holders of OFA, after Aizawa forbid Midoriya from training with his quirk until he saw a quirk specialist after Black Whip manifested at the Joint Training Exam. As Aizawa now knows about OFA, he's allowing Midoriya to train without seeing a quirk specialist. Yamada has promised Shinsou that he will stay at UA after the investigation, and is seriously considering adopting Shinsou, but Aizawa is not convinced of that course of action at all. Kayama (AKA Midnight) is an experienced wardship hero who has given advice to Yamada and Aizawa before concerning Shinsou.

Yamada is starting to think there was a reason that Amajiki and Mirio were camped out in Shinsou's room.

“Whatcha need, Shinsou?” Yamada asks while he rounds the counter to stop the teenager dragging

himself off the couch for the hundredth time. It took about 20 kitchen visits for Yamada to give up on the ‘bed’ part of ‘bedrest,’ but he’s starting to see the appeal of changing it from ‘couch rest’ to ‘sleeping bag rest’ just so he can zip him up and tear off the zipper tab.

Shinsou lifts his head but doesn’t quite meet his eyes, before he settles himself back on the couch in a huff. Shinsou definitely *wants* something, or maybe the fever is just making him feel a little restless, but Yamada would appreciate it if that energy could go towards finishing that smoothie.

Chiyo wasn’t happy to adjust the medicine schedule for Shinsou drinking several doses of cough medicine at once, but it was about time for a dose of the fever reducer, and Shinsou needed to have a full stomach to do that. Since the vomiting has gotten a little more frequent, Yamada is hoping having a more liquid diet might help the next upset go a little easier on Shinsou.

Yamada puts aside the papers he’s supposed to be grading when he glances at his phone to see that Shinsou’s fever is starting to slip into the red a little. He doesn’t need an ice pack under the arm yet, but that wicked fever spikes fast, and he doesn’t want to be caught unaware, so he walks over to put the back of his hand on a sweaty, hot forehead until it seems to inspire another wracking cough.

Yamada gets the smoothie and Shinsou shakes his head, nearly making the hero roll his eyes. “Shinsou, I really need you to drink just this much. Then we can take that fever reducer.” Shinsou turns on his side to look at the smoothie, but he doesn’t move to take it from Yamada, who is past the point of looking down on bribery. “C’mon kiddo, what do you want for it? A pair of my glasses? Make me wear that Existing Amplifier shirt again?”

Shinsou just sighs, and for all that coughing and how hoarse he sounds, it’s odd that his chest has sounded completely clear this entire time. No snotty noses either. *‘Head hurt.’*

Yamada runs his hand over Shinsou’s forehead again, and the cold compress still feels cold to him. “The fever reducer is going to help with that, but we need about five good sips of this smoothie to get to that.”

He tries to hand the smoothie over again, and gets a curled lip in response. He knows Shinsou *likes* this orange and banana blend, he said he liked it when he first started drinking it. Either this is some moodiness on the part of a sick and miserable teenager, or that next stomach upset might be telling him to stop filling up before it just spews out. Or it’s looking a little poisoned now, after half an hour has gone by since he last sipped on it.

“Want me to drink some?” A shake says ‘No.’ “Feeling some tummy troubles?” A glare and a head shake says ‘No, stop talking.’ “Okay, so it’s starting to look like we’re back to the soup thing. What can I do to make those five good sips go down a little easier?”

Shinsou looks up at the ceiling before he frowns, and Yamada *knows* there has to be something. As much as he knows that there *needs* to be something, something that he can get pretty quick to keep that fever from climbing higher, he knows that Shinsou wants something that he keeps trying to get up to get. *‘Say S-H-I-N-S-O-U 5 times. For 1.’*

Yamada absolutely, *does not care* that it doesn’t make sense. That little sip is the easiest thing in the world to get right now. “Shinsou, Shinsou, Shinsou, Shinsou, Shinsou.” Yamada handed over the smoothie, expecting a little smirk or a bit of smugness, but he just gets one good sip out of it before Shinsou hands it back. “And for sip number two?”

Shinsou gives the smoothie a withering look. As much as his little demand was easy to meet, it still seemed like drinking this smoothie was a monumental task. *‘3 times.’*

But maybe it was getting a little easier. “Shinsou, Shinsou, Shinsou,” Yamada says, handing the smoothie back for another sip. He shoots a glance at his phone to see that number still red, but it hasn’t gotten any higher. As simple as this was, it was getting a little tedious. “What about for two sips in a row? What do you want for that?”

Shinsou shoots him a miserable look, collapsing back on the arm of the couch. Yamada almost takes it back when it seems to be taking Shinsou longer to respond, but a glance at the kitchen and Shinsou’s arms moving to cross over his chest seems to promise that he’ll actually get to know what Shinsou has been wanting to get for hours. ‘*Chopstick.*’

It almost sounds ridiculous to Yamada, until he realizes it. Shinsou likes to take things from events that mean something to him, for control or to keep a memory of it. Yamada has never caught him doing it, didn’t have a clue that he did until Bakugo found the stash under his bed. But because he’s been trying to keep Shinsou on the couch so he can rest, he hasn’t been able to take that chopstick. A souvenir that he wants, maybe from making breakfast this morning. Maybe from when Yamada pretty much had to spoon feed him before he passed out after taking so much cough medicine.

It was honestly a little weird to feed a kid as old as Shinsou, but not as weird as he thought it would be. It also felt nice in a weird way, thinking that Shinsou might not have been cared for like this as much as he should have, and that Yamada could fill that void for him.

But when he hands the chopstick over and sees Shinsou take two sips of smoothie as promised, he just hopes that it isn’t ‘control’ over that moment. That maybe, Shinsou could feel a little bit of the same way too. “One more, just need one more sip. Anything you want, little listener!”

Shinsou doesn’t hand back the smoothie, but he looks at it for a while, glancing up at Yamada from time to time. As easy as his little requests were to fulfill, he wouldn’t mind if Shinsou wanted to give up on this game either. But when Shinsou honestly asked for so little, he had to admit that this game was fun to play for Yamada too, in a way. ‘*Stay.*’

Shinsou doesn’t look at him when he sign-whispers ‘Tomorrow,’ and afterwards he drinks the smoothie anyway. And as much as Yamada has dedicated himself to nearly *torturing* Ectoplasm today to try to fulfill that little request already, he only has another reason to redouble his efforts. “Well, a promise is a promise. I’m going to get to work on making that happen, little listener, so you can spend all day tomorrow getting pestered by your favorite Existing Amplifier!”

Shinsou takes his medicine with no complaint, but winces once he settles back down on the couch, despite Yamada trying to turn down the lights and offering the chilled eyemask that Shinsou refuses. Yamada only makes it halfway back to the kitchen table where he intends to send some rather unprofessional emails and texts on his mission to stay home tomorrow, but sees a very exhausted teenager start to drag himself off the couch to follow.

“Okay, let’s start on that pestering right now so you can be sure to get sick of it,” Yamada says, even if he can’t pull the grin off his face when he thinks of something ridiculous. Maybe this whiny, moody teenager was pulling some toddler antics to get attention, as much as he was trying to get that chopstick for his collection. Running away from the couch ‘time out’ just to get scolded, which was exactly what he wanted in the first place.

Shinsou shakes his head again at the offer of pulling up some videos on his laptop or turning on the TV, and with the headache, that’s pretty understandable. But as much as Yamada didn’t want to make any calls so Shinsou wouldn’t overhear some things that might come across as threats - and they were - he didn’t want him to peek over and see those things in texts.

Yamada sits down next to the couch, phone in one hand but the other is propped up on the armrest

next to the sullen, miserable kid's head. It might be a little reckless, because he knows that Shinsou is making progress but not totally there on the 'touching' thing, but he thinks it might be worth a shot anyway. "There's this tapping thing that my mom used to do when I felt this cruddy, but stop me if it's not helping. Just close your eyes, and we'll see if this helps."

Shinsou does close his eyes, even if he opens them as soon as Yamada's fingertips start dancing on his forehead. It's hard to tell what the right pressure is, whether it's too soft or too hard, and it always feels better with his mom because she has longer fingernails. But when Yamada moves over to his temples, Shinsou sighs and the tension seems to flow out of him, melting into the couch.

Yamada can't help the pull in his chest, thinking that Shinsou might actually like this.

Shinsou has reasons to not like being touched. There are scars that were wounds all over him, and there are far more wounds that didn't scar that Yamada is sure are still there. It's easy to forget, even when it's written right on Shinsou's face with those symmetrical scars from a mask, but Shinsou has known far more pain from other people than he's ever known love or care. And being touched makes him vulnerable, it makes flinching an inherent response.

But Shinsou is trying, and it looks like he's trusting more and more. Yamada knows that shoulders are safe as long as he's gentle, and it seems like Shinsou might tolerate a hair treatment as long as it's his idea. He knows that it takes time to fight something instinctive, something that Shinsou has known for years or his entire life, and he's terrified to set back even this much. To give Shinsou a reason to stop reaching out like this.

He wants Shinsou to trust him, even if he knows it's hard. Even if he knows he really *doesn't* know how hard it is, he can't imagine it because he's not Shinsou and because he doesn't know half of what he's been through. But the purple haired teenager on his couch with a flushed face and frown from a headache is trusting him this far, even if Yamada still can't bring himself to ask how far that trust goes.

'Sunshine da' can mean a lot of things, and the things that Yamada wants them to mean also mean a lot of trust. A lot of love, even if Yamada still thinks that he's already ready to give it.

Shinsou's eyes screw up tighter, a flare up from that headache hitting him hard, and it seems to just be building as his face twists in pain, a hoarse whimper making it worse. Yamada puts a hand to cover his eyes without thinking about it, just knowing how bad it can get for Shouta, but Shinsou's hands coming up to press hard at his temples seems to indicate that it's getting worse. His skin growing paler as he starts holding his breath pulls at Yamada's chest in a different way, in a harder one. "Shinsou, it's okay."

Yamada whispers that, even if he knows it doesn't do any good, he just feels like saying that might do something, but it doesn't. He doesn't need to hear the thermometer app chiming at him to remind him how serious this is.

"Okay, I'm getting the stronger reducer, stay here," Yamada says, pulling himself away in a panic that almost makes him forget what to do. He grabs the ice packs too because it spikes fast, that chime is the warning that it's bad but there's another that he doesn't want to hear that means it's *worse*.

He pours the liquid fever reducer with shaking hands that he has to convince not to shake when he slides an arm under Shinsou's shoulders to lift him up. He mutters as softly as he can that Shinsou needs to drink it, watching Shinsou's hands cover his eyes with curled fingers, his legs twisting and thrashing, but he drinks it between pained whines. A migraine this bad worries him, he knows that might be a hospital trip in itself if it doesn't calm down, but he puts the ice packs under Shinsou's

arms, having to pull his tensed arms away from him at the elbow to do that.

Yamada runs a hand over Shinsou's forehead even if he knows it doesn't help, but the sight of this kid twisting in pain is too much to deal with without a distraction, without the illusion of helping him. He wants to pull the kid into his arms, hold him too tight to thrash around like that'd help *at all*, and hates this useless tension that pulls tighter the longer it goes on. Shinsou doesn't *act* like this, the sob when he turns to press his face into the cushion and curl into himself before he thrashes away from it *breaks* Yamada's heart to hear it.

The chime that he hears between Shinsou's loud, broken gasps nearly makes his heart stop completely.

"Shinsou, it's okay," Yamada mutters, even if this is really, *really* not. He slides his arms under Shinsou's shoulders and knees to lift him off the couch, knowing he's in no state to walk himself to where they're going. Yamada hates that with every gasp and whine that goes quiet, he hopes that Shinsou might pass out. It's surprising that he hasn't, yet, but Yamada doesn't look down to see if Shinsou looks like he has any idea where he is right now.

He wants that flashing number on Shinsou's monitoring bracelet to go down more than anything, but he'll settle for Shinsou being so out of it that he doesn't remember this.

With Shinsou's fever so severe, he should have been taken to a hospital, but Chiyo wrote a treatment plan that included some of the steps that would have been taken by medical professionals. The ice packs under Shinsou's arms can lower his fever through his femoral arteries, it should cool down his temperature quicker than anything, but it's not working this time. If that number doesn't budge in five minutes, if they can't disperse the heat building up, Shinsou will be at a greater risk of brain damage.

Yamada can't afford to just wait for those five minutes, so he sets Shinsou on the bathroom floor, leaning against the wall, before he starts pulling at the hem of Shinsou's hoodie. Maybe direct contact can do the trick, maybe he won't have to take that last step.

Shinsou's hands fall from his head to clench on the bottom of his hoodie, pulling it down as hard as he can with his shaking arms. He shakes his head, eyes still unfocused and glassy, and that's what Yamada *didn't* want to see. He didn't want Shinsou to be delirious but still *think* he knew where he was, where he absolutely *wasn't* anymore.

But those hiccuping whimpers, the pure terror forcing Shinsou to move and fight despite the pain, gives Yamada a deeper level of hatred for that bastard Chronostasis, even if he hated him plenty before this. He's just never seen what he did to Shinsou like this before, forced to realize that the bleach torture meant that Shinsou's clothes were taken off. He wants to run right over to Tartarus to make that bastard pay for it, but he can't let the rage or pain even break over his face or voice in front of Shinsou. "Shinsou, look at me. It's Yamada, you're at UA. I need to take your shirt off and put these ice packs under your arms."

Yamada tugs, and he knows he could overpower Shinsou with the way his elbows buckle, but a garbled whine that sounds like 'No' stops him. It nearly breaks him because he *can't* do this to Shinsou. He's done enough already, standing by while The Commission put him in the same room as Chisaki, not even being there when they used a quirk to force him to talk.

He can't *do* something like this to Shinsou, to force him to relive that pain while he's still so vulnerable. Even if not doing it will kill him. "We'll take it off together, okay? You hold on, and I'll lift. Just the shirt, okay? I'm only going to take off the shirt."

Shinsou's fingers twist, and he curls into himself, but he doesn't fight or argue. Yamada lifts the hoodie over Shinsou's head and works his arms through the sleeves, then puts the ice packs under his arms to earn a hiss.

"Hold that, okay? Hold it tight," Yamada says, holding Shinsou's arms to his chest himself, and he stares at the phone that he dropped on the floor. He just needs a blip in the right direction, just a sign, just an *excuse* if he's honest. Shinsou's head falling forward onto his shoulder precedes a tenth of a degree in the wrong direction, and Yamada feels himself drenched in a numb chill.

God *fucking dammit*, it's not enough.

"Okay. Shinsou, it's okay," Yamada whispers, working off of a plan from his worst nightmares. He tries not to move Shinsou when he leans to pull the internal stopper in the bathtub into place, and the shudder that he feels run through Shinsou when he starts the water reminds him how he has to make it different. He doesn't even *know* how to make it different, he only knows pieces of what Chronostasis did, but he knows enough to throw three bath bombs and an entire open bottle of bubble bath mix into the bathtub in hopes that he can prove it's different enough. That at least it won't smell anything like bleach.

Shinsou is shaking. Hiccupping sobs that he can't see from where the kid has his face pressed to Yamada's shoulder, tells him it's not enough. He runs a hand down Shinsou's back to an expected flinch, but he swallows the guilt at that, how useless he feels because there's nothing else he can *do*.

He can't make that number go down.

He pulls away to pull Shinsou up to look at him with a hand on his forehead. The apparent agony on his face, in his tears, is hard enough to look at without seeing Shinsou biting his lips with too wide eyes, trying to hide it.

"Shinsou, I need you to tell me how to make it different," Yamada says, because he knows this isn't enough. Shinsou is hurting, he *hates* that he has to hurt him like this, and he almost wishes that Shinsou could pass out so he wouldn't remember it. That he wouldn't really be there for it. "You can smell the bath bombs, it's not-it's not there, you're at UA. Should I talk? Will that help if you can hear my voice?"

There's a long blink where Shinsou droops, his eyes close, but Yamada feels a hand trying to pull at his shirt. He sees Shinsou's eyes open to slide in and out of focus, knows that Shinsou is in no place to answer him, but then he hears it in the hoarse whine that escapes Shinsou's throat. "Talk."

"Okay, I'm going to keep talking. You know my voice, right? All whiny and annoying, everyone loves it, and I can talk for hours. I get paid to do that, you know? At school, on the radio, I just get paid to blabber on and on about everything," Yamada says, even if the words catch in his throat when he looks at the phone one last time, for one last chance, before he turns off the water and takes Shinsou into his arms again. "So, we're going in, I'm going to put you in the water and it's going to be just a little cold, keep those ice packs under your arms for me."

One pack slips out and falls into the water. Shinsou turns his face into his chest and his shaking hand holds tight to the collar of Yamada's shirt, and there are so many reasons he doesn't want to set Shinsou down, but knowing how scared he is and how weak he is despite the fight makes it harder.

"That's okay, I'll get that in just a bit. Just going to set you down. I think there's a lot of cherry blossom scents, I didn't check them, I just threw them in." Shinsou tries to kick away when he

feels the water on his back, but Yamada lets his arms get soaked while he slowly lowers Shinsou into the tub. “It’s really floral, I honestly don’t know how many smells we have working here. Maybe you can help me pick them out.”

Shinsou clings to the collar of his shirt, shaking his head. His legs are in the tub and Yamada knows he’s only holding himself up by where he’s clinging to Yamada, despite how weak he is. He knows that if Shinsou had an ounce of strength left in him, he’d fight this, he’d probably fight Yamada to escape, and Yamada wouldn’t blame him. Another gasping sob rends Yamada’s heart to pieces, before he moves his arm up to Shinsou’s shoulders and leans himself over the tub to take the choice from Shinsou’s hands.

When the water reaches Shinsou’s shoulders, the hands holding the collar of his shirt fly to Yamada’s hand resting on the tub. The tear filled eyes are too wide, too clear right now, and a silent plea in those hands holding him down with what little strength Shinsou has rips him apart for a different reason. “Yeah, I’m not moving this hand. You’re in control, I’m not going to-not going to touch you after I let go. And I’m letting go, okay?”

The bottom half of Shinsou’s face bobs under the surface for a moment, but before the water reaches his nose, Shinsou pulls himself up. Yamada doesn’t really know if he can hold himself above the water, knows that he probably shouldn’t have filled the tub that far, but he refuses to look away from those violet eyes still unblinking, refuses to offer anything but a shaky smile. He hopes it looks calm, it looks confident. It looks like a hero’s smile even if it’s not.

“Okay, we’re in,” Yamada says, pulling his hand to rest beside the other, then tucking it under when it seems like Shinsou can’t move his hands to trap them both. “You’re doing good-” Shinsou shakes his head, a whine bubbling in his throat and his face pinches from one pitch of terror to a deeper one. “Okay, I’ve got it. Not going to say that. We’re here, okay? We’re doing- we’re going to take some deep breaths. Smell how it’s- how it smells. There’s cherry blossom, right? A bunch of flowers, like we’re just in a field of flowers.”

Shinsou’s hair floats in the water like a purple halo, disturbed every time that he tries to pull himself up, and tries to fight it. He’s too weak for it, and Yamada knows he should have a hand under his back to keep him above the water, but he doesn’t want that hand to feel like it’s reaching for his hair. “S...su....”

Shinsou’s voice is so hoarse, it’s hardly more than an exhale, but Yamada knows how to read lips even if they barely move. “A field of sunshine, right,” Yamada says, and nearly collapses with the weight of that. Knowing that Shinsou knows where he is, that he knows who Yamada is. He still doesn’t know what that name means to him, or if he’ll still have it after this. “It’s a really nice picture, isn’t it? A field of sunshine, feeling that warm and that bright. Maybe a field of sunflowers. We could go to one of those places that are just fields full of flowers, take a lot of pictures there. We’ll take pictures, and we’ll go places. Even if the world seems small at UA, I promise it’s bigger. I promise I’ll show you.”

The fingers on top of his hands tighten and Shinsou’s jaw clenches as his eyes close tight. Yamada knows he’s in pain, and he’s terrified, and it only makes it more terrifying because he can’t see.

“There’s a lot you haven’t seen, and I’m going to show you all of it. Like Disney World, like-like everything. Cat cafes, I’m pretty sure you’ve never been to a cat cafe. A whole gaggle of cats in one place, and you can pet as many as you want. Shou used to go to them all the time, we just haven’t had a lot of time lately. We’ll have all the time in the world when this is over, and I promise-I promise you’re staying. You’re going to be here for it, and it’s going to be so much better, okay?”

Yamada has to look at the monitoring bracelet when Shinsou's face breaks in another pained gasp. This severe migraine, this unbreaking fever, he knows that the kid needs a hospital but they've tried to *kill* him in a hospital, right after the raid. After everything that Shinsou has gone through, he can't let him *die*.

"Look, Shinsou," Yamada says, and Shinsou hiccups another gasp and twists his legs. His eyes are still closed, Yamada knows he's in pain and he probably barely knows where he is through the pain and the fever. "I need you to tilt back your head. Like this, get your forehead wet. It-it'll help."

Yamada doesn't know if it will, if getting Shinsou's head wet will lower this fever. He just can't sit there and watch that number still screaming at him, can't feel this tension like a rubber band pulled too tight. This is so fucking *dangerous* and there's not a thing the fucking Voice Hero himself can do about it.

"Shinsou," Yamada says, and Shinsou opens his eyes, but barely. Tears still streaming out of the corners of his eyes, but they seem focused. "Just tilt back your head like this, I promise it's different. I promise nothing is going to happen, I promise, okay? I promise."

Shinsou just stares, teeth gritted tight and bared, watching Yamada tilt his head back and he doesn't want to *make* Shinsou tilt his head back into the water. He doesn't want to move his hands from where Shinsou is holding them down. He remembers the way the clumps of bleach damaged hair were knotted together in the back, that someone had grabbed Shinsou's hair in a fist to pull him under. He knows there's probably a reason that Shinsou hasn't sunk into the water that far, even if he's shaking from the effort of holding himself upright.

"It's different, I promise it's different. I promise- I promise you that I *hate* this, I don't want..." Yamada sucks in a breath, he knows he can't stop talking, he has to talk for Shinsou. "I want to keep you safe, kiddo. I want to take care of you, I want to make it different for you. I want to show you everything, so *please*. Just trust me. Trust 'Sunshine da.'"

The fingers on his hands curl tighter, fingernails biting into the back of Yamada's knuckles, but Shinsou *does it*. Slowly, he watches the kid shakily tilt back his head, eyes wide and locked on Yamada, and once the water reaches his hairline he snaps back up. But Yamada hopes it's enough, he *hopes*.

"Great, that's perfect, that's go- great. You did it, that helped. It's going to be okay, Shinsou," Yamada says, and he wants nothing more than to cover Shinsou's hands with one of his own, to hold the kid in this way if nothing else, but he can't afford to take away that illusion of control. He looks down to see just a degree changing in the right direction, and he breathes out a heavy sigh of relief. "It's going to be okay."

"Te..." Shinsou's voice is just a hoarse whisper, but Yamada looks to see his eyes roll into the back of his head before his body relaxes too much. Yamada doesn't even think before his hand is in the water, holding Shinsou's head up by the back of his skull, but he adjusts his grip to the back of his neck quickly.

"Shinsou, it's going to be alright," Yamada whispers, more for his own sake at this point because he knows Shinsou can't hear him. He feels the panic rising when the number on his bracelet does, and stupidly looks away because he just can't *see* this. "Shinsou, everything is over. You got out, you got out of Miasma and you got out of the 8 Precepts. You never should have had to go through all of that, but you *did*, don't fucking- you're going to beat this. Whatever happened, whatever is going on with your quirk. You're going to- you're going to tell me about it, okay? We're going to get through this."

He sees Shinsou's teeth baring again before a hoarse scream breaks through, the water spilling while his legs kick and thrash. Shinsou's eyes close tighter, his hands moving to hold onto his temples while his arms shake violently with the effort.

"That's okay, you can scream, you can shout, it's okay, just don't- don't *fucking* go, okay? It's okay, I promise it's okay," Yamada says, his thumb tracing circles on Shinsou's scalp that he wishes could *fucking help*. The monitor bracelet is screaming in an alarm, Shinsou's screams are completely *silent*, just hoarse breaths that drag out too long. "We're going to be okay, it's okay, we're going to be okay-"

Yamada doesn't even hear Shouta come in, just feels a hand on his shoulder before he looks up to see his husband's panicked expression. Despite what Recovery Girl said, that using Erasure could result in the same thing that this fever would, it could give Shinsou brain damage, he just wants this pain to *stop*.

And it *does*.

Shinsou's arms drop to the sides of the tub, his breathing too quick but the lines on his face are easing as the pain seems to recede. The shaking returns, but it seems more like Shinsou is too worn out to shake, more like twitches that still afterwards.

Shinsou's head turns to the side, and Yamada catches the side of his face to keep him from slipping under the water, his eyes moving under his eyelids. Yamada looks at his phone with the monitoring bracelet out of sight, seeing red drop to orange in a blink.

Shinsou lets out a breathy gasp that sounds like 'Ten,' his eyes still unfocused. Yamada waits, staring at the phone, before he realizes he can't just leave Shinsou in the bathtub in case the fever spikes again. He needs fluids, he needs so much care and they can't *fucking* give him half of it, but he needs Shinsou to pull through regardless. He needs to give him the best shot at that.

"Eraserhead, help me with the IV," Recovery Girl says, and Yamada didn't hear her come through the door either but he's so *fucking grateful*. "Present Mic, we need to get him out of there. Dry him off, bring him to his bedroom. We can't risk that fever slipping lower than his body can handle."

Yamada gets soaked as he pulls the teenager out of the bathtub, realizing he hadn't even set out a towel until Shouta hands him one. He pulls the remaining ice pack from under Shinsou's arm and throws it into the tub, leaning the kid against his chest while he works the towel gently over his hair and back. "See? We got through that, let's not have another one. Just going to dry you off, put you back into bed. Just relax, Shinsou, we'll take care of you."

He doesn't bother with Shinsou's soaked pants and doesn't care about the water dripping on the carpet. He still holds Shinsou close to his chest when he sits on the bed, Shouta taking over the change of clothes before Recovery Girl inserts an IV into Shinsou's arm. Once Recovery Girl is done, she looks up at Shinsou with a worried pinch between her eyebrows. "Is he conscious?"

"Te..." Shinsou breathes out with a gasp, and Yamada can see his eyes are open, fixed on Recovery Girl, but he still doesn't seem to have the strength to hold himself up. "Hel... Ten...."

"Looking a little more alive," Yamada says, something that he thought was funny before he said it. He finds himself brushing a hand over Shinsou's hair before he realizes it, pulling away hoping that Shinsou didn't realize it either. "What do we need to do, Chiyo? I forgot- yeah, I can't really remember right now."

Shouta's hand on his shoulder reminds him to breathe, and he needed one. He feels like breaking

apart at the seams, but he needs Shouta's steady presence to keep him from that. Chiyo probably sees that, because she just tells him instead of reprimanding him. "Fluids, and rest. He's in no state for an evaluation, but the fever is beginning to break again. If it climbs again, I'm calling an ambulance, and there's not a thing you can do to stop me."

Yamada can't find the strength to fight her on that, even if the fear coils deeper inside his gut. He just hopes it *doesn't*, knows that it shouldn't be anything like this if Shinsou was developing his quirk again after Rewind messed it up. Developing Emitter quirks could have fevers but not ones this *dangerous*. "Okay, IV is doing some fluids. Don't think we're in any state to start running off the couch again, right listener?"

Yamada lifts Shinsou up to settle him on the bed, trying to be careful of the IV, but a hand catching the collar of his shirt stops him from pulling away. Clear violet eyes are staring at him, even if that mouth only offers shaking pants.

"And, of course, constant supervision," Chiyo adds, raising an eyebrow with a half smile. "I think I and Shinsou both would rest easier knowing that you were at his side, Yamada."

And Yamada really can't argue with that, especially with a bit of inspiration taking hold. "Yep, doctor's orders, I definitely can't afford to be away from this little listener for even a second! Not until this nasty fever works itself out, right?"

Yamada pulls the blankets around Shinsou and sits down before he takes the hand from his shirt, putting it on Shinsou's chest just to pat it reassuringly, a promise that he's going to keep with or without Chiyo's help.

"And since it's doctor's orders and all, maybe you can help me work things out with Ectoplasm so I can stay home with Shinsou tomorrow? And the day after, just until we get this bug kicked, right?" Yamada asks, and while he's reassured by a pinched frown that would become a very irritated sigh and perhaps even a tirade about how Ectoplasm was being an unreasonable little shit who *sucked* at karaoke, but Shouta surprises him.

"Toshinori is better, and he can take over your classes. I'll work things out with him," Shouta says, but that hand curling around the back of his neck says something else. "Thank you for keeping an eye on Shinsou's fever readings, Chiyo."

Chiyo definitely catches something that she's not happy about, but she directs a withering look at the IV before she turns to leave. "I'll still be watching the readings, and I will call an ambulance immediately if necessary."

While Shouta walks Chiyo to the door, Yamada fights the urge to run a hand over Shinsou's hair again, settling for pulling off the wet cold compress on his forehead before resting a hand on the teenager's chest. "See? You're going to have to deal with me all day tomorrow, and every day until we get this fever kicked. So you might as well catch up on some rest, because you'll definitely need it to put up with me."

Shinsou sighs, his eyelids getting heavier, but he still seems to fight sleep. "Stay."

Yamada smiles, even if that word was little more than air the way it was spoken. Even if Shinsou has spoken to him before in bouts of delirium or panic, he can't help but hope that this one means even more than that. "Of course I'm going to stay. I'll be right here when you wake up, and you're going to be waking up here for a long time. We're both going to stay, right here."

He knows it doesn't really make sense the way he says it, but he doubts that Shinsou hears half of

it before he falls asleep. Shouta comes back into the room with a stern look that might imply he *did* hear some of that, but Yamada's not going to listen to any of that right now.

"Toshinori's fine now, is he?" Yamada asks, careful not to get too loud, and he finds it harder to do that when he sees Shouta glance to the side with that hand curling behind his head again. "He got over that cold pretty quick."

"He was trying to figure out the complications with the Problem Child's quirk," Shouta says, but there's a lot he's not saying with that, and Yamada knows he can't really hear any of it. Not when he could have been home *all day today* if Toshinori wasn't trying to play hooky. "I'll take care of that. Is there anything else you need?"

Yamada doesn't care if it embarrasses a blush onto Shouta's face, but he puckers his lips in invitation for something that he *definitely* needs right now. A kiss from his husband, strong hands framing his face and making him melt in a way that almost makes him forget about the unconscious teenager in the room. Yamada sighs when he presses his forehead against Shouta's. "I miss you."

Shouta's nod, his fingers stroking into his hairline is enough of an answer that he does too. "Eri is becoming part of the Class 1-A pack. I think it helps her to not miss Shinsou, but.... *hopefully* nothing bad will happen from it."

Yamada can't help but laugh, just imagining what could happen if a gaggle of herolets were left to raise a 5 year old child. Sure, he could trust that Yaoyorozu and Iida would keep things from getting too out of line, but he's sure that Eri has already been floated by Uraraka as many times as she's asked to be. "I hope we kick this soon. Have my family back under one roof."

Shouta pulls away a bit with a sigh, but Yamada shoots him a look not to say anything. He already knows what Shouta wants to say, but he's not going to hear it right now. He doesn't have the strength to get into it. "I'll bring the electrolyte drinks, and your phone. I needed to get more things for Eri to wear."

"Shou," Yamada says, worry twisting in his gut when he tries not to say it. "The things in the closet are already matched, and *please* don't drag out that-

Shouta's wide-eyed false innocence is warped by his grin, and despite how Yamada feels pretty much handcuffed to Shinsou to make sure he's there for him every second, he wants to *bolt* to prevent a tragedy.

"*Shou*, if you dress her up in that cat vomit again I will file for a *divorce*. I *will* know about it, and I don't want to hear anything about it happening. I *trust* you. I trust my husband, the love of my life and the stars in my sky, to *not do this to me*," Yamada says, and he knows that he's laying it on a little thick, but it's necessary. Shouta's propensity for being a little shit would go unchecked if he didn't stoop to begging.

That grin pulls a little wider when Shouta leaves, and while Yamada feels torn for a second, it's only a second.

Shinsou asked him to stay, and Yamada won't leave his side.

*

27 looks in the mirror and doesn't see himself. Chisaki stares back at him with his own eyes, purple irises and white pupils that only get bigger, only distort more of that face the more he

stares. He hears the mask click open, only to click shut before he can stretch his jaw. "Stealing," his voice and Chisaki's voice, blended and echoing in this room. "Stealing my voice."

He and Chisaki reach out their hands towards the mirror, and 27 feels that familiar pressure, that familiar tug when Chisaki grabs his mask. He looks and he stares at Chisaki, holding him by the mask, those white gloves forming a second one. "Stop stealing," Chisaki tells him, those words almost melting after they're spoken, his voice too strange. Too neutral, too slow.

27 pulls away from it, and he feels the mask crack and break around his face. As soon as he's free, he doesn't spare another glance at Chisaki, he turns on his heel and runs. Eri is here, Eri has to be here, he has to get to Eri.

He's running through corridors without doors, gray concrete stretching forever, shadows pitch black in every corner. He hears Midoriya's quirk nearby, like he's chasing him, or circling him. Trying to find him but he can't.

He turns down a hallway and sees her, sees her turned to the side wearing a hat she shouldn't have. One she stole. "Shinsou."

His mother looks at him with his eyes, still and waiting for him to approach. She's wearing 50's hat, that wide and floppy brimmed hat that she wore when she was free, she shouldn't have that hat. She stole it from 50.

His mother smiles at him like she knows that he knows, that she can see the anger on his face. "Shinsou."

He runs towards her, sure that she'll disappear into smoke as soon as he gets close, but she doesn't. She's standing still, just staring at him with half-lidded eyes and a frozen smile. He gets close enough that her smile gets distorted, it twists feral and dark for a moment before she steps back.

There's a knife in her side, weeping blood over her white dress. Over bandages on her arms and legs that she doesn't need. His mother just smiles at him, raises a hand like she'll slap him. "You're angry."

He stares at the knife, the blood, the blood on his hands, fear blacker than tar sinks deeper than bone into him as he shakes his head, backing away. "I'm not."

Her smile fades when she steps forward, his eyes almost bulging out of her head for a moment. "You're angry."

"I'm not!" he screams, afraid. Afraid, small, cold, dark. Bug will hear. He's not allowed to talk, not here, even if he doesn't have the mask he can't talk they'll put him back. Back for days, back for years, he doesn't know, he can't count that high. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...

He's in the Red Room, and he can't bear to look at the walls, he feels that color tacky on his back, Bug didn't clean up before she put him on the table. 10 leans over him, goldfish circling around his head, swimming and playing with the sparse white hairs there. 10 frowns, his eyes watery, and 27 realizes he doesn't have the mask on. He knows what that means.

"I can work. 10, tell them I can do it, I'm not sick, I'll be better in time for the job, I can still do it-"

"Shinsou, it's okay," 50 says, standing on the other side of the table, eyes lowered and focused on the restraints that she's putting over him. "It's just a bad dream."

“You’re not here,” 27 says, shaking his head, everything shaking, he feels like he’ll rattle off the table even if he’s restrained. “You’re not here, you won’t be here, why aren’t you here?!” His own voice scares him, echoing off the walls even redder than they are. “You’re not here, 50! I’m out and you’re not-”

50 leans over him, too close, and all he can see is the blackness of her pupils. “Shhh. It’s just a bad dream kid.” Her voice drops lower, impossibly low until he feels it inside his skin.

His mother spins on her heels, her white dress flaring out around her knees. She keeps dancing, swaying, while she holds up Nemoto’s mask like she’s pretending to dance with him. When she stops, she holds it up to her face, looking at him through it, her voice too high pitched. “You’re angry, aren’t you?”

He feels the answer pulling up through his throat, forced to by Nemoto’s Confession quirk, feels that terrifying red feeling bubbling through his body. He pulls at the restraints before he even thinks to, glaring at the goldfish swimming around 10’s frightened face that grows more warped, more like it’s melting into wrinkles and sloughed off skin. Those fish, those goldfish, circling around but never his. Even if he catches them, even if he eats them, they’re not his, not his, not his.

He can’t even steal them, and his mother laughs.

27 gasps when he wakes up, sees Yamada’s face too close to his before he tries to twist away from him, nearly falling off the bed until a hand catches his arm. “Whoa, whoa, just a bad dream. Just breathe, kiddo, just a bad dream.”

27 closes his eyes, realizing he doesn’t have the strength to pull himself back onto the bed properly before Yamada does it for him. When Yamada tries to pull the blanket back over him, a whine slips out before he can help it, because he feels too *hot*. He’ll *die* if he has that blanket over him.

“Yeah, you’re right, we should probably start hitting these drinks again. Get some fluids back into you,” Yamada says, dragging him to sit up against the wall at the head of his bed before he reaches over to grab one of the bottles on the bedside table. He never really noticed how strong Yamada was, but he can move him around like he weighs nothing. “Orange Crush! A blast of citrus flavor. Kind of sounds like an up and coming hero, like if Sugar Rush just ran on orange juice.”

27 takes a drink once Yamada hands it to him, but his throat feels like it’s being stabbed when he swallows. Even if he knows he should drink it, he wants to find a way to avoid it. ‘*S-H-I-N-S-O-U.*’

Yamada gives him an odd look, but he does it. “Shinsou. You want me to say your name for every drink? Because I can do that, that’s pretty easy!” Shinsou shakes his head, he doesn’t *want* to drink this. “You feeling alright?”

27 leans back, because he *hates* that question. He doesn’t want to pay attention to his body right now, taking inventory of all the ways it’s betraying him, hurting him. He feels weak, there’s a dull ache everywhere and he’s covered in sweat either wet or drying. His skin feels weird too, like there’s an oily sheen underneath the sweat, completely different from the way his skin would feel painfully stripped and raw after a bleach bath. ‘*Throat hurts. Head little.*’

A cough starts and stops, coming out closer to a sneeze. He just wants the coughing to stop, he *hates* it the most. Or maybe he hates his sore throat, or the headache, or how he can’t be hot or cold. He just *HATES* this.

Yamada pokes at the bottom of the bottle in 27’s hands, and 27 can’t hide the half-hearted glare.

Yamada offers to get him a different flavor, reminds him that he needs to drink and get fluids and all of the things that 27 already knows. But he doesn't understand because 27 doesn't understand it. He just doesn't *want* to.

But Yamada plays a frightening game sometimes, and he straightens up with a wide smile. "Shinsou."

Shinsou rolls his eyes, but he drinks it. It should work. His throat flares again but it's a little weaker, not that it matters. He's not concerned with the fluids working back into his throat as much as he is with this name working under his skin. He wants it to *stick* eventually.

"Shinsou."

27 glares at his arm when it doesn't work, when that name starts sounding more foreign. He doesn't want it to be, and it's not because he wants to be that name for anyone else. He's never had a problem answering to it, he's learned how to have other names.

But he wants to *be* this name.

Shinsou Hitoshi might have a bad mother, a mother who sold him, and he might have scars and training that came after the fact. Shinsou Hitoshi might have PTSD, he might be broken, he might be troublesome to other people.

But Shinsou Hitoshi is forgiven. Shinsou Hitoshi has a place in this world that he doesn't have to fight to have. Shinsou Hitoshi doesn't have to do things to earn it, Shinsou Hitoshi doesn't have to worry about losing it.

Shinsou Hitoshi gets to stay here, at UA. He gets to see things that he's never seen before. Even if the things he's seen don't leave him, the memories stick to his skin and crawl inside at times, Shinsou Hitoshi is clean. He's unmarked in all the ways that matter, not tainted or weighted down by his crimes.

"Hey, Shinsou," Yamada says, pulling himself to sit closer with a leg crossing his thigh, and that closeness reminds Shinsou to take a drink. Yamada looks nervous for some reason. "Is the name thing... about the tattoo?"

It takes 27 a moment to realize what he means, and when he does he feels it like a tremble inside himself. That tattoo that's still hidden under the black band isn't all that '27' is, he was 27 before he got the tattoo. He had to answer to that name before he could leave that first cell, before he could leave that timeless dark and the cold inside of it. He had to answer to that name so that people would talk to him, even if they usually didn't.

"It takes time, you know? Shinsou," Yamada says that name like an afterthought, the wince behind his glasses when he looks away tells 27 that he feels out of his depth. He probably is, because the 'it takes time' seems to be what he says when he doesn't have anything useful to offer. Time is so odd here, sometimes it stretches beyond 27's imagining, even farther than it's ever felt at The Miasma or the 8 Precepts, and then sometimes it feels unbearably short. He never really knows how much time he has, and he's not sure if he wants to know either.

Time has new names here. When 27 first woke up, Yamada asked him a lot of questions, and only some of them that 27 could answer. He knows the year and the prime minister of Japan now, but he doesn't know if that makes any difference for him. Yamada seemed content that he knew most of the answers, even if it took him some time to decide on the first one. 'Shinsou Hitoshi.'

Shinsou Hitoshi is his name. He'll make it his name. He just doesn't know how to do that any quicker. "Want to talk about that dream, Shinsou?"

Shinsou shakes his head, not because he doesn't want to talk about it. It just felt so odd, so oddly *melty*. Just remembering it makes his head feel dizzy, and he doesn't want to feel dizzy anymore. *'Just weird. Not nightmare.'*

Yamada nods, even if it doesn't seem like he believes him. He pulls his hair behind his head into a ponytail before he lets his hands drop, looking at the door before he looks at 27. "Sometimes, you talk about this 'Ten' person when you're kind of out of it. Were they...a good person? Kind of like 50?"

27 catches himself before he shakes his head, because 10 wasn't like 50. But 10 is a good person, and Yamada should probably know that. *'Good. Healer. Fever quirk. That's why. Don't hurt him.'*

He feels more like he's thinking about a dream, the more he thinks about it. The investigation wants to find The Miasma and stop them, and it's ridiculous to think that they will. 27 has no idea how to find them, he's never tried to pay attention to street signs when he was taken to a job and he's never had the opportunity to see them when he was taken back by Boss' quirk. If they find them, if the heroes perform another raid, he doesn't even know if 10 will still be there. If he's even alive. But 10 is the one Number who shouldn't get hurt in that raid.

It's ridiculous to think that far, when it stretches 27's time here too long and too short. It's better if The Miasma is never found, if they just have to keep 27 to keep trying. If he never has to test what Yamada said, he just gets to live here anyway. He doesn't think that UA feels small.

"We try not to hurt anyone on those operations, but we'll definitely save 10," Yamada says, and it sounds like a promise. 27 doesn't know what he'll feel if Yamada has the opportunity to keep it. "Take another drink for me, Shinsou?"

Shinsou feels childish when he pouts, but he does it. He winces when his throat burns, and Yamada stands up saying that he'll get him a popsicle, but 27 feels even more childish when he grabs the hem of his shirt.

He doesn't *care* about popsicles, but he doesn't want Yamada to leave. Yamada could swat his hand away or scold him for that, but he doesn't. He just smiles. "Yeah, no popsicles. I'm not going anywhere, Shinsou."

Shinsou frowns when he realizes it, but with the way Yamada is looking around, he knows that he's bored. He wants to leave. He's a flight risk if Shinsou doesn't stop him, and when he finishes the bottle of that weird juice, he can see it in Yamada's smile.

"Yeah, now we can get back to relaxing, catch up on some more sleep. Maybe we can get you so well rested, it'll be hard to recognize you." He knows Yamada is talking about the dark bruising under his eyes, and he would look weird if he didn't have it, but he's sure he always will.

And he knows that if he hooks his arm around Yamada's and leans back against where Yamada's forearm is under his back, he can trap Yamada. Eliminate the flight risk.

Yamada just blinks at him, glancing at where he's pinned, but Shinsou tries to stare him down and make the threat realer than it is. He might be weak, but he's always been weaker than his opponents, and he knows how to work with that. Gravity and leverage are two things that no one can fight. "You want me to lay down with you?"

Shinsou considers it for a moment. He wants Yamada to stay, and needs to trust that he will, and he can't trust that Yamada won't leave as soon as 27 falls asleep. But while leverage works against him pretty well in this pin, he might be able to make a better one.

Shinsou nods, and pulls his arm away so Yamada can take his back, and watches as Yamada lays down beside him. "Hopefully I don't fall asleep too, there's a few things I need to get ready for Toshinori-"

27 is almost trapped by the blankets around his waist, especially with Yamada laying on top of them, but even if Yamada was trying to pin him down with that he's no match for him. 27 puts his chest half on Yamada's and reaches out to hook Yamada's free arm into the bend of 27's elbow. Yamada can't get up now, even if he has the strength to lift up 27 he doesn't have the leverage to fight against the weight on top of him, not when he can't lean on that elbow.

"Shinsou?" Yamada sounds confused, but Shinsou can't see if he is. The downside of this pin is that his face is pretty much smothered by the pillow above Yamada's shoulder. "You know, I'm a-okay with some cuddling, but this is a little...."

27 huffs, but can't respond to that. It's not *cuddling*, it's a tactical pin. Eliminating the flight risk. Keeping Yamada next to him. Forcefully.

"I can work with it," Yamada sighs, relaxing into the hold but 27 knows not to trust it. It could be a feint, just to make him lower his guard. The arm underneath 27's body moves out, but instead of shoving him off, he feels it wrap around his torso so that his hand can stroke up and down his back. "This okay?"

It takes a moment for 27 to nod, but he does when it feels like Yamada will stop. It doesn't just feel okay, it feels nice. 27 isn't sure how to make Yamada keep doing that, but he's sure that the next time he uses his quirk on someone, he's going to make them do that.

27 realizes what Yamada is trying to do once it starts working. 27 used to do it for Eri when she had trouble going to sleep. He would stroke her back or her arms or her hair, have her rest closer to his chest so she could hear his heartbeat. He's never experienced the effects of it himself, this 'soothing' method. It's too powerful, and 27 has to keep moving his head or his free arm to keep himself from falling asleep from it.

The fingers that were dragging up and down his back pull away, and 27 pulls his head up despite the strain in his neck. He doesn't know how to make Yamada go back to doing that, but he has to figure it out. He has to make him.

"You sure it's okay? You don't have to-" 27 collapses back to the pillow in a huff, an irritated whine boiling out before he can stop himself. Maybe it's ridiculous, but it doesn't *feel* ridiculous. It really won't make him explode if Yamada stops but he feels like it will. "Okay, got it. I like back rubs too, just wanted to check."

27 huffs and moves down, frustrated with the pillow on his face. He has to lay on Yamada's shoulder with his head turned to face him, because looking the opposite way might break his neck. Yamada looks at him out of the corner of his eye and smiles, his tiny mustache looks weird in the glow of the string lights.

"This is kind of nice, you know? Just, it's not a weird thing. Eri has very clear preferences on who she cuddles with, and Shouta will never admit it, but he gets clingy when he's tired but not too tired. He has this cute little growl when I stop playing with his hair," Yamada says, and 27 can't decide whether he wants him to keep talking. He likes listening to Yamada talk, likes listening to

his voice, but he's trying to stay awake so he can enjoy this. "How about this? You can tell me where to move my hand and if I should stop. Like I'm one of those claw machines and you're moving the controls."

27 has heard about those claw machines even if he's never seen one, and it seems like an odd way of describing exactly how his quirk works, even if it's far simpler. 27's free hand is trapped underneath him and that arm feels too weak to be useful besides, but he moves the arm that's trapping Yamada's so that his hand rests on the pillow, and points up.

Yamada's hand moves up to stroke along his spine, between his shoulderblades, and Shinsou feels like it's almost painful and sharp at first, before the tension starts to drag out. He's not sure when was the last time he relaxed like this, but he hears a pop as he breathes out, relying on the pin to hold Yamada in place because he doesn't think he has the strength to move his arms anymore. And he doesn't think he minds that.

He feels boneless, relaxed, but that only makes him more aware of the strain in his neck. He's aware of the pain in his throat when he swallows, considering. He tries to remind himself that this much feels nice, but it's making him unbearably selfish, and it builds until the ache in his neck is all he can feel. He points up again.

Yamada's fingers drag over the back of his neck a few times, featherlight touches before his hand stops and his fingers rest at the base of it. His thumb and a finger press in with building tension, but he hardly has to press at all to get that first loud pop. Those fingers start rubbing in hard circles, and 27 loses the ability to move *completely*. His shoulders have never relaxed this much, he's completely useless at this point. He couldn't open his eyes if he tried, feels like he's goo and bones wrapped inside of skin instead of a tool. Instead of a person, even.

The tension building in his neck makes him flick his finger up, even if it seems like too much of an effort to move it. Yamada is pinching but it doesn't hurt, there are so many ways he could hurt him or kill him or paralyze him right now, but Shinsou can't even remember them all, barely remembers that they're there. Yamada's fingers spread and drag from behind Shinsou's ears, pulling back to the back of his neck before pushing out again, and Shinsou nearly sees white because it feels *so nice*. It feels like he's massaging his *brain*.

There's something weird at the top of his head, he can't figure out if it's stinging or itching, but it's annoying. He thinks if he could touch it, he could figure it out, but he can't move his arms at this point. He points up, even if it feels exhausting just to move a finger, to break this hazy spell cast over him. But he has to try to move his head up when Yamada doesn't move.

"Sure?" Yamada says, quiet and choked for some reason, and Shinsou tries to nod, settles for a grunt instead. Yamada's fingers brush over the back of his hair at first, not really touching him and not touching that weird sensation at the top of his head, but then his fingers comb through his hair so gently that it almost tickles. *Eventually*, Yamada's fingertips brush his scalp, and that weird sensation evaporates in a sigh that he can't fight.

Shinsou can't open his eyes and he can't move, he doesn't want to disturb this at all but when Yamada stops, he can't stop from tilting his head to chase after him. Move his head if Yamada won't move his fingers.

Yamada breathes out in a weird, stilted way, like he snorts or tries to laugh, but he starts combing through his hair again, and Shinsou tries not to get irritated when he thinks he'll stop again, that he'll have to keep reminding him. The minutes drag on, time that doesn't really exist, and he's starting to forget the rest of his body that isn't lit up by that feeling of Yamada's fingertips.

He feels like he's in that crossing point before sleep, on nights that he's not sure if he will because he didn't sleep the night before. When he feels that transition acutely, but it's different. It's not a worry that he won't sleep, because he knows he can't fight this haze or comfort, he just worries that it will stop. It's ridiculous, but he wants Yamada to keep doing this even when he's asleep, even if he won't feel it.

It's ridiculous, but Shinsou moves his head just a bit closer to Yamada's chest. He can hear his heartbeat, a steady rhythm but it doesn't sound like he thought it would. There's almost a weird 'gush' kind of noise, like he can hear the blood more than he can hear the heart that's pulling it around.

This soothing technique was used by mothers, intended for infants. It's a bonding exercise. His mother.

His mother might have done this. He didn't have a quirk as a baby. He could have.

It's not familiar.

But it's nice.

*

Yamada drops his phone on his face twice, finding it hard to get a good angle with Shinsou's elbow still trapping his arm, but he finally gets a good picture. Or several. He's just not really sure if this is going to happen again.

He sends one of the better ones to Kayama, not entirely sure if it's a good idea to send one of his hand in Shinsou's hair. She knows the situation, they've told almost everyone who comes in contact with Shinsou about it. He's a little worried about what she'll say about this entire situation, but he definitely needs her advice on it.

Kayamaaa: AWWW!!!! Congrats! It's a beautiful baby boy!

Hizashi: I kno ur jokin BUT HE DOES THE HEAD BOP

Hizashi: THE SHOU BOP THE LITT E CAT BOP I CAN'T

Kayamaaa: Hizashi. Tell me the truth.

Kayamaaa: If u n Shouta had a lil assbaby back in high school I NEED TO KNOW

Hizashi: MY ASS WOULD REMEMBER BUT PLS HELP

Hizashi: Is this ok???? Hes asleep but he does the growl also HELP HE DOES THE GROWL

Hizashi: But he his fever got that bad we had to do the bath. It was really bad then he kidn of did this?

Hizashi: Also I cant move im kinda trapped rn. Not just cuz this is cute but im legit kinda pinned down rn

Hizashi: I need to use the lil hero's room 2

Kayamaaa: Hizashi. STOP. It sounds like he's in control, so if he feels safe enough, let him. Good phys contact so important with him. So b very trapped.

Kayamaaa: But if u need me to com over with a bottle 2 help out... ;) I won't peek

Hizashiiii: I kno u dont need 2 u perv. I can hold it.

Kayamaaa: I noticed Eri hasnt been home. Shinsou's prolly a codependent sleeper. Sleeps better w someone there. And #same.

Hizashiiii: Hes been sleeping ok I think but maybe. And u need 2 put yen in the old ppl jar, u old hag. No hashtags 4 u.

Kayamaaa: Im gonna beat u 2 death with a brick nside a tube sock n steal Shinsou's cuddles. U dont deserve them. DONT CALL ME AN OLD HAG U NASALLY BITCH

Hizashiiii: #hagtag

Shinsou pulled the arm pinning his a bit closer to himself, sighing afterwards. Despite himself, the pressure building below his gut told him to try to pull his arm away, so that he could possibly drag himself away from Shinsou with an elbow to lean on. But as soon as he tried, Shinsou's hand pulled down and grabbed his arm, a quiet whine reprimanding him for trying.

Yamada sighed, running a hand over Shinsou's hair soothingly, even though he knew it would only start up those sleepy growls again. His arm was tired, he had *so much* to do to get his lesson plans ready for Toshinori, and he'd do anything at this point to take a quick trip to the bathroom.

But the hand on his arm starts relaxing with another quiet sigh, and Yamada looks down on Shinsou's sleeping face. It's a reminder that he wouldn't trade this for the *world*.

TodoBroki's Secrets

Chapter Summary

27 feels a lot better, but it's hard to prove that to Yamada. Two students fleeing from the 1-A dorm give him an opportunity to test whether his odd quirk sickness is resolved so Eri can come back, but one of them has a startling revelation for him.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Vague discussion of child abuse, Trauma spill

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou fell asleep while pinning Yamada down, and Yamada needed to pee before he fell asleep. Some emitter quirks have higher base temperatures, and Shinsou's actual base temperature is still a mystery as his has fluctuated so much since he was rescued from the 8 Precepts. Eri causes Shinsou's fever to worsen, which is why she has not been at the dorm, and won't be allowed to return until Shinsou is definitely over his illness. Shinsou has been trying to think of himself as 'Shinsou Hitoshi' instead of 27. Eri's nickname for Bakugo is 'Ugo.' Aizawa recently learned the truth behind Midoriya's quirk, and had banned him from training with his quirk until he saw a quirk specialist after he manifested Black Whip at the Joint Training Exam and he couldn't cancel his quirk. Todoroki has had a cat that he adopted off the street in his dorm for a few months, named Soba. Shinsou learned about Todoroki buying an expensive All Might figure on the group chat, and Bakugo responded to the picture evidence of that with 'YOU SUCKED HIS ICYHOT DICK FOR THAT ALL MIGHT FIGURE.' Shinsou has also noticed the similarity between Midoriya and All Might since their first meeting, but has seen several times on the chat that Midoriya is All Might's son. When Shinsou was discovered to be sick, Todoroki walked with him to Recovery Girl's office and asked Shinsou if he was a villain, to which Shinsou answered that he was a criminal. Shinsou has hated Soba ever since meeting the cat in a ventilation shaft where he tried to rescue it from the robots in the vents, but was severely scratched and bitten from his efforts. The night that Shinsou tried to escape UA, he placed Midoriya under his brainwash, which Midoriya broke out of by breaking two of his fingers. When Shinsou first arrived to UA, he was convinced that the hero students only wanted to befriend him to get information about The Miasma to tell Aizawa.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

27 felt better than he had in what felt like weeks when he woke up, even if it was confusing to wake up on top of Yamada. He didn't have time to consider whether it was weird to sleep on top of him, or if he should try to keep Yamada pinned down so he could, because Yamada just smiled and told him 'Good morning,' before pulling away and almost running down the hall for some reason.

Maybe it was weird, but he didn't care. He rolls into the side that Yamada was sleeping on, but finds himself feeling like he had *actually* rested. The soreness in his limbs, the heaviness that had

been weighing him down - all of that seemed like it was gone. His throat still hurt, but it was just a pinch when he swallowed, and his head didn't hurt in the slightest.

He chases away the soreness in his throat with one of the drinks left on the table, and it's gone with half of the bottle. He feels completely better. He's really not sick anymore.

He tells Yamada so when he comes back, and Yamada looks at his phone before he puts a hand to his forehead, a worried pinch becoming a wide grin. "Yeah, I definitely like that number a lot better, but we're still running a little hot. Or hot for me, we're still not totally sure about you. But I'm really glad you're feeling better!"

'Better' means he can sit at the kitchen counter, but it doesn't mean he can help Yamada cook. 'Better' also doesn't mean that Eri can come back yet, and that's the most irritating part.

Now that he can feel something other than too hot or too cold, something other than exhaustion or pain, he feels it like an itch under his skin. He knows Eri is fine, that she's been with Aizawa and probably has all of the hero students catering to her every whim. She probably doesn't miss him, she has no reason to, and he doubts that Yamada could have kept her away if she were upset about it.

But he misses her. He just needs to see her, to make sure she hasn't grown into something almost unrecognizable. She grows too fast, and he doesn't want to miss it. He goes back to his room for his phone, but he starts typing while he walks back to the counter.

QUARANTINED ASS BITCH: Send me a picture of Eri.

Uggs 4 Lyfe: FUCK NO. THE LITTLE PIPSQUEAK IS OURS NOW YOU DEAD ASS BITCH

Horn Sis 4 Lyfe: SHINNYYYYYY omg we did a makeover nite! Look how cyute Eri is!!!!

Horn Sis 4 Lyfe: *Tap to download 22KB*

Big Sis Tsu Senses ACTIVATE: Don't send him a picture of her right now.

QUARANTINED ASS BITCH changed their username to Shinsou Hitoshi

Moonie Squad yo: KAMINARI DONT

Sailor Uranus??? I guess????: hahaha yea let's not

Yeeting the baby with them arms ;) : Don't worry, Shinsou, we have taken it upon ourselves to make sure that Eri's stay at the dorm is as enjoyable as possible!

Yeeting the baby with them arms ;) changed their username to Iida Tenya

Shinsou Hitoshi: She looks cute. What are you doing to her right now

Sailor Uranus??? I guess????: AHAHAHAHA LET'S NOT GUYS

Apple Dispensary: Eri has taken command of us all. She is safe and enjoying herself. Do not inquire further.

Moonie Squad yo: BAKUGO PLS DONT I DONT WANT TO DIE

Shinsou Hitoshi: what. are. you. doing. to. her.

Also yeetin a baby: We're watching movies! Don't worry about it Shinbro!!!! Are you feeling any better? Being sick sux :(

Bunny Dispensary: She's having fun!

Bunny Dispensary: *Tap to download 22KB*

27 stood up and started walking towards the door, but Yamada stopped him. And he didn't *understand* even when he showed him the picture, starting to coo over it like it was cute. Eri, grinning with paper wings taped to her back floating above the 1-A common room wasn't 'cute.'

It was dangerous. "Aw, the little angel of 1-A! Don't worry, Shinsou, Shou's got it covered and Uraraka has great control over her quirk. She can lift 2 tons, so she wouldn't drop a little bean like Eri!"

Shinsou knew it would be too hard to overpower Yamada right now and make a break for it, so he huffed and placed his hopes on getting his message across on this chat. But if they didn't listen, he'd *make them*.

Sailor Uranus??? I guess????: KODA NO

Moonie Squad yo: KIRISHIMA I NEED YOU

Apple Dispensary: I believe that Uraraka may require Kirishima's presence more than you.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Put. Her. Down. Floaty can't see this but tell her if she doesn't put Eri down, I will skin the toebeans off of her fingers.

Sugar Hypin' 5 Year Olds: Toebea

Sailor Uranus??? I guess????: wait was that what happened during training?? You saw Uraraka's fingers and thought they were

Elsa Cosplay on Point: You won't. You're not a monster. You can't hurt her toebeans.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Try me.

but im sailor jupiter :(changed Shinsou Hitoshi's username to Uncoolest Mom

Tuxedo Mask: We put down pillows.

Tuxedo Mask: *Tap to download 22KB*

They did put down pillows. All the cushions from the couches were on the floor beneath Eri, but he could see her crossed arms and pouting from the top of the picture. Floaty's nervous expression was in the center, and while he wanted her to be aware of the risks, he didn't want her to be rattled to the point that she might lose concentration. The other heroes frowning at him through the phone disapprovingly didn't matter, they just had to understand.

Uncoolest Mom: Put her down. I don't want her to get hurt. I'm not being unreasonable.

Moonie Squad yo: How did my mom get your phone???

Sugar Hypin' 5 Year Olds: Holy crap that is the mommest thing ever said

Uncoolest Mom: I don't have to be a mom to not want Eri to get hurt

Still Ji-Ji: Uraraka can hold her for hours, and it's really not going to hurt her if she falls on the pillows.

But im sailor jupiter :(: Yeah MOM, a couple of bumps r a-ok! Eri's really rubbery, falling on your head is just a part of growing up. Trust me ;)

Sailor Uranus??? I guess????: That explains a lot

Iida Tenya: We are entrusted with Eri's safety, and though there are some sentiments expressed here that might be worrying, they are not meant to be taken seriously. We are indeed taking good care of Eri and making sure that she won't be harmed.

Uncoolest Mom: You're right, Sparky. I was really rubbery as a kid. I was beaten almost every day and I turned out just fine. I definitely hope that Eri gets injured too, so she can grow up just like me.

Elsa Cosplay on Point: #twinsies

Moonie Squad yo: Right, I missed thi

Sailor Uranus??? I guess????: Wait back the fuck up???

Uggs 4 Lyfe: @everyone STFU

But im sailor jupiter :(: hey todobroki what do u meme?

Sugar Hypin' 5 Year Olds: But your dad is Endeavor???

Elsa Cosplay on Point: I know. #tragic

but im sailor jupiter :(: todobroki dont hide ur pain in memes thats my thing open the door????

Uggs 4 Lyfe: @EVERYONE SHUT THE FUCK UP AND DONT FUCKING PULL SOME DUMB SHIT JUST LET HALFSIES BE FUCKING STUPID ALRIGHT

Also yeetin a baby: @Shinbro I'm really sorry that happened and it was messed up and ur def on the hug train just makin a stop by Todobroki's room

Uncoolest Mom: I don't want to be on the hug train

Big Sis Tsu Senses ACTIVATE: Todoroki, we should talk. I can make the others go away if you open the door.

Horn Sis 4 Lyfe: @Shinny i kno this is bad 2 ask but u kno any hitmen???

Uncoolest Mom: Yes. Starting at 200000 yen for a nobody, you can't afford them.

Uggs 4 Lyfe: IM CALLING SHITSEI ON YOUR ASSES BECAUSE YOU CAN'T FUCKING LISTEN YOU DUMBFUCKS GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HIS DOOR AND STOP BEING SUCH FUCKI

27 curled a hand around the back of his neck, staring at the phone but not really reading the

messages. Todo was unnervingly similar to him.

The mother that poured scalding water on his face. The beatings. Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned that, but Sparky talking about how 'rubbery' Eri was made the anger boil quick from red to black. Eri *wasn't* rubbery, she's been through enough and she should have a normal childhood now. A childhood that wasn't full of pain.

Todo didn't have a normal childhood either. Todo very clearly wasn't normal either, and that should have been 27's first clue. He should have pieced it out sooner, should have sensed it somehow.

Todo still wasn't opening the door, and 27 can't help but worry about that.

*

Midoriya held his forearm with a wince one too many times, and Aizawa rolled his eyes when he called an end to it, despite the protests. "You're straining your muscles to force your quirk. I've told you not to do that."

Aizawa shoots a glare at the person who *told* him to do that, someone who should know to teach the difference between building a body to compliment a quirk and building the quirk itself. *Someone* who apparently didn't know how to use their own quirk before they passed it down to a quirkless child. "But I think I almost--"

Aizawa sighs, tipping back his head just to feel the sweat from his hair meet with the back of his neck. Sparring with the Problem Child was exercise that he needed, that the Problem Child needed to focus this 'Black Whip' quirk that he spawned. "Save it for your Heroics class. Now that we know Black Whip isn't permeable, you can train with your quirk as long as I'm supervising."

The Problem Child has only conjured up two small whisps at most, nothing like the mass that he created during the Joint Training Exam. But the capture scarf could restrain them, and that was going to have to be enough.

It would be better if he could strengthen his Erasure quirk, but he wasn't young. He already went through training and examinations to discover the full potential of his quirk, and while he could cancel multiple targets' quirks, he couldn't cancel multiple quirks in one target.

And he doubts that if it were a possibility for him before, that he would still be able to achieve it after what USJ did to him.

Midoriya walks over to the bench to check his phone, and Aizawa finds himself a bit too alert after the sparring session to overlook the loss of color in his face. But before he asks, one of the doors to Gym Gamma swings open forcefully, Bakugo having kicked it open. Aizawa watches as rage stutters to scowling confusion. "Oi, Sensei figure out how to cut off One for All yet?"

Aizawa glares at Toshinori, and has to remind himself, *again*, that he can't murder the former Symbol of Peace on campus grounds. But *Bakugo* knew. *Bakugo*, who had been kidnapped by the League of Villains, knew about One for All, and that's beginning to look more suspicious as the realization of that settles in. "Toshinori. I need a list of every one of my students who know about this. *Immediately.*"

"Is Todoroki okay?" Midoriya asks, still clutching his phone, and Aizawa would appreciate it if his student's worry was an exaggeration. But he knows it's not, not if Bakugo came here because he was concerned.

“He blabbed about the Endeavor shit, now he’s freezing the door because everyone’s up their own asses about it,” Bakugo answers, and once Aizawa works out what he means, he finds himself disturbed by how many secrets Bakugo was privy to. Only the necessary members of staff knew about his concerns about Endeavor, and Toshinori wasn’t one of them.

He wishes he could feel spiteful about that. “What do you mean by that, young Bakugo? Is there something wrong with Endeavor-”

“I’ll tell you when I feel it’s appropriate for you to know,” Aizawa interrupts, still finding it within himself to be a bit spiteful, while he starts to gather his things from the bench. “How much did he disclose?”

Bakugo scoffs, glaring at the floor and unwilling to answer, and if he found himself disappointed by the appearance of Aizawa’s inaction, he would have to ignore it. Aizawa has fielded too many offers for the Number 2 hero to visit his homeroom in a special presentation, offers that turned into requests, that turned into near threats. The appearance of inaction might be the only thing keeping Todoroki enrolled at UA.

“It’s vague, but,” Midoriya says, looking at his phone with a pinched worry up to Aizawa with wide eyes, seemingly also surprised that he knew. “Just, that he was beaten. The training.”

‘Just’ means that Midoriya also knows more about the situation than Aizawa expected he did, but he should have adjusted those expectations given how much time the two students spend together. ‘Training’ like that was a mere suspicion on Aizawa’s part, something he was unsure of when he saw the way Todoroki would react at times during hand to hand combat drills. Subtle enough that it was just a suspicion. “I feel like I’m repeating myself, but those concerns are supposed to be reported to a trusted adult. *Me*, specifically.”

Midoriya looks down at his phone with that same dog kicked expression that he’s grown to hate, due to how ineffective it seems to be at showing whether the Problem Child *would* do better next time. “He really didn’t want me to. It’s Endeavor, so-”

“This is UA,” Aizawa says, and he leaves that up to interpretation. Principal Nezu won’t stake the reputation of the most prestigious hero academy in Japan against the current Number One Hero, but that same hero wouldn’t have the same difficulty reaching out to Todoroki if UA wasn’t so prestigious. Untouchable, even.

He’s well aware that there are times that the rules bend for the greater good, and he’s facilitated that happening in his hero work often enough. But he *aches* for the day that Endeavor falls a bit farther from grace, and *real* hero work can take place.

For now, he has to manage a crisis of 16 heroes in training who likely wanted to crowd Todoroki into shutting down, or kill the Number One Hero in Japan. And he’d rather risk the latter.

*

Aizawa was able to threaten his students away from Todoroki’s door, but the door was still frozen. He allowed Midoriya to remain in hopes of coaxing his student out, but after no response, he was forced to use a tactic from his own ward’s book.

As much as Hizashi might joke, he doesn’t have to climb into many ventilation systems in his hero work. It’s happened often enough that he’s familiar with how to map out the twists and bends, but when he reaches the vent in the center of Todoroki’s ceiling, he sees that he’s not the only one that Shinsou inspired.

Todoroki is only halfway inside the vent, stable enough that he seems to be standing on a pillar of ice inside his room. He's wearing a backpack and casual clothes, but those clothes aren't appropriate for the winter's chill outside. If he were running away, he should have at least taken the time to prepare for it properly.

If he were simply going to sit inside the ventilation system to decompress like Shinsou does, that unfortunately wouldn't be happening. "Principal Nezu is going to replace your door with one that can melt ice. No student should be able to lock out their teacher."

The silent, blank expression that answers him is too familiar. Too much like Shinsou's, and he's grateful when Todoroki glances away and whispers, "Sorry."

Aizawa sighs, his knees and back complaining about the cramped quarters. "We'll talk in your room."

Todoroki slips through the opening, and Aizawa follows with a leg braced against the remaining ice pillar to slide down it, then watches as Todoroki starts melting it. The door is ignored, even if the Problem Child's pleading is still audible on the other side of it.

"Midoriya told me that you admitted something on the chat before all of this happened," Aizawa says, reading the rising stiffness in his student's shoulders, the way that the flames he's using flick higher for a moment. "I don't need to know what it is, even if I suspect you won't surprise me. If you need to get away from your peers, you can come to the Safe Room. That's always an option if it's necessary."

The flames die out and Todoroki's hand falls, leaving a meter of ice left. Not that it would save the carpet from any damage if it was melted naturally, and he expects that even Todoroki knew that. That he needed a distraction from this conversation. "I would rather not see Eri right now. It's fine."

Aizawa is beginning to hate that phrase, 'it's fine.' But the mention of Eri, her age catching in Aizawa's mind, makes him hate Endeavor even more. "You're well aware that this room is going to be their target. And you seem somewhat prepared to leave it anyway."

He sees the backpack bulge outward, surprisingly noiselessly, and stops wondering where Todoroki's cat is. He overlooked putting on a jacket or scarf, but made sure to pack his *cat* to run away. "I'll have to clear the air eventually. I didn't mean to..."

Todoroki might think that having his back turned to Aizawa would mean he's hiding what he feels, but that shaking fist at his side betrays him. "Pick your target. Midoriya or me. It's better to approach at a distance with this."

Todoroki needs time to process what he did, and he had somewhat of the right strategy in trying to escape the dorm. But it was Aizawa's job to help him form better ones. "Midoriya. If that's fine. He already knows to wear gloves at this point."

Aizawa is going to overlook a lot of things with that statement, like how he's still not a trusted adult that his students will approach with issues, or what the *hell* he means by gloves. "There's a window on the 6th floor, it's the easiest escape route. I'll cover you from behind."

Todoroki turns to look at him, his eyes slightly narrowed, and Aizawa doesn't think it's due to his own pointed gaze at the jackets hanging in the closet. "How...much do you know?"

It's a question that's difficult to answer. He has suspicions and nothing proven, and the appearance

of inaction might be as painful as the knowledge itself. If Todoroki feels betrayed that Aizawa knew in the first place, when he never said a word about it. “I know that something is wrong. And I trust that you’ll tell me more when you’re comfortable with that.”

He knows the flinches. He knows that Todoroki can’t see as well out of his left eye, but better than he should have if it was treated naturally. He knows that implies that a quirk healer was called to do as much as they could for the eye, to preserve the sight of a potential hero but do nothing for a wound that became a scar. He personally knows the difference between correspondence course education and isolation, and that Todoroki’s struggles to relate or at times imitate his peers isn’t entirely due to his homeschooling.

He knows that he’s always known enough to do more, and he knows even better the fine line that he has to walk to give Todoroki a safe haven at UA.

Todoroki sucks in his bottom lip, for a moment looks close to tears before he breathes out. He knows that Todoroki knows more, but he’s not ready to tell him. Not after this, not when it’s fresh.

But he hopes that Todoroki tells him.

*

Midoriya doesn’t say anything, and Todoroki doesn’t either. Sometimes they walk like this, just walking around campus or going on a run together, but it’s different. It’s never really this quiet.

It makes him feel like he should walk slower, and he keeps pulling on the gloves that Todoroki insists that he wears. Maybe it’s a little weird, but Todoroki always asks him to wear gloves to protect his hands whenever he feels like he’s getting ‘too involved with him.’ And even if it’s weird, he’d gladly do it for a friend.

“Soba is getting cold,” Todoroki says quietly, already walking towards a bench, and Midoriya follows. He hasn’t heard the cat complain, but after they sit down and Todoroki unzips the backpack, he’s not surprised to see the cream colored cat shaking a little, eagerly rubbing itself into Todoroki’s left hand.

He knows they can’t stay outside walking around like this, because Soba is with them. Maybe it’s a little weird that Todoroki still wanted to bring Soba, but Midoriya really doesn’t mind, especially when Soba lets him scratch his chin in search of warmth. “I can ask Kacchan if things have settled down yet. He kind of knows too, I guess. I didn’t tell him, though.”

“I didn’t either,” Todoroki says, his eyes almost closed while he stares at Soba. “*“But that’s why his explosions are so big. They are full of secrets.”*”

Midoriya laughs, despite himself. He feels guilty because he knows that Todoroki doesn’t really want anyone to know about his father. But he rehearsed the lines from that American movie for hours with Kaminari, and now he can say it pretty much perfectly. He can see just from pulling up LNE that Kacchan already sent him a message saying that he’ll tell him when things have settled down. But he also sees a message from Shinsou on their own chat.

Brainwashio: Tell him I’ll like that stupid cat if he opens the door.

Shinsou didn’t respond to any of the messages that Midoriya has already sent him, asking him if he was okay after he tried to run away that night, asking him about his quirk, if he really thought he was quirkless. If he really considered what being quirkless would mean if he was. But Todoroki hums when he looks over, like he doesn’t really see those messages either.

“Ask him if we can come over,” Todoroki says, catching Soba’s paws when he tries to jump out of the bag. “He needs to make good on that oath.”

Midoriya opens his mouth to say that’s probably not going to happen, especially because Shinsou was sick, and because he probably didn’t mean it. But he thinks that Todoroki was really just saying what he didn’t mean, in a way that still meant what he was asking for.

Todoroki probably just wanted to talk to Shinsou, to find someone who could relate. And luckily, Shinsou wanted to talk to them too.

*

Yamada looks surprised when he comes out of the hallway to find Izuku and Todo standing in the living room, but if he didn’t want to be surprised, he shouldn’t have taken so long in the shower. “Hey, we have visitors! I definitely knew that beforehand!” *‘Let me answer door please.’*

27 tries to pull his irritation back into something more useful, more convincing while Midoriya stumbles through a long apology. *‘Need to talk to Todo. Important.’*

Yamada keeps antagonizing Midoriya by rambling about how he was in the shower and might have burst out in the nude to protect his home and ward, while he signs to 27. *‘Problem child too?’*

27 nods. *‘They’re boyfriends. Package deal.’* Yamada jerks his head around to stare at 27, drawing attention to their conversation and to possibly bring it out in the open if he argued against it, and 27 sighs. *‘Quirked Problem Child. If no problems, not sick. Eri can come back.’*

Yamada nods stiffly, agreeing but not happy with it. But he acts oddly nervous around the hero students when he addresses them again. “Well, it’s kind of late for a school night, but at least your teachers know where you are! I guess we can host a little friend sesh for a while before sending you two back to the dorm to get some shut eye. There’s plenty of snacks in the fridge, and a lot of soup that you’re welcome to!”

Shinsou doesn’t need soup anymore, but he’s sure that Yamada is going to make him eat all of it. From what he saw in the refrigerator, he’s going to be sick of soup long before he finishes it. Hopefully, he can get the hero students to eat a lot of it to save himself some trouble.

27 decides to guide them to his room, because they both seemed nervous around Yamada, Izuku especially. And after they get there and get the same speech about leaving the door open from Yamada, Izuku asks about it. “I hope we didn’t make any trouble, I saw that Mic-sensei signed ‘Please’ but I don’t know many of the other signs-”

“It’s-s,” 27 grits his teeth, glaring while he pulls out his phone. The mask *was* still open, but that was happening for some reason. The stuttering, and he didn’t want to deal with it. *“It’s fi-ine. He di-idn’t want you here, Pro-blem Child.”*

Izuku’s smile is completely hollow, his laugh barely that. “Oh. I didn’t know that Mic-sensei called me that too. But he’s okay with it?”

Shinsou rolls his eyes, sitting on the bed to claim it while Todo took the computer chair, holding his backpack in his lap. *“You’re bo-oyfriends, so yes.”*

Izuku chokes, bending over himself like he’s been punched, and Shinsou makes a note of that weakness. “We’re not-what- Why do you think that-”

“We’re not like this,” Todo says, holding up one of his pinkie fingers. “We’re more like this.” He

makes a V with his fingers, like he's seen a lot of hero students do. It seems like a lot of students were trading sexual favors for expensive gifts then.

Even *Mirio*.

"Yeah, we're just friends! We're good friends, and we're both hero students, but we're not-" Izuku keeps looking between Todo and Shinsou, and the speed at which he moves his head seems to be picking up while Shinsou types.

"*You-u sucked his di-ick for tha-at All Might figure,*" 27 explains, hoping that Izuku could elaborate on that. If this was a common occurrence at UA, he'd definitely need to be more careful about who he allows Eri to be with and look up to. He's pretty sure Momo has done that gesture too.

"I *really* didn't! I was just showing it to Todoroki and he bought it and I didn't even ask because I wouldn't and-and," Izuku's face is disturbingly red, his arms fanning the air before he knots his hands into fists, looking irritated. "Did Kacchan tell you that?! He really shouldn't-"

"What else do you know?" Todo asks with his hands folded under his chin, over the backpack. "People have a lot of secrets, and you seem to know a lot of them."

It's hard to know what's a secret at UA, but this one probably is to anyone outside of Class 1-A. "*Izuku-u is All Might's so-on.*"

Todoroki hums and nods, while Izuku stares at him looking betrayed and a bit frustrated. "He's really not! Why-wait." Izuku blinks a few times while the shock begins to fade, before he tilts his head with wide eyes. "Shinsou, do you believe everything that's on the chat? Because the stuff that's on there is just a joke, or just... It's really not true."

27 glares to hide the tar black feeling curling in his gut. How was he supposed to know truth from exaggeration here? He hasn't been at UA long enough to tell the difference, but that doesn't make him *stupid* like Deku seems to think.

"Midoriya guards that secret well, but I trust you don't have any bad intentions knowing it," Todo says, staring at his backpack when it starts to bulge oddly. "Even if you're a criminal."

27 rolls his eyes at that, irritation boiling under his skin. He should just talk to Midoriya, maybe even use his quirk on him to prove that he was over that weird quirk-sickness. He just wanted Eri to come back to where she was safe, back to him, and he didn't really want to deal with these hero students. "But you're really not a criminal, Shinsou. Even though Todoroki said that you said that, you had a really bad fever at the time-"

"I'm not," Shinsou says, quick enough that he doesn't have time to stutter, two words in one forceful gasp, forcing them past his teeth so they don't have time to catch. "What-"

A cough cuts him off, but it's short. Even then he hates it.

But he hates what IcyHot drags out of his bag more. "That's good. I didn't really believe it at the time, but I'm glad that Soba isn't going to be associated with any unpleasant people."

The demon makes a very uncute, shrill and *not* squeaky 'Mew' when Halfsies pulls it out from the backpack. He sets that fiend loose on his floor, and 27 watches as it starts winding itself around Temperate Extreme's ankles.

This *wasn't* part of the deal.

“You know, Shinsou,” Deku says, his hands pulled behind his back like he knows what danger he’s in now that *creature* has been set loose. “Soba has different colored toebeans on each side. The side where he has a blue eye has pink toebeans, and the yellow side has brown ones. And the pink ones are really cute.”

27 *doesn’t want to test that*. He doesn’t. He doesn’t care if Deku is lying, and he doesn’t care if that cat blinks at him affectionately. Or if it jumps on the bed to bob its head at him.

He doesn’t care about its toebeans. The demon isn’t cute. He tried to save the stupid thing from the robots and it wouldn’t even let him *pet it* afterwards. After he saved its *life*.

The demon opens its mouth and nothing comes out, and it’s stupid enough that he holds out his hand for it to sniff. Stupid thing was *mute* sometimes, and it’s stupid. It’s too stupid to hate.

The cat nibbles at his fingers gently, not at all the way it dug its fangs into his hand in that vent, before it makes a circle to rub its side against his hand. Scent marking 27, owning him. Stupid thing can’t *own* him.

But when he tries to pet it - or shove it off, he hadn’t decided yet - it rolls onto its side to start scent marking his bed. *And it has divided toebeans it’s really too cute*.

“See?” Deku asks, because he knows too much. It’s unnerving. “Soba really isn’t that bad! He’s gotten really friendly since he started living in Todoroki’s room, and I think maybe he really wasn’t really feral at first. Maybe he used to have a home but some bad things happened to make him scared-”

“Eat the soup,” 27 commands, even if he knows he can’t force his quirk over Deku like he can with Eri. He’s tried. “I’m not sick anymore. I don’t need it.”

“Maybe Ochako can come over and help you with that,” Deku says, crouching down to start petting the cat’s fuzzy soft cheeks. “Her allowance is kind of tight this month, and it’s... Sometimes, she doesn’t go to the dorm meals if she thinks it’s for her. I’m kind of running out of ideas.”

“As long as she doesn’t float Eri,” Shinsou agrees. He didn’t want Floaty to go hungry, even if it sounded stupid that she wasn’t eating out of pride. Even if he didn’t have a lot of room to talk about that.

“Wear these,” Todo says, holding out a pair of thick leather gloves like the ones that Izuku was wearing. “I’ve been reckless until this point, but if you’re getting involved with me, you need to protect your hands.”

27 tries to stare at him hard enough to make him make sense, and Izuku starts muttering. “Uh, Todoroki thinks that when people get involved with him, their hands get hurt. It really wasn’t his fault at the Sports festival-”

27 hums while he takes them, just to see if he can. To see if the mask is open with Todo too. “Same.”

It was open.

He’s been able to talk to Ashi and Eri, because he used his quirk on them. After using it on Izuku and Bakugo, he was able to talk to them too. Yamada thought that this illness had something to do with his quirk, that it was wrong and it was. Mirio thought that when he got better, he might be able to talk normally.

He's never used his quirk on Todo.

"That wasn't your fault either, though!" Izuku says, waving his hands around. "I didn't even know that my fingers were going to move under your quirk, and Recovery Girl said it was okay! I didn't mess up my tendons any worse, which is really...really good."

Shinsou puts on the gloves, covering his scarred hands. The gloves matched the ones on Izuku's scarred hands. The scar on Todo's face doesn't match the ones on his at all, but somehow, they were more similar. "I didn't want to say any of that, that night. It's irritating."

Todo doesn't blink, and 27 wonders if he was also taught to do that to unsettle people. Look creepy behind a mask, intimidate by looking unhinged. If he had to compensate for a small and unintimidating body by doing that. "I've never been an older brother, but if Aizawa-sensei adopts me, I would try to be a good one for you and Eri."

27 truly has nothing to say to that. He knows that Eri likes Todo, and they probably would get along well if he were also adopted. But 27 is *not* going to be adopted by Aizawa or Yamada. He's just going to stay, hopefully. As long as he's careful not to mess that up.

Todo sighs, eyes almost closing as he stares at his left hand. "No, I'm past the point of running away. My fate was already decided. I have to keep moving forward, even when it's difficult." He looks up at 27 and nods. "You're moving forward as well."

He's not sure what he means by that, if he knows that he's trying to work a new name under his skin, for himself. Trying to be Shinsou Hitoshi, whatever that means, and what he wants it to mean might be moving forward. Even if the past still clings to him. "N-not a lot of criminals will take on a pro. And it's expensiv-ve. Use his credit card."

Todo looks down again, folding his hands together. "One of them already tried. I'm happy that they didn't succeed. I still have use for him."

27 is surprised Todo can say something like that, and mean it. Take something like that and appreciate it the same way that he does for the training he went through at The Miasma. If Bug didn't beat him into the ground almost every day, he probably wouldn't have survived as often as he did in those matches at the 8 Precepts. Chisaki would have gotten tired of repairing him.

"This isn't the reason why we're friends, but friends don't keep secrets from each other," Todo says, threading his fingers together in his lap loosely. "My father wanted me to become friends with you to find out your secrets. To find out where the Nomus are coming from."

27 breathes out, still numb to what IcyHot was saying. He was sure that the hero students wanted to know about The Miasma, but to know it was true? That it was him? Just him, judging by Izuku's shocked stare and breathless, "What?"

"He said that Aizawa-sensei isn't handling the investigation the right way, but I think he is. I think it would be best if you could keep your secrets until you want to share them," Todoroki says, even if his eyes narrow. "Your secrets might be dangerous, but they're yours."

They're not. They're not his anymore. Aizawa has The Miasma's name, and he said that was enough. He hasn't checked to see if it's enough, if they're getting close, but he doesn't want to. He doesn't want to know if he'll lose this.

"Shinsou, you..." Izuku stops and stares, and 27 has to force his fists to relax. Force himself to breathe, because he doesn't want Izuku to see this. He doesn't want anyone to know when they

already knew too much. “Aizawa-sensei... is investigating the Nomus... and you-”

“Well!” Yamada shouts, walking down the hall to hold up his phone with an annoyed expression. “I just got off the phone with- oh Soba! How’s my little Sobarista doing?”

“He’s well,” Todo answers, standing up to lift the cat into his backpack and zip it up. “We should be leaving. It’s late.”

“Just stole the words out of my mouth! I just got off the phone with Eraserhead, he said to say that the coast is clear, but I don’t know what that’s all about,” Yamada says, sounding too much like Current Radio right now, even more than he usually did when he was talking to the hero students. “But feel free to make a little Soba delivery every now and then, bringing a little cat cafe to our dorm!”

Izuku stands up with a smile and a wave he clearly doesn’t mean, and he doubts it convinces Yamada either. He forgets about the gloves until he hears Yamada shut the door on the hero students after they leave, pulling them off quickly. They’re not going into the stash.

Izuku knows. Todo knows. They know about The Miasma.

Aizawa wasn’t handling the investigation the right way, whatever that means. It probably means he’s not making progress, as much as he thought. It means that they’ll want more information from him, and he doesn’t *have it*. He doesn’t know what that *means*, if he stays, if he has to leave, if he *loses this*. This one place that feels safe, that has 50, that has Eri, he can’t *fucking lose this!*

His mouth drops open when Yamada comes back in, but he doesn’t know what to *say*, how to ask, if he can ask, if he could even tell if Yamada is lying. He doesn’t want Yamada to *lie* to him.

Yamada’s face falls into pity, and he realizes that he didn’t want him to tell the truth either, if it’s *that* truth. “Shinsou, it’s alright. It’s- it might not be your quirk, and it’s fine if you can’t talk to me. We can always talk in sign-”

‘Stay,’ 27 signs, even if he has to force his hands to move, has to ignore the breath caught in his chest. ‘Stay. Investigation. Stay.’

Yamada’s eyebrows draw together tighter, and he moves to sit on the bed beside 27, a hand on his shoulder. “Shinsou, you’re staying. You don’t have to worry about that, okay? You don’t even have to think about it, and... Don’t worry about what Todoroki said. Endeavor shouldn’t even know about it, but he doesn’t know anything about what Shou’s doing. You don’t have any reason to worry about the investigation anymore.”

27 wants to believe those words. He wants to believe, he wants to be safe. He doesn’t know if Aizawa can keep him safe, if there’s someone above him, and he knows that there is. There’s someone in charge of Aizawa and they can decide that he’s not doing enough, and there’s *nothing that 27 can do*.

He doesn’t *know* what Nomus are, just that Aizawa thinks that The Miasma is connected with them. He doesn’t know where The Miasma is, he’s *useless*, he only had a name and he lost it, he can’t lose his name now.

He can’t lose Shinsou Hitoshi.

“Shinsou,” Yamada says, his hand moving from one shoulder to the other, his arm braced around his back again. 27 looks at him, tries to find something in his bright green eyes to hold on to, even if it’s a lie. This buzzing under his skin doesn’t feel anything like Bug’s quirk but it might as well

with how horrible it feels. “You’re staying here. I’m not going to let anyone take you away, or hurt you. You’re safe.”

Shinsou has to relax his hands from fists, has to breathe out the buzzing. Has to believe what Yamada says, even if he knows it’s not that simple. There are a million ways of losing this, and he won’t risk any of them. ‘*Stay.*’

He won’t risk letting Yamada know that he doesn’t have to ask that with his hands anymore.

*

Todoroki didn’t know what school was like before UA.

He had odd expectations of it because of that. He overheard a few things when he was able to sneak into his older’s siblings living quarters, able to hide and pretend that he was closer to them than he was. School meant friends, meant homework and strict teachers. Fuyumi spent a lot of time talking about the things her friends liked in their bento boxes, which left Todoroki with the impression that he should study how to prepare one before the first day at UA.

The first day was overwhelming. The first month was, really. The well-worn floors of his home, places that seemed suffocating in the weeks after his father informed him that he was accepted to UA, felt like welcome relief after school. Quiet, after so many loud voices. Calm, after so many loud people.

UA offered the best training, the best pedigree, the best reputation. Nothing but the best for the next *number one hero*.

Todoroki grew to hate that number, ‘one.’ After spending so much time as ‘one,’ the ‘one’ child that would succeed, the ‘one’ child that was different from the ‘four.’ From the family.

Being ‘one’ was intolerable when he was surrounded everyday by others, noisy others. Distracting, weak others. Until it wasn’t.

Midoriya made ‘one’ into ‘two.’ ‘Two’ into ‘four.’ ‘Four’ into ‘seven.’ ‘Seven’ into ‘nineteen.’

In some ways, he’s still ‘one.’ But those ways feel like they’re melting, slowly. Like ice.

He melted too quickly this time, he felt the heat of it. He wants to take it back but he can’t. It’s too loud because of that.

These halls are never quiet, they’re not well worn. There’s a newness everywhere, in every corner, and it’s still surprising. As much as he’s learned to prepare, he’s not prepared sometimes. But he’s learned that it’s better not to act surprised, not act like he’s in pain. Ice and fire aren’t surprised, aren’t in pain, and that’s what he’s always been to his father, an offering to them. He’s learned to hide it, to a degree, even if it’s different here.

Aizawa-sensei was the one thing that he expected from UA. A strict teacher. Strict in different ways, better ways. Far kinder ways than his peers seem to perceive it.

It’s reassuring that not everything is the same.

When he knocks on the door to the Safe Room, he feels the numbness that used to scare him. When he would encase himself with ice sometimes, overusing his quirk, chasing the memory of his mother’s chilled skin, chasing away the feeling of flames and sweat, he would get scared of that numbness because he was afraid that he wouldn’t be able to feel those things anymore. He

wouldn't feel his mother, he would be left to the flames but they'd break him.

Aizawa-sensei opens the door, and the numbness breaks instead.

*

Body Disposal: Ok, whats the money sitch lookin like?

Taser: I found two more aunts who owe me birthday money!!! Like, im p sure theyre related to me this time!

Taping up the body bag: eBay is not looking good. THE NEONGEN REBOOT IS AROUND THE CORNER THE HYPE SHOULD GET MY MERCH WAY MORE BIDS

Hug Train choo choo: 25000 yen so far! Maybe we can just glitterbomb him everyday instead tho?

Dark Deeds: It bears a reminder that what is spoken plainly is uncovered quickly.

A Cop: WE. CANNOT. HIRE. A. MURDERER. TO. ATTACK. A. PRO. HERO. THIS IS EXTREMELY CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR AND I WILL HAVE TO REPORT IT TO AIZAWA-SENSEI IF IT PERSISTS

Mixing a Murder Tape: Stain who? Running off to rescue Bakugo what?

KING EXPLOSION ~MURDER~: I DIDN'T FUCKING ASK FOR THAT. FUCKING FOUR EYES SPEWS ALL THIS SHIT BUT HE BREAKS THE FUCKING LAW ALL THE FUCKING TIME HE FUCKING LOVES IT

Hack His Life BB: Endeavies having some problems with his fanpage now and forever, and all the spam in his inbox whoooooops

Body Disposal: bless u my sweet hackerina but whats the deal with bitcoin? Can we get a lot of money off that???

Hack His Life BB: We're gonna need bitcoin anyway :)

Cement Hookup (thnx daddy): Some guys from my dad's company started a business to send animal poop to ppl's houses we just need the address but we can get the year subscription for like 20000 yen!

Body Disposal: WAIT bring Koda back in we can get him on the poop supplies and get a discount!!!

Taser: nah honestly im kinda digging the murder thing, we can't do poop mail if hes dead

LAME ASS MORAL BITCH: Guys. This is crazy. We're heroes, we're not going to kill anyone. We need to leave it to the authorities.

LAME ASS MORAL BITCH: But I have family in the country who can help with the poop mail supply.

Body Disposal: YESSSSSSS OJIRO GETTING REDEEMED UP IN THIS BITCH

Sweet prince we got u fam: My family situation is complicated. I wasn't thinking clearly at the time that I sent that message, and I didn't think that you would realize what I was saying. I know that sounds odd. My father is not a good person, and I don't forgive him for that. I never will. But I will lose opportunities to become a great hero if he dies, and the world might need him right now.

Sweet prince we got u fam: I appreciate the plans to kill him. I appreciate that you care. I don't want to talk about my personal history.

Sweet prince we got u fam: But I prefer poop mail over glitterbombs. He's not #fabulous.

Body Disposal: We got u fam but also UR GETTING SO MANY HUGS PREPARE URSELF

A Cop: Just so that we are all aware of the best way to move forward, would you like us to ignore what we know, knowing that it wasn't intended to be known to us?

Sweet prince we got u fam: Yes. After the poop mail is done. ~ Forget ~

Taser: but im still down for murder. Just hmu, he hurt u n he dies.

Sweet prince we got u fam: #dark!Kaminari unlocked

Taser: fu k TODOROKI IM SO PROUD IM CRY I CANT

Taser: IM THE MOST DOWN FOR MURDER RN WHERE'S THAT FLAME BOI LIGHTNING BEATS FIRE ELEMENTS BIOTTTCH

Also getting hugs: When I get my quirk back, I can make him do anything. Remember that.

Sweet prince we got u fam: I will. #friendsou #hitoshi

Also getting hugs: #don't

Also getting hugs changed their username to Shinsou Hitoshi

Chapter End Notes

1-A Groupchat Usernames -

QUARANTINED ASS BITCH > Shinsou Hitoshi > Uncoolest Mom > Also getting hugs : Shinsou Hitoshi (27)

Uggs 4 Lyfe > KING EXPLOSION ~MURDER~ : Bakugo Katsuki

Horn Sis 4 Lyfe > Body Disposal : Ashido Mina

Big Sis Tsu Senses ACTIVATE : Asui Tsuyu

Moonie Squad yo > Taping up the body bag : Sero Hanta

Sailor Uranus??? I guess???? > Mixing a Murder Tape : Jirou Kyouka

Yeeting the baby with them arms ;) > Iida Tenya > A Cop : Iida Tenya

Apple Dispensary > Dark Deeds : Tokoyami Fumikage

Also yeetin a baby > Hug Train choo choo : Kirishima Eijirou

Bunny Dispensary : Koda Koji

Sugar Hypin' 5 Year Olds : Sato Rikido

Elsa Cosplay on Point > Sweet prince we got u fam : Todoroki Shouto

Tuxedo Mask : Shouji Mezo

Still Ji-Ji > LAME ASS MORAL BITCH : Ojiro Masharao

But im sailor jupiter :(> Taser : Kaminari Denki

Hack His Life BB : Hagakure Tooru

Cement Hookup (thnx daddy) : Uraraka Ochako

Happiness is Precious

Chapter Summary

Eri is allowed to come back to the dorm, now that Shinsou appears to be over his illness. But that homecoming comes with a reminder that was startling for Shinsou and Yamada to realize. And a fruitless interrogation continues.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Intentionally causing flashbacks, Animal death (SPOILERS: it's temporary)

Thank you guys so much for these benchmarks I've passed since the last update! Over 1000 kudos and 25k hits! I really, REALLY want to drop a bonus chapter to commemorate that, but I've kind of fallen behind on my lead with only 7 chapters right now, so I'll be holding off on that for now. But look forward to some bonus updates in the future!

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou has been staying home from school while he was sick, and though he feels better, Yamada finally arranged to stay home with him today. Shinsou tried to make coffee himself for the first time and forgot the filter, which led to a lot of coffee grounds in Yamada's teeth. Shinsou recently discovered that he could talk to people he hasn't used his quirk on, leading him to believe that he's no longer selectively mute, but still intends to hide that from Yamada and Aizawa. Shinsou believes he was sold by his mother because of his quirk. One of Shinsou's triggers is someone touching his hair, especially from behind due to Hari grabbing him by the back of his head during the bleach bath torture. Baths are also a trigger, more sensitive now due to the bath Shinsou had to take to lower his fever recently. Eri and Aizawa have been living at the 1-A dorm to cover Toshinori's dorm shifts during the week, because Shinsou's fever would worsen with Eri around. Eri has been feeling angry towards Shinsou after their 'logical ruse' where they pretended that Shinsou couldn't talk to her, because he was trying to hide the fact that he was sick. Shinsou received a picture on the group chat of Uraraka floating Eri, and tried to make the floating stop, but the 1-A students put pillows on the ground as a compromise. Eri's nickname for Bakugo is 'Ugo.' When Principal Nezu watched Shinsou while he was sick, he exchanged the fish bowl that Eri and Shinsou's pet goldfish had been living in for a larger aquarium more suited to their health. Beanie is Eri's science project, a beansprout she's been growing in her windowsill. 'Fishio' is the name that Shinsou gave his pet goldfish, but he internally refers to it as 'Ten' after a Number at the Miasma that he was close to, who promised to take him to a festival when he was a child. Shinsou Ui has been extradited to Japan after Ashido submitted a witness statement that Shinsou claimed he was sold by his mother, which he told Ashido and Midoriya on the night that he tried to escape UA.

Shinsou tries not to think of it. He distracts himself with Yamada, and it's nice that Yamada still stays at the dorm today. It's nice that Yamada still checks his temperature, still worries over him, even if he makes him eat soup. Even though he wanted to cook with Yamada, Yamada at least shows him how to make coffee the right way when he asks.

He tries not to think about it, even when they're watching American movies without subtitles, and they have to pause sometimes so he can ask what a word means. It would be easier to ask without signing it.

He can't lose this.

Yamada said that he doesn't have to worry about the investigation anymore. He's free from the police, the interviews, he's as free from The Miasma as he'll ever be. He knows why Yamada wants him to believe that, he wants him to think that he's staying. To believe it. He trusts that.

He can't trust that Yamada is right. Someone else might take over the investigation, like Endeavor. Whatever connection The Miasma has with Nomus, they shouldn't have gotten involved because it's attracting a lot of attention from the heroes. Boss probably knows that. Boss probably hates that he's not dead yet, that 127 failed to kill him.

It's been a month since he came to UA. If Boss wanted to kill him here, he's finding it hard to get someone to do the job. It might actually be impossible. He might actually be safe.

But he could lose it, in a million different ways. There are some that would be more painful than the others.

He doesn't want Yamada to look anything like his mother. He doesn't want him to know that he can talk, that the mask is open, that his words could come because they'd be *dangerous*. Maybe they would use a mask, but maybe they wouldn't.

Maybe it would kill him just to see them looking at him like that. To feel cold under their stare, to see that distrust. Fear, even.

He doesn't know if what he remembers about his childhood before he was sold is right. He might have had a warm place before he got his quirk. He might have had a warm mother. He might have lost too much to his quirk already, he lost time that he can't get back, but he has to keep what he has. Silence is easy enough to keep at this point.

He gets irritated with Yamada when he keeps stopping while he buzzes the hair on the back of his neck short again. He knows it's odd, but it's fine. Yamada is nothing like Hari, especially when he talks. Hari wouldn't talk like that, or cut his hair just because he asked. Just because he liked the feeling of short hair made soft by its length.

It's fine, until Yamada mentions that he should take a shower. The oiliness from all the soaps Yamada used in that cold bath sticks to his skin and his hair, and he's sure that the sweat sticky where it's not oily isn't pleasant. He hasn't felt this unclean since he was bought by Chisaki and given access to bathe everyday, but just looking at the shower makes his blood freeze. Just standing in a bathtub is too much.

Yamada offers to stay, to talk, but he seems more comfortable when he offers to play music on the laptop for him. 27 is more comfortable with that too.

He listens to the music, translating the words when they're in English. He tried to learn English to

help Eri escape, but something about it interested him. Different words for the same things, it seemed like something from one of his books. A hint of a far off land, something that made the world impossibly bigger than it was. Bigger than it seemed.

He keeps adjusting the water so that it's hotter, so he can scrub the oil and sweat from his skin. He washes his hair twice before it starts to feel almost brittle again, feel like it did after the first bleach bath, and he lets the spray rinse it out after that so he doesn't have to touch it.

The world is impossibly big. His mother had been living in another country, a far off land, but she might not be there now. The detective said that 'they had her,' and Aizawa said that she was alive. That's all he knows. There's a pull in his gut that wants to know more, but he ignores it.

Yamada says that UA feels small, but it's not. It's normal, and he's spent too long in his small room at The Miasma, in the too big spaces outside on jobs and trips outside of the 8 Precepts. He can still see the sky, the same sky outside, but it doesn't feel like it will swallow him whole and crush him. It just feels like it's there, like it has a different name. Like it always has, but he just didn't know it.

There's droplets of water on the tile wall, and he traces them with a finger before he writes it. '27.' It's different from the way Memory wrote it on his skin with the tattoo machine, a burn that dragged on and on, slowly. That name lives inside his skin, under the black band that Nemoto put there, even more slowly.

He drags his hand over that name, like Nemoto did to his skin. It's still there, but that doesn't matter.

He writes 'Shinsou Hitoshi.' It's not a name that settles easily into his skin. It's more complicated, longer, harder to write. Shinsou Hitoshi was sold by his mother, lost things in that dark room that stretched further than time or the world could ever be. Shinsou Hitoshi was buried beneath 27, beneath Dog, and Shinsou Hitoshi became more complicated because of that.

Shinsou Hitoshi was the first name he was given, when he was born to his mother. He had it before he had his quirk, probably before he had clothes. When he was born into this world and had no idea what would happen to him afterwards. When he probably screamed because it was terrifying, so disturbingly *new* to be born into this world.

Shinsou Hitoshi is a name that he wants. He wants to go back to that birth, but that's unreasonable. He wants to go back to it a different way, to be without scars or tattoos, but that's even more unreasonable.

He wants to feel that way, though.

Yamada mentions it when he checks his phone, when a bright smile works over his face. "Looks like we'll get our first snow soon! Definitely looking forward to those crazy snowball fights now that we can't escape it after class. Has Eri ever seen snow before?"

It snowed once while he was on a trip to the bookstore, and he tried to bring some of it back to her. He smiled stupidly behind the mask at the snowflakes catching on his hair, kept bending down to grab more of it from the street because it kept melting in his hand. He was sure that he could still make it in time.

He shakes his head, because it melted before he got back to the room, and a wet, cold hand was no way to explain snow to her. But he smiles, because it's different here. He wants to show her that feeling, that snow.

He wants to feel that feeling, 'snow.' He knows there are probably better words for that, but it's not the same.

He wants to feel the snow with Eri.

*

Eri has to hug Ashi really tight so she stops crying after Zawa's last class. "Ashi, it's okay! You can come over and hang out with Twenny now that he's better!"

Ashi gets really happy when she hears that, and her tears stop really quick before Zawa walks over with a big sigh. "It's Wednesday." Zawa is really, *really* sleepy because he doesn't get to sleep at the heroes' dorm, so he stops talking long enough for Kami to say 'My dudes' really loud. "Shinsou will be at the dorm this weekend, if not at school tomorrow. Don't come to my dorm for *anything*. Tell Toshinori if someone is dying."

It's okay even if Ashi can't come over, because Zawa is probably going to sleep for a really long time, and Eri can sleep on top of him. And that means that if Twenny starts making her weird or mad, she can kind of get away from him.

Eri liked being with the heroes all the time, and they helped her feel better, like they always do. Sometimes, she still missed Twenny really bad, but sometimes just thinking about him made her flippy and itchy and mad. But she's going to try really hard not to do that, because Zawa said that Twenny is really happy that she gets to go back to their dorm today, since he's not sick.

She made a really good picture for Twenny, and she has a lot of games they can play, and she really wants to be really happy with him again, even if she's worried that she won't. Maybe looking at Twenny will make her remember that he's dumb sometimes and makes her mad, and that he's not a cool mom because he made the heroes put down pillows when she was flying.

But she tries to smile really really big when they get to the door so maybe he won't, because she misses the not-dumb Twenny.

And Twenny looks really happy and not dumb, and that makes her miss him even more. "Twenny!"

Twenny picks her up when she runs at him and squeezes her really tight, and she squeezes him back super tight too. Kiri said she's getting really strong and she's got big muscles, even if she can't really see them like she can see Kiri's and the other heroes. "I really missed you," Twenny says, and it's only a little dumb because his voice makes her want to cry a little. "How-" Twenny makes a really weird sneezy sound, and it blows her hair when he does it. "Was school? And spending time with the heroes?"

Eri has to put her head on Twenny's shoulder to hug him really tight and get all the big happy feelings inside her out. Twenny was talking normal! He was asking her questions normal instead of talking weird, so he really *was* all better! "It was really really fun! We did a lot of really fun stuff, like flying and making pictures and doing girl's nights and watching all of Sailor Moon! And Ugo gave me lots of secret piggy back rides down the stairs really fast, but you can't tell anyone about it because it's a secret!"

"Yes, it's definitely a secret," Zawa says, because he already knows about stuff before she tells him. Especially when it happens at the heroes' dorm, since he watches all the TVs in the Safe Room.

“Don’t let him-” Twenny starts to get kind of mad, before he blows all of his big mad out and it makes her hair blow again. “Don’t let him run too fast when he does that.”

Eri leans back to put her hands on Twenny’s face, and she smiles so big that she has to make him smile too. He’s trying to be a cool mom, and that makes her really happy. “You can do it too, Twenny! I bet you can run really *really* fast down the stairs, and I’ll hold you really really tight too! And it’ll be even better than when Ugo does it!”

Twenny looks really surprised that she thinks that, and then he starts pinching at her horn and looking at it. It starts to make Eri a little mad because she doesn’t really like Twenny poking her horn sometimes, but then he smiles really *really* big. “You really must have been happy. Your horn grew.”

Eri feels her own eyes get really big, before she really has to kick all of the happy out. “Twenny, it works! It really works! I can fix Mirio by being happy!”

Zawa and Yama get closer to see, and Eri is sure that her horn must be growing a whole lot because she feels really happy. She puts a hand on it to feel it grow, because it’s got to grow super big right now, but she just feels like it’s getting a little warm, and not growing at all!

“Shou, I can’t believe you didn’t notice!” Yama says really play-mad at Zawa, and she feels like he shouldn’t get play-mad because it’s not really working.

“It’s small,” Zawa says, but he says it really quiet, kind of like he talks when he talks about important stuff. “It’s very hard to notice, but it is growing. That will be better in the long run.” Eri knows that Zawa is super tired because he even fell asleep in his older hero classes, not just the Class 1-A classes where he usually sleeps. But he smiles really big for her, even though he’s tired, so she knows that he means it. “I’m really glad, Eri.”

Yama gets glad in really loud ways sometimes, and he uses his super long arms to squeeze everyone into a hug. “We’ve got a happy meter running, and I can’t wait to see it fill up!”

After Yama’s big hug, Eri has to work hard on finding ways to be happy, and she’s really happy that she’s back at the dorm with everyone being so happy. Even though Zawa really has to go to sleep, Eri knows he’s really happy about that because he likes sleeping so much, and it makes her happy to know that he’s happy.

Yama is really happy that she’s back in the dorm, and it’s always easy to see that Yama’s happy, because he always smiles at everything, since he’s happy all the time. And he seems super happy about tucking Zawa in so he can sleep good.

Twenny is super happy that she’s back, and he’s really happy about her horn too, but when she gives him the picture she made of him, he’s so happy that he cries, but he promises that it’s because he’s happy.

She worked really hard to make his hair floofy and purple, and that he has a big smile that’s so big it even moves the marks on his face. And she drew a lot of cats, the same kind of cats that Twenny taught her to draw a long time ago, in a bunch of different colors. He’s so happy that he wants to put it on his wall right by his bed, right now, and knowing that he liked it makes her *super* happy.

Eri likes when everyone is super happy, because it makes her super *duper* happy. She wants to know if even Fishio and Fishie are so happy that they’re smiling with their little fish mouths, because if they were, she’s *sure* that her quirk would be ready to fix Mirio’s quirk.

But Fishio and Fishie are being really weird, because Fishie is sleeping on top of the water, and Fishio is moving around really slow, like he's too tired to move his fins around. "Twenny! Fishio and Fishie are really tired, but Mr. Nezu didn't give them a bed in their big house!"

Twenny walks into the room and looks at their fish, and he looks really scared, and she really doesn't like it. "Hey, Eri?"

Eri's really worried, and she hopes Twenny can fix it. "Are Fishie and Fishio okay?"

Eri feels kind of dizzy all of a sudden, and her head kind of hurts, but when she puts her hand to her head to try to feel where it feels dizzy, her hand is wet.

"Are you okay?" Twenny asks, and he sounds like he's not worried anymore, even if he still looks a little worried when she looks at him. "You might be tired too. Fishie and Fishio were just tired, but now they're fine. We can get them a bed to sleep in."

Eri does kind of feel tired, but she's glad Fishio and Fishie aren't tired anymore. They're both swimming around really happy, and she tries to smile at them but it feels kind of twitchy. "Can you read me a story in my room?"

She really wants to hear Twenny read the story about the color clown, but she knows Twenny doesn't really like reading books that they used to read before they got rescued. He looks like he's going to tell her no, but then Yama comes in with Beanie, but Beanie looks really tired and brown because he's 'wilting.'

"Yama! Beanie's wilting! We gotta call Momo!" Eri runs over to Yama, even if she really doesn't want to tell Momo. Even if Momo is really smart and knows how to fix Beanie, she doesn't want her to know that she didn't water him while she was away with the heroes.

"It's okay, little bean! I've had plenty of wilty little Beanies before I grew a green thumb, and we just need to give him a little coffee to help him perk up!" Yama says when he pats her head, and he starts making coffee to help Beanie perk up.

It makes her happy to know that Yama can fix Beanie, even though she's not sure where his green thumb is. The thumbs on his hands aren't green, but maybe he has another thumb hiding somewhere. "I'm really sorry I didn't water you, Beanie. I'm gonna make my thumb turn green too so you never have to get wilty again."

"It's okay, Eri! The big dumb-dumb loud guy forgot about me, but he's gonna give me some coffee to make up for it," Yama says for Beanie, but his voice doesn't get the same way that Mirio's does when he talks for Beanie.

"Let's pick out a story, Eri," Twenny says, and even if Eri wanted to make sure Beanie perked up really good, she still really wanted to cuddle next to Twenny on her super soft bed even more.

But she gets kind of mad when she starts falling asleep, because Twenny makes the color clown's splishes *really* splishy this time, and she wanted to hear them instead of falling asleep.

*

27 knows he doesn't have a lot of time, that this much is reckless enough, but he doesn't know what to *do*.

Eri's fish is *dead*. Ten doesn't look like he's far off from it either. The fish that Eri got from Shichi-Go-San are dead or dying, her first childhood pet is dead.

He didn't feed her fish. His weird quirk sickness drove her away, made her stay away from the dorm to keep her away from him because she made it worse. His quirk *killed her fish.*

And he still used it on her.

At the very least, he can shield her from it while she's under his quirk. He knows he could do more, he could fix this and she wouldn't even know, but he *can't*.

Her horn was small, but it was *growing*. Not from pain. For the first time in her life, her horn wasn't growing because of pain or fear, but from *happiness*. Both she and Mirio wanted that, wanted to use her quirk when it accumulated happiness to Rewind him until he had his quirk again. It would take a long time for that to happen, especially with how slowly it was growing, and if he did *that*, he would taint all of that happiness. He would use it up and replace it with something else, he'd *steal her happiness*.

He nearly loses control of his quirk when Yamada walks in, and he's not sure if he should have let it go. Yamada's face falls, disappointment, maybe he thinks that 27 is still sick but he has to realize that it's worse. *'Fish dead.'*

Yamada's mouth drops open before he covers it with his hand, as horrified as 27 is. Maybe just as guilty. Maybe that guilt was what made him slip up.

'Can fix.' 27 knows that they know he can do that. Yamada knows he can control Eri's quirk, and that it's never really been necessary for her to build up or control her quirk to bring Mirio's quirk back. He didn't want them to know at first, he knows how dangerous it is that he can do that. Even Chisaki didn't want to use it when he found out, Chisaki swore he would take 27 back to The Miasma if he did. The results weren't good enough for him anyway, they were wrong somehow.

Yamada looks unsure, looking to the side like he wants to look away from the sight of Eri under his quirk, her arms hanging loose at her sides and her eyes turned white. "It might be better to have that talk with her. A fish floating off to the farm is a part of growing up, unfortunately. Even if it was my fault."

'She knows about death. Doesn't need talk,' 27 signs. He knows from his books that in a normal childhood, it's better for children to learn about death from a pet rather than a person, that pets are supposed to be less consequential and damaging. But Eri knows what death is, Chisaki told her enough times that she killed people, even if 27 tried to tell her that he was lying. Even if he knows he might not have been. *'Eri likes fish. Happy.'*

Yamada pulls a frown, he's not happy with the plan, but he's not happy with the alternative either. But one of them has to lose to the other. "How does it work? You're... you're not going to get hurt, right?"

27 shakes his head. It's not going to hurt him. Physically, at least. *'Push into mind. Hard to explain.'* He's glad that he doesn't have to explain, because Yamada gives him a small nod, still unsure, and walks closer.

He knows Yamada has never seen Eri's quirk, so he's probably curious. He probably needs to know because Eri still can't control it, and she came to UA for that reason, she became a ward because of that. But he'd rather Yamada not watch, because there's a chance that 27 might mess up. He knows how to do it one way, but it's worth a shot to try it another.

He can barely feel it, but he does. Even if he needed her to answer him to pull the string of his quirk, he can still feel what she feels, completely unlike any other control he has over others. She's

worried, the prickle of it is muted under his skin, but he closes his eyes and tries to dig up something better to push against the control, and into her mind. Into her horn.

Happiness. What makes him happy?

He's happy that Eri isn't mad at him, he's happy that she's happy and safe. He was so happy that she finally gave him a *picture*, a piece of herself that she hasn't given him in months. She drew pictures for all of the heroes, but hasn't given him a single one since they were rescued, and even if he doesn't have the pictures from before the rescue anymore, he has *that*. He knows what he looks like in her eyes now, and it's *different*. He's not wearing a mask, and the scars on his face weren't colored red like they're bleeding. He was so *happy*.

He feels the tug afterwards, he knows that the push was pulled through, but when he looks he sees what he expected. That barely-there difference in her horn. Happiness is too precious, it will take too long to build it up, but it will be worth it for Mirio's sake. Eri won't have to suffer for him at least.

And at least she doesn't suffer like this. She doesn't remember it if he releases his control instead of having it break.

He can give some of that happiness back to her afterwards, at least.

He breathes out and closes his eyes, trying to pick one from the many. The first time it happened, he forgot himself while they were walking to The Chair. He remembered walking behind Bug to the Red Room, so much so that the hallways seemed to change because of that. Instead of focusing on Eri, focusing on the pain she was giving him when she was thinking of what happened in The Chair, he was trying to hide his own fear so Bug wouldn't see it. Thinking that she'd lash out, grab him by the back of his shirt to hurry him along, tell him that Cherry and Blossom didn't want to *wait* too long.

He can almost hear her voice, hear those words that he'd fear the most. *Cherry and Blossom*, pain pain *pain* trying to get them to stop, stop them from moving, burrowing deeper, might kill him. *Little shit*, her voice was so shrill that time he accidentally kicked one of the holes that the bugs came out of during training. She threw him to the ground, pinned him down, hitting him hard enough for him to realize that she'd been holding a lot back before then, she wasn't holding back and she could *kill* him. She *would* kill him, the client was going to *kill* him he couldn't make that policeman talk, but he didn't want his friends to die-

"Shinsou?" Yamada's voice cuts through that terror, but he still feels it on the edges, in how tightly he's holding himself even if he knows that only makes it hurt worse. He looks at Eri, and her horn is glowing, the wisps of green fire contained. Her eyes still blank.

He finds himself loosening his jaw, out of habit. Not because he needs to, but he's always had to before he placed a command or a question. "Reach out and touch the fish on the surface."

Eri does, and he hopes that this part is the same. The difference between controlling Eri and anyone else seems smaller now, but he used to be able to control her with just a thought. He has no idea how to tell her what to do, how to put it to words. He can think it, or imagine it, and that's much easier than he can say it.

Luckily, he doesn't need to. The green wisps surround Fishie, and start to lick towards Ten too. The clock rewinds for them both, Ten darts away as soon as he's able and Fishie thrashes with renewed life before he darts to the bottom of the tank too. He pulls the flames back, he settles Eri's quirk bit by bit. He imagines the fire burning off instead of just burning, invisible smoke as she lets

it go.

Once her horn shrinks, he focuses on building it again. He hopes it won't hurt, but he knows that it might. He has to find 'happiness' again.

He's happy that the fish are okay. Eri won't see death here, she can be protected like a child should be. More than any child should be, because he wasn't able to protect her before.

He's happy that Yamada and Aizawa will always protect her. He's happy that they're there for her. He's happy that they'll protect them both, that they'll both be safe now, that he's actually free.

He looks up and has to breathe out at what he sees. Her horn almost grew *too much* at that thought, the overwhelming emotion still caught in his chest. The Miasma might not be gone, but they can't touch him now. Not with Aizawa and Yamada, not at UA.

"That is pretty cool," Yamada says, running a hand through his hair while the other pokes at the aquarium. "Controlling her quirk like that, it's... It really goes to show how close you two are."

He knows it's dangerous. A thought stabs in his chest and almost makes 27 forget himself, he almost opens his mouth to say it, to make sure Yamada isn't afraid of it. But he knows that saying it might make Yamada afraid anyway. *'Dislike. Don't want to use Eri's quirk. But don't want her to be sad.'*

Yamada's smile tugs to the side, almost like a flinch, a nervous reaction he can't hide. "I get it, I just mean that it's kind of cool. Sharing your emotions and all. And it looks like you were pumping up the happy meter too?"

It sounds more embarrassing when Yamada puts it like that, but Shinsou nods. And the grin that answers him is enough to break his concentration on his quirk.

Eri stumbles forward, and he knew beforehand that it would take a lot out of her, but he hopes that he manages to hide it. Yamada forgot about that bean sprout Eri had until *after* he dropped the control, but luckily he knows how to fix that. Apparently coffee works on plants to bring them back from near death.

When Eri is settled next to his side, sleeping comfortably and pinning him down with the arm underneath her, he puts down the book and tries to fight the haze of sleep himself. Her soft breaths, her warmth, all that is distracting and it's more distracting because she's been gone the past few days. Her effect on him is heavier because of that.

It's still so odd, that all of this is okay. Using his quirk without permission, sleeping when he wants to, having time to rest when he's sick and having people that take care of him when he's ill. Those things don't happen to Numbers, they wouldn't happen to Dog.

Those things happen to people, to Shinsou Hitoshi.

It's easier to work that name under his skin the more he thinks about that.

*

Naomasa breathes in, before he opens the door to try again. It might be a relief that Eraserhead didn't want to be here, that he wouldn't be breathing fire down his neck when this situation was difficult enough.

"Mrs. Shinsou," he says, and he sees her head snap up and her eyes narrow at that. *Yes*, he's heard

her say that her name is ‘Eloane Paro,’ and *yes*, he’s called her that, but niceties aren’t getting them anywhere. He might play a more subtle ‘Bad Cop’ than Sansa, but he’s not opposed to calling him in if he doesn’t have *something* tonight. “Let’s try this again. 12 years ago, on August 13th, you called the police to say that your son didn’t return from school-”

Mrs. Shinsou sighs, wringing her hands as she drops her head. “He was kidnapped, I don’t know-how many times do you want me to-”

“The school marked him as absent that day, on the 13th. Records show that they called you to ask if he was sick, but you didn’t return a single call.” It was difficult to get these ‘records,’ the fuzzy recollection from a retired secretary that Sansa had to spend four hours with to get this much. The local police truly should have done this much work themselves, or kept better records. “You never called them back, either-”

“I was at work, or I was...*drunk*,” Mrs. Shinsou barks out a nervous laugh at that, the tremor working back into her hands before she starts wringing them again. Naomasa knows he’s either getting to a breaking point or a breakdown, but with the time allotted to him, he’ll have to risk it.

“Did you have a drinking problem when you had Hitoshi?” Naomasa asks, pulling on this singular emotional reaction that seemed to be outside of stress from the extradition or repeated interviews. “Were you an unfit mother?”

Mrs. Shinsou’s knuckles turn white, but she still won’t look at him. He can see despite the way her head is angled downwards that she’s biting her lips together, and no matter what she says, he knows it would be honest if she *said it*. He’s offered understanding, compassion, just a chance to look at the facts or to release this dark secret that she’s held onto for years, and nothing has worked. She knows that he knows when she’s lying at this point, but she keeps *lying*.

“You must have thought that it would have been better for him,” Naomasa says, earning another flinch for his efforts. Digging into that deluded mindset, *selling a child* because it would be better than living with an alcoholic. “Or maybe you just needed the money-”

“Je veux un avocat,” Mrs. Shinsou bites out, and even though it’s French, he knows both the meaning and that it’s honest.

“You have the right to retain a lawyer at your own expense,” Naomasa repeats, almost second-nature to him after repeating those rights before every interview he’s ever performed. “But, as your bank account in France was depleted and you didn’t have cash on hand when you were arrested, you don’t have the funds to retain a lawyer. I’ve allowed you to make those calls anyway. Officer Sansa and myself have helped you with that. The only thing that will make this any easier for you is if you just tell me what happened. In your own words, what happened on August 13th? What happened that led to the disappearance of your son?”

He gets silence, and he lets it drag on. He watches as the tension works to a pitch then fades, the pressure builds before he thinks she might talk, but it becomes apparent that she just becomes *used to it*.

Shoving his chair into the table after he gets up isn’t entirely an *act* of frustration, it’s honest frustration. They only have days to work with, and they can’t afford to have Shinsou Ui relaxing a single second of it.

Sansa is already standing by the door with a folder in hand. Naomasa honestly didn’t want to go with that. They have no idea if this Miasma might have helped Shinsou Ui escape the authorities in France, but the fact that she’s still alive seems to suggest that they’re not involved.

Sansa walks in, and Naomasa walks to the one-way mirror, observing not just to use his quirk. This might rattle something loose, especially with Sansa presenting it.

Sansa drags the chair out gently, lays the folder on the table long enough for it to raise suspicion. Shinsou Ui's head lifts just enough to stare at it, and that's exactly what they both want. *"You know, I've actually met your son. Played cards with him a few times, he's a smart kid. He really likes cats."*

There's a flinch that almost looks like a dry heave, Shinsou Ui's mouth opens the same way but as expected, *nothing* comes out. If it's not a misremembered script that she read to those that were investigating or covering the kidnapping, details so obviously wrong that she doesn't try to explain why they were wrong when they're pointed out, it's *silence*.

"Now that kid, I bet he loves cats," Sansa says, opening the folder to the first picture, the one of Shinsou Hitoshi at age 4. *"He even likes heroes that are cat-themed. You probably got him that Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats lunchbox, right?"*

Shinsou Ui whispers a quiet 'Yes,' but a pinch in Naomasa's right arm tells him she's lying.

"So, you know that kid, but here's the kid that I know." Sansa flips the picture over to reveal the one underneath, and Shinsou Ui looks away with a hand over her mouth. *"That's the same kid. That's your son, Shinsou Hitoshi. Your son has been through hell. I don't even know everything he's been through, but what I do know absolutely sickens me. And he's still your son underneath those-"*

"Je veux un avocat!" Shinsou Ui screams before she slaps a hand on the table, trying to rock it back and forth to possibly topple it over, but it's bolted to the ground. *"Je veux un avocat!"*

"You're not getting a lawyer until we get answers," Sansa growls. *"Who put those scars on that kid? Who dunked him in bleach until his hair turned out like that? I know the answers to those questions."* They don't know the answer to half of those questions, but Sansa says it confidently enough that she might feel the pressure closing in on her. *"But what I want to know is who put him in that position? What kind of unfit mother would sell her own son?"*

Shinsou Ui starts shaking her head, slowly at first until she looks at Sansa, still shaking. *"Kidnappé. Il a été kidnappé-"*

Sansa doesn't need to know French, or feel the pinch in his arm to know she was lying.

Pursuit of Normalcy

Chapter Summary

Shinsou Hitoshi tries to be normal, but his circumstances are anything but. Sansa, Ashido, and Yamada all three have different plans for him, but what 27 wants is far different from anything on offer to him.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Flashback to Chisaki

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou has been wearing a fever monitoring bracelet linked to Yamada's phone while he's been sick, because his fever can spike dangerously and quickly. After the events of TodoBroki's Secrets, Shinsou has been placed on the "Hug Train," even though he doesn't want to be there. Principal Nezu looked through Shinsou's placement exams when he was babysitting Shinsou, and determined that Shinsou learns best by hearing lectures through another exam. Quirk Thief AKA Monoma was under the impression that Shinsou was being dosed with high levels of quirk suppressants when he was asked to copy both Shinsou and Eri's quirks by Aizawa and Yamada, before Shinsou got sick. Monoma promised Yamada that he and the entirety of 1-B would learn enough JSL to be conversationally fluent after Yamada mentioned that Shinsou might be lonely and need a friend. Shinsou believes he can speak freely now, and has spoken to Todoroki even though previously, he was only able to speak to people that he had Brainwashed, and he doesn't want Izuku or anyone else to realize that he can talk. Shinsou Ui is being held in Tsukauchi and Sansa's custody at the police station for 72 hours for questioning, and she's been repeating the phrase "I want a lawyer" in French. Ashido knew Shinsou when he was 4 years old, and met the original Mocha, Shinsou's stuffed cat. In Wards, Yamada has a sidekick who helps him on his radio show, named Byte Sound. Yamada's sign name for Shinsou is 'Shin Amaze.'

Shinsou Hitoshi likes cats, but he likes them with a normal appreciation, so he wears a striped long-sleeve shirt with just a cat faced pocket on his chest. Shinsou Hitoshi might have scars, and might be used to wearing a mask, but he's only going to wear it for a few days because he's been sick. Even if he's not contagious, not according to Yamada, he still wears the purple and pink galaxy face mask that Eri picks out.

He wavers for a bit, but he decides that Shinsou Hitoshi definitely likes drinking coffee in the morning. Even after he's been sick. Yamada finally takes off the bracelet after checking his temperature with the thermometer, and seems a little confused with the number he sees, but Yamada gives him a cup of coffee, even if he was sure that he shouldn't. That's fine, because Shinsou Hitoshi can eat a full breakfast just fine to make up for it.

Shinsou Hitoshi goes to school, and that's something that he's never really appreciated the right

way until now. People go to school, normal people go to school. Maybe 27 has missed a lot of school since he came to UA, but from now on it can be different. From now on, he can be Shinsou Hitoshi.

He starts to regret that Shinsou Hitoshi goes to school when he sees every head turn to face him and stare, how much attention Shinsou Hitoshi gets, but he's hopeful that it won't be like this all the time. Once Shinsou Hitoshi becomes a more familiar face in class again, they won't act like this.

Ashi will probably never stop, but he'll have to get used to that.

"Shinny," Ashi calls out, her hand stretched out and she looks angry before he notices the way she's holding her desk with her other hand, like she's trying to restrain her body from jumping away from it. "I need to hold your hand. *Really* tight. Because I need to hug you."

Shinsou Hitoshi is fine with hugs. From Ashi, at least. He shrugs and lifts his arms just a bit away from his chest in invitation. Ashi's eyes widen in an almost predatory way, and if he didn't know what killing intent looked like so well, he would almost mistake it in her eyes, but she jumps up to nearly crush the wind out of him.

She really shouldn't be strong enough to lift him off the ground and swing him around like this, but he's grateful that Aizawa calls the end of it by telling everyone to take their seats before it makes him too dizzy. But from the sound of feet rushing back to their desks, even if he doesn't catch who they belonged to, he appreciates that for a different reason.

Aizawa protected him again, it seems.

Aizawa still seemed tired this morning, even if he wasn't as exhausted as he was yesterday after going without sleep for nearly three days. Once again, he's deciding to leave Class 1-A to their own devices while he zips himself into his sleeping bag, but even though Eri seems to want Momo to help her with her science workbook instead of asking him, he won't be bored in this class.

There's a workbook, a pair of headphones attached to a tiny black device, and a piece of paper that explains where all of it came from. 'After looking through your placement exams, I thought it best to start off with a History objective. Yamada has the materials to cover the rest of your curriculum, and will let me know if it needs any adjustment. :3'

He's not sure when the robots looked through those exams, or why they were working with Yamada, but he knows that's a face that the robots make. There are instructions for this portable USB reader, including how to switch out the USBs that are pre-loaded with lectures to accompany the workbook. It's recommended to listen to the lecture first, then try the quizzes in the workbook. Even if he's oddly tempted to see what the workbook says, he'll follow those instructions.

It's like going to school normally. Listening to a teacher speak, then answering questions. He's never been able to do that, but now Shinsou Hitoshi can.

Or he could, if he didn't have to deal with all of these bothersome people.

"Oi," Bakugo grunts before he kicks his desk, even if he should be sitting at his own. Shinsou didn't notice before, but he's wearing a white face mask. "I told you not to run around with the fucking plague. You better be over that shit if you're at school again."

Shinsou Hitoshi might have been able to antagonize with his smirk if he wasn't wearing a face mask, but at least he can antagonize in a different way. "Tic tac toe twinsies."

He knows that Bakugo hates Todo for some reason, and Todo said that on the chat. He knows that Bakugo would be especially angry that he's implying that they're familiar like that, just because they're both wearing face masks.

But apparently, that's not the reason Bakugo's eyebrow starts and stops twitching, before he stiffens.

"Hashtag," Bakugo grates out, before the rest explodes in a scream. "It's called a 'hashtag,' don't fucking act like that Icyhot bastard, spouting shit off that you don't even know-"

Todo covers Bakugo's mouth from behind him, pulling him into his shoulder, and nods at 27. "It's difficult, but I will try to be a good sempai to you. The Meme Study Group meets tonight in Sero's room."

27 appreciates that Todo drags Bakugo away, at least, but he hates that he'll probably have to endure that study group. Normal people knew 'memes,' and he didn't. It really shouldn't feel much different from not knowing what normal people did academically, but it does. But that doesn't matter. He just needs to learn it in that study group.

He needs to learn a lot of things, but since UA is a school, he's probably in the right place to do that.

Ashi forces him to say it, when she walks up pouting once homeroom ends. "*Shinny*, you don't *have* to study during study period. No one does! Just come hang out with me like Eri gets to! Or talk to me on the chat!"

Eri looks up at him like she hopes that he would, as though she still has worries that he can make friends here, and that much is ridiculous enough to make him smile. But his reasons not to might be ridiculous enough to make him laugh, and he tries to hide it while he rubs the back of his neck. "I like studying at school. It...makes me feel like I'm really going to school with you, Ashi. Like I could have if...things were normal."

Ashi straightens, becoming too quiet before her hands clap together in front of her chest, and he reaches out to hold Eri's shoulder to shield her from the fear of that familiar noise. But Ashi doesn't notice that at all. "Shinny. We're going to give you the most normal school day in the entire history of ever!"

He already knows they won't.

*

Shinsou thought that things would settle down once he escaped from Class 1-A, from all of the paper airplanes with notes inside that had been tossed in his direction, or the paper hat that Bakugo defended by saying it would probably be normal for him to be bullied. He *thought* that he might be able to make some real progress on this workbook, but it seemed he was forgetting about someone.

"I'm glad that you were able to take some time off for that medication to be adjusted," Quirk Thief says, trying to wear that more neutral and less crazy face, and that probably allowed him to slip from that Kendo person's detection. Kendo is also distracted by Eri wanting to show her the results of the science experiment that she did with Momo, that prism shaped crystal that bends light into rainbows. "I hope you don't mind if I-"

27 grabs Quirk Thief's covered wrist, and keeps his grip tight enough that he can't slide forward to touch him despite that. Despite the warning glare he levels, Quirk Thief tries, and that less crazy

face starts to slip a bit while he chuckles.

“Shinsou, I truly would rest easier if I could know for certain-”

27 isn't stupid enough to forget he has two hands, he grabs the other wrist without even having to break his stare. Now that Quirk Thief is out of options, out of free hands and the ones he has can't reach for his skin even when he strains his wrists to try. He sees Quirk Thief's eyebrow start twitching.

“Shinsou. Let me try to copy your quirk. *Please.*” The strain is becoming more apparent in Quirk Thief as he devolves into begging. 27 has never seen a neurosis like this being directed at him, even if Eri has to deal with more pleasant versions of it from Class 1-A. Those hero students' excitable and eager attempts to win her favor are far easier to endure than *this*.

Wait. Did Class 1-A do that to him too-

He sees what Quirk Thief is trying to do, and rears back to meet it. If Quirk Thief was going to resort to headbutting him, 27 was at least going to do some damage. He was at least going to *enjoy* it.

There's a blinding thunk when their skulls meet, and he manages to knock Quirk Thief back, earning a hiss. He imagines if Quirk Thief needs to concentrate to steal his quirk, then his concentration was broken at the same second that he could have stolen it.

He hopes so, at least. The spot where their heads met right below his hairline shouldn't be more than a bruise, but he will test his luck if Quirk Thief keeps pushing.

“MO-NO-MA!” Kendo and Yamada almost sound like they've rehearsed, and it seems like Yamada is very content to let Kendo deal out a finishing blow to the back of Quirk Thief's head, bending him back over the desk.

27 isn't *surprised* that he still tried to take advantage of that by trying to yank one of his arms from 27's grasp, but he's surprised that Kendo was able to pull him away despite his grip not loosening.

“Monoma, *sit,*” Kendo barks out like she's ordering a dog around, and even if Chisaki and Hari used that same tone on him before, it was very rarely for that order. More like ‘kneel,’ or ‘take Eri back to the room.’ Or ‘Do you want to die?’

It was hard to know if he answered that one right, sometimes. Harder to know if he answered honestly. But the answer was always the same. Forcing himself not to flinch when that hand hovering came closer, grinding his teeth to hold in the pain. Forgetting it in a blink, that queasy sensation of Repair working under his skin and stitching his parts together again.

“Shinsou? Are you alright?” Kendo asks, and like a blink she's in front of him, her hands in a half sign. He doesn't want to know what her face looks like, but before her hands drop, he thinks she was signing a formal ‘Sorry.’

‘*Fine,*’ 27 signs, feeling the urge to run away from her stare before he forgets it can be useful, and seeing Quirk Thief's false guilt on his face reminds him of it. ‘*Need help. M-O-N-O-M-A. Bully me.*’

As loudly as Quirk Thief might protest, the furrow 27 works between his eyebrows when he stares at the desk in front of him is probably louder to Kendo, and if she's anything like Class 1-A, this will be taken care of *quickly*. “We'll take care of that, Shinsou. I'm really sorry, on behalf of all of Class 1-B, but it won't happen again.”

He truly doesn't expect much with that saccharine tone, but when he raises his head to at least enjoy another blow to Quirk Thief's skull, he sees two strikes in quick succession and notices the expressions on most of the Class B students. They look almost *murderous*.

27 is pretty sure he looks murderous too, when he can't concentrate on the lecture playing from his headphones every time he tries. He can't hear the words when they fade out, when he has to look up and around, when he can't hear because just being in this classroom is too *loud*. Not even Yamada is loud, this place is *loud*, loud enough to rattle his bones like Yamada's quirk probably could.

27 has to put the headphones down, but even when he watches Eri playing with her prism crystal, he can't force this buzzing from under his skin.

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Aizawa doesn't know the specifics, only knows from Hizashi's wince when he picked up the wards to take them to his free period that something happened to cause Shinsou's oddly positive mood to sour into what it is now.

At first glance, Shinsou just seems frustrated with the lesson plan that Principal Nezu has designed for him, but the endless fidgeting with the headphones and glances around the room is familiar. Aizawa curls a hand around the back of his neck, because even though he knows the best course of action, he's not sure how to guide Shinsou towards it when he still seems intent on his studies.

Shinsou wants to appreciate a 'normal' school day, when his situation was anything but normal and he certainly *wasn't* at a normal school anyway.

Aizawa closes out his email where he had been scrolling through old memos as a way to distract himself from answering Naomasa's call, and stands up before tapping the cubicle that Shinsou was working at. When Shinsou takes off the headphones, Aizawa tilts his head towards the corner that works best for this and starts walking towards it, eventually followed.

There's a potted plant that Aizawa moves out of the way and replaces with a chair, though he usually just curls up inside his sleeping bag when he uses it. From this corner, the entire expanse of the teacher's lounge is visible, including the door that Shinsou's back had been turned to at that cubicle. There's also a window directly to the left, far enough away that the outside can also be surveyed. Aizawa sits on the floor underneath the window, catching quickly that Shinsou's curious stare was directed at him instead of his surroundings.

"It can help to be aware of your surroundings," Aizawa says, though that's not what Dr. Tenma or any of the research he's done would call it. He wouldn't call it what Shinsou seems to think it is either, fighting not to raise an eyebrow at what he signs. "Not as a bodyguard..."

Aizawa glances away when he recalls that Shinsou said that he worked as a 'bodyguard' at Miasma. It was something akin to what he suspected when he noticed how often Shinsou would check his surroundings or stare at new people in the beginning of the wardship, something that he thought was drilled into him. Now he finds himself feeling foolish for not connecting the dots when he always knew exactly what it was.

And he feels like it might be an apt comparison to make. "In a way, it might be. There's a part of your brain that is trying to protect you like a bodyguard would, trying to make you aware of your current surroundings. Perceiving it to be dangerous to not know what's around you. Taking some time with your back against the wall and everything in clear view can help sometimes."

Shinsou pulls himself a bit straighter in the chair, his hands folding before he signs again. ‘*P-T-S-D.*’

Aizawa nods, wavering before he admits more. “Hypervigilance. Maybe it’s made me into a more effective teacher.”

That was a poor joke that Hizashi made when he started perusing the wealth of troubling symptoms that Aizawa either didn’t have or stopped hiding. As nice as it would have been to be able to spot a student on their phone or close to pulling a reckless stunt during training, he’s far less perceptive in that state. Despite how much his body is screaming at him to know what’s around him, where this invisible threat will be coming from, he’s nearly blind to his environment because of it.

He notices that Shinsou presses himself a bit more firmly to the back of the chair as it goes on, glancing between the door and the window with little to survey in between. The fingers pressed too tightly together where they’re folded in his lap start to relax the more he looks out the window, perhaps distracted by some students cutting class or just the gray and dreary weather outside.

Eri looks up from her workbook with a frown before she approaches, shuffling from one foot to the other before her gaze settles on Aizawa. “Dad, it’s not Twenny’s fault that Monoma was being bad, so he shouldn’t get in time out.”

Shinsou huffs a cut-off laugh, raising a hand to tug at the corner of his face mask. “It’s a PTSD time out. I’m not in trouble.”

While Aizawa is grateful that it’s effective enough to settle Shinsou to this degree, his mind eventually works through another odd ‘Dad’ comment to catch on Monoma’s name. “Did Monoma do something to warrant putting him in time out?”

Eri nods with a pensive, if not irritated expression. “He headbutted Twenny, so Kendo had to chop him a lot, and I think he should get a lot of time outs and a lot of chops even if he kind of doesn’t have a dark face sometimes. He’s still got a really dark face a lot.”

Aizawa weighs whether it would be worth his effort to expel Monoma, knowing that Kan would force him to re-enroll him before the day was out and was certainly capable of doling out his own punishment, before he sees Shinsou pick at the mask again. ‘*I head attack. Thought he would. Tried to steal quirk again.*’

It made a bit more sense that there was some provocation behind the attack, especially when the attack took place during Hizashi’s class. And Hizashi might have let his own worries prevent him from stepping in when necessary just to see if Monoma could succeed, and get any information on the state of Shinsou’s quirk through that student. “I’m sure Hizashi will keep a better eye on him in the future, but try not to resort to violence with the students, especially Monoma. Half of Kendo’s job as Class 1-B’s president is to dole out physical violence on Monoma.”

Eri approves of that, nodding again, but her studies seem to be a bit boring when compared to the excitement of sitting in a corner between them. The three of them probably make an odd sight if anyone were to come into the teacher’s lounge other than Hizashi, who might still find it an odd sight even if he could clue in to the reason for it.

Aizawa will never be thankful for USJ, but knowing that the three of them were a bit closer because of that gives him a similar feeling to it.

Before the end of the day, Shinsou has to fend off a lot of invitations to do things with the hero students this weekend. Todo and Sparky are intent on making him go to that 'Meme Study Group', Ashi wants him to have a make-over night like Eri did, and Izuku still wants to show him more of those Legend of Zelda games, even if he knows that he's not as mute anymore.

He specifically doesn't want Izuku to realize *how* not mute he is, so he tells him that he's busy, even if that means he might have to endure some of the other activities offered to him to prove that he is.

The worst invitation came when Kirimson Shark and Floaty came into the teacher's lounge during lunch to invite him and Eri to eat with them in the lunchroom. Maybe it would be normal for Shinsou Hitoshi to want to eat in that lunchroom, to eat with people his own age, but he's fine with not being completely normal. It feels more normal to eat in the teacher's lounge, because that's what he does when he goes to school.

Maybe it's not normal to pay attention to a Hero Ethics class when he's not a hero student. Especially when he has a study plan from the Rat Boss to work on that requires listening to lectures with headphones. Maybe Shinsou Hitoshi shouldn't be interested in the class at all, shouldn't wonder what would have happened if one of these hero students really met him on one of his jobs when they were learning the signs that a member of an enemy group was there unwillingly.

Maybe Shinsou Hitoshi shouldn't find it funny that he would have matched absolutely every single one of those signs - pointed focus on the objective, easily rattled, ostracized from the rest of the group in subtle ways, not as passionate about the group's objective. If a hero showed up, 27 would have been focused on the job at hand - protect the client, complete their objective as quickly as possible if feasible or abandon them. With the stakes that dire - the razor thin line of disappointing Boss by failing the client or enraging him by getting caught - he would probably be going out of his mind, not just rattled. Honzo was the only client who ever did invite him closer to the inner circle on jobs, but not when the objective for that job was being performed. And he wouldn't have been able to preach about the superiority of swamp based mutants or *anything* else with the mask holding his jaw tight.

Maybe Shinsou Hitoshi shouldn't have preferences for which hero could have found him like that, but he does. Even if he knows it would have been hopeless, that Boss' quirk would have pulled him back regardless, he thinks that Mirio might have seen it better than the others.

Maybe that's just wishful thinking. If he wasn't sold to Chisaki, if he was still at The Miasma, then he would have wanted to meet Mirio just once. Even if it wouldn't have made any difference at the end.

Shinsou Hitoshi probably shouldn't feel so exhausted after a normal school day, and probably shouldn't be dreading the dorm shift tonight. He should probably find it easier to pick his poison when he's lived with the threat of being poisoned longer than he can remember, when he's lived under far less dire stakes than having to deal with any particular member of Class 1-A.

Shinsou Hitoshi probably shouldn't feel like all of those concerns disappear like smoke when Aizawa answers his phone and storms outside without saying a word.

*

Aizawa doesn't *care* what Sansa wants to say, and he doesn't care about that 'warning' that he gave on behalf of his ward. Shinsou is *done* with the investigation, he's not going to see a single piece of it if Aizawa can help it, and no matter what information Sansa has or how necessary it is to keep it confidential, it's not worth Shinsou seeing Sansa. *At all.*

He knows the kid remembers being force fed very well, and all the obstacles in getting him to eat while he was sick is just a reminder of how difficult this investigation has made it to convince Shinsou that he's safe.

Sansa at least didn't wear his uniform, but he seems to know that he's not getting into the teacher's dorm when he leans against the railing outside the doors. Aizawa exits and closes the door behind himself, making that clear, and he doesn't like how Sansa doesn't fight that, despite the cold. "You know how weird it is to have an important witness at the station and not have you skulking around the bullpen?"

Aizawa doesn't answer that, because he knows that if Sansa is inviting that kind of hands-on observation, then Sansa is in danger of inviting far too much of it. He'll personally break Shinsou Ui's fingers if Sansa is thinking of asking what Aizawa imagines he wants to ask.

Sansa sighs, crossing his arms and glancing back at his car. Aizawa wants him to go back to it and drive away already. "Yeah, I wouldn't either. Your priorities are different this time around."

"You've gotten nothing," Aizawa asks as a statement, as a barbed insult that he *completely* means. Sansa shakes it off too easily in that shrug, and he wants to mean it more because of that.

"Oh, I've learned how to say 'I want a lawyer' in French. Let me tell you, I've definitely got that one memorized," Sansa jokes, but that means more than what he says. They've pushed hard enough for her to shut down, and got absolutely *nothing* from that. "She's got some screws loose, but she's put together enough to make things hard. And we don't have much time to work with when we don't have anything concrete to charge her--"

"You're not using Shinsou," Aizawa says, because he knows that's exactly what Sansa wants. Probably what Naomasa wants, but he's smart enough to make Sansa play messenger. "If you can't make her talk, cut her loose and we can keep working on the reviews."

Sansa breathes out, watching the cloud from it slowly dissipate afterwards. Then he mutters quietly, not quite under his breath, "I sure as hell don't want to."

Aizawa finds it colder, to realize he wasn't entirely alone in that. He *doesn't* want Shinsou Ui to disappear into thin air, and he knows that if she is returned to French soil, she will. They might not catch her again, the woman who sold her own child will never face justice for that.

But he's more unwilling to allow Shinsou to face her. Rationally, he knows that if there's a single part of Shinsou Ui that isn't a monster, that would be the one thing that could rattle something out of her, to force her to see what she's done when it's plainly written on Shinsou's face with those scars.

But Shinsou Ui is enough of a monster. Shinsou has faced too many of them, and he needs peace now. He needs to be left out of the investigation.

"Not even with the one-way mirror?" Sansa asks, but he asks like he already knows the answer. "Hell, a video of the kid might--"

"Shinsou. Is *done*," Aizawa growls out, and he doesn't give a *damn* about what might be a rational compromise. The only thing that the investigation needs from Shinsou from now on is for him to stay alive and stay safe. That's less than what Aizawa wants for him, but at *the least* he will give him that. "If you can't get answers out of a suspect in due time, you cut them loose. You don't drag the victim in to make them talk."

Sansa tilts his head towards the car, nodding to himself. If he already knew it was useless, he could have saved himself the trip and not wasted Aizawa's time. "We'll let you know how that goes, then. Take care of the kids for us."

Aizawa knows that slight implication - that he's more focused on the children in his care than hovering over any lead in the investigation - is meant to be somewhat insulting. It's not.

It's what a designated hero is supposed to do. He's going to make this wardship a traditional one. Shinsou won't have to concern himself with the investigation anymore, and Aizawa will be able to focus on his wellbeing far easier because of that.

And apparently, he needs to focus on when he's being followed.

Shinsou is standing against the wall next to the door, and quickly makes it known how much he's overheard. *'Want to help. It's fine.'*

Aizawa crosses his arms, finding it hard to argue against showing his disapproval when it needed to be known, even if Shinsou could take it harder than it was meant. "If you want to help the investigation, there are other ways to do that. Not this way."

He knows it's a mixture between cowardice and cruelty for him to turn away to start walking up the stairs, turning his back to Shinsou so that he doesn't see any response he has to that. He doesn't want there to be a response, and he'd rather his words be taken as a threat even if they weren't.

Shinsou was forced to meet with Chisaki. He was tricked into the influence of Jun's Confession quirk to make him talk. Even if Aizawa knows that on its face, Shinsou Ui might be the least threatening of any interview, he knows it's far more complicated beneath that.

Shinsou confirms it when he catches up to him before they reach the door. *'I want to see her.'*

That was one of Aizawa's greatest concerns.

Shinsou has a deeply complicated history with his mother, even if that history at best spans four years of his life. He's had chronic nightmares about her 'rejecting' him, believed that his quirk drove her insane or to suicide. He *knows* that his mother sold him, and the only reason that Aizawa knows that or that Shinsou Ui is in Naomasa's custody right now is because he told that to Ashido.

And out of all the twisted reasoning Shinsou could have to *mean* that statement, could *want* to meet with his mother, one stands out as the most disturbing.

There's a possibility that Shinsou is seeking some kind of connection with his mother in this. A facsimile of a 'normal' relationship between mother and son, even if it begins in an interrogation room with the outward intention to force his mother to reveal how she came into contact with the organization she sold her son to. He's not sure if Shinsou is stable enough or grounded enough in his own reality not to slip into that kind of thinking, to take that meeting as an invitation for it when it's *not*.

Shinsou isn't an orphan, but he might be better off if he was. Aizawa eventually came around to that same reasoning for himself over the years. There are ways that it will be easier for Shinsou to 'orphan' himself from Shinsou Ui, given that at best she will end up behind bars and at worst she will disappear from society to avoid recapture. There are ways that it will be more difficult, if Shinsou never understands what she's done, or that it's even *wrong*.

Aizawa's hand rests on the doorknob, and he can hear Hizashi asking Eri where they are from the other side of it. Perhaps that leant him a sense of urgency to say something he completely didn't

mean. “Give me a five page essay defending why that’s a good idea, and I’ll consider it.”

He’s never hated being a teacher more in his life.

*

27 only wanted to ask the hero students how to write an essay, but he didn’t even get a chance to open the chat before he saw a message from Ashi on their chat that derailed his plans completely.

He has no idea how to respond to it, this *threat*. True, he knew that it was a possibility that she wasn’t lying when she first mentioned it, but seeing the proof only makes the situation graver. Especially when he has no idea what she *wants*, even when it seems like she’s saying it plainly.

Ashi: *Tap to download 22KB*

Ashi: Shinny :) We’re having a sleepover :) If ur not there :) This gets leaked 2 the 1a chat :) Bring Moka n dress like a 5 year old :)

He knows she probably wants him to bring Mocha, and even if he doesn’t want to, he can hide Mocha in his bag and only reveal him in the most dire of circumstances. He knows he can endure whatever a ‘sleepover’ means, but he has no idea how to dress like a five year old. Even if he should, since he *lives* with Eri, who *is* a five year old, he doesn’t know the distinction that separates her from anyone else. Is he supposed to wear a dress like she usually does?

Yamada knocks on the open door, which seems unnecessary, and he’s still wearing the Present Mic costume since he’ll be leaving for his patrol soon. He might be one of the few people who certainly doesn’t dress like a five year old, but since he usually dresses Eri, maybe he’ll have some insight. ‘*Need help. How do 5 year olds dress? Different?*’

Yamada’s head tilts to the side, seeming utterly confused until he steps into the room with a hand cupped around his chin. “Uh, it depends a whole lot on who’s dressing the five year old. Is there something wrong with the clothes we have for Eri or....”

27 shakes his head, trying to figure out how to explain it and starting to regret that he asked at all. ‘*Threatened. Need to dress like 5 year old. I don’t know meaning.*’

Yamada’s confusion twists tighter in his pinched eyebrows before he frowns and becomes alarmingly serious. “Is someone bullying you into this? Let me- can I see that message really quick?”

27 knows it might be easier if he just said it, and he knows it was *definitely* a mistake to involve Yamada now that he’s taking the situation even more seriously than it is, and as something that it’s not. Ashi isn’t *bullying* him, she’s just threatening him into doing something that he didn’t really want to do. He was hoping that he could just avoid all of the hero students to work on that essay in the Safe Room, but he doesn’t want *any* of the hero students to see the picture that she has.

He turns the phone to face Yamada, hoping that he might just answer his question and see that it wasn’t bullying if it was from Ashi, but when he sees Yamada’s face turn from subtle anger to shock to the beginnings of that odd cooing expression he gives Eri when she dresses up in something cute, he realizes that he’s made *the worst mistake of his life*.

He pulls the phone back to see that it was displaying the picture in the chat now.

Yamada.

Had seen that picture.

He wants nothing more than for death to take him now. “Wait, Shinsou I just need to see that one more time-”

Yamada keeps begging, his voice pitching higher and more desperate as he keeps reaching for the phone, kept away from him as 27 holds it at arm's length. Yamada could still grab it, could still see that utterly *embarrassing* picture, something that 27 wishes didn't even exist even if it wasn't being used to threaten him, or torture him even more horribly now that *Yamada* had seen it.

He knows what Yamada does with pictures. He prints them out and puts them in *books*. For *other people* to see. To *keep* them as memories.

The thought of Yamada having this picture or showing it to *anyone* twists inside 27's gut and makes his face burn hot enough that even if his leather jacket has spikes on it, they look too inviting to impale his face on them. That plan seems like the only possibility of relief from this torment.

He probably looks odd, he's probably acting odd by pressing his face pretty much into Yamada's armpit but mostly into his chest, but even if Yamada has seen *that* he doesn't want him to see his face right now. Yamada's movement's still, and it's hard to tell but he seems to almost hold his breath for a moment, before he laughs quietly and drops his arms, one curling around the back of 27's shoulders.

“Okay, okay. You don't have to show me, Shinsou,” Yamada says, and that promise seems too good to be true even if it's believable enough for Shinsou to breathe a sigh of relief. “After all, that little herolet's definitely not in a position to turn down extra credit in my class.”

Shinsou glances up with a glare, not sure how much he means the instinctive thought of silencing them both, but he sees Yamada's stupid mustache and stupid tinted glasses and doubts it immediately. Yamada just smiles at him, and pats his shoulder.

“You don't *have* to go to that sleepover thing if you don't want to, but it does sound pretty fun! And you can always have Shou come by to pull a little rescue mission if you need it,” Yamada says, and Shinsou can't tell if he wants him to go to the sleepover or get rescued. “As for the dress code, I think you've already met it, but if you want to look over the top and ridiculous, I can send Shou in here to help out.”

27 shakes his head and pulls away. He's still not sure how a five year old is supposed to dress, and it seems even more convoluted now. Five year olds wore striped shirts and dresses? And even though Yamada seemed to dress Eri more often than Aizawa, he was better at it?

“Did Ashido want you to bring coffee to this shindig too? I'm not sure if we have time to grab some from the coffee shop, and we don't really have the stuff to make a mocha coffee,” Yamada rambles, and 27 realizes that he *read* the message too. Ashi didn't know how to spell Mocha, but Yamada assumed she was talking about coffee.

‘*No. It's different,*’ 27 signs, but he has no idea how to lie to Yamada if he presses further. He knows that Yamada knows he sleeps with Mocha, that he hasn't moved him from his bed since he came here. If it's weird, he hasn't said anything about it. Maybe five year olds are supposed to sleep with stuffed animals, but 27 isn't a child. But he's not going to put Mocha away either.

Yamada shrugs, even if he seems to want to ask, but 27 is glad that he doesn't. Maybe it's weird, but it feels weird when he thinks about telling Yamada about Mocha. He feels like it would both be

fine and be horrible, in a way that feels too overwhelming to think about.

It's not the first time he's taken Mocha somewhere else, but it's the first time for this Mocha. The apprehension stings a bit when he thinks about that, but he knows this Mocha won't end up like the first one.

He won't let it.

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Mayami really, *truly* tries with Present Mic.

Sure, she owes him a lot. She heard enough times during her enrollment at Ketsubutsu that her dream of working in the hero industry was going to be difficult to achieve. Her quirk isn't good for offense but she trained like hell to make her body into a weapon. She clawed her way to the top of her class in all of the academic courses and studied with the support department to compliment the very specific ways her quirk can be utilized. She hung up her first internship request rejection on her wall, and did the same for the next four. After graduation, she hung up the first ten agency rejections before they started to just pile up along with the unpaid bills on her coffee table. Present Mic was lucky number 29 who actually took her on, who said 'Nice to meet you' at first and repeated it in sign after she did.

She was honestly a little star struck for the first two weeks after that. *Present Mic*, a big name hero like that took her on, always signed to her and never asked why she doesn't just wear hearing aids when she's not in costume. She's pretty sure he doesn't even notice that she doesn't have ear canals.

The haze of hero worship faded fast after the first two 70 hour work weeks she pulled, and she quickly realized he didn't need it in the first place. Her first two jobs are as his sidekick and as his right hand on his radio show, but her *most* important job is to put a pin in the balloon that his ego can become if left unchecked. She has to bring him down sometimes, and that's just as important as bringing down a villain. She knows after seven long, *long* years that very few people can do what she does.

And she was pretty sure that after the two light weeks she'd had, knowing that Present Mic was spending all of that time with his little ward, she was going to be working *very* hard this weekend to make it up.

"Byte," Present Mic says with a sigh, looking up at the sky instead of the patrol route they're supposed to be walking. "I need your honest opinion. Is headbutting...a sign of affection? Maybe?"

There are times that Mayami wants to take off her headphones, not just because it's a stupid little 'Mini-Mic' gimmick that their manager keeps insisting on with an almost perverse obsession. She wants to make it very clear that she just doesn't want to hear whatever nonsense Present Mic is working through, that she just wants to cut in to hear when he's rambled himself back into cohesion because there are plenty of times that he can do it on his own.

This is not one of those times. No, she's *really* got to hear this one.

'Which goat kid?' Mayami signs, smirking when Present Mic seems to realize that there's so many ways to take that. Sure, that cute little Eri girl doesn't look like a baby goat apart from the horn, and while she doesn't know what the mystery ward looks like she doubts he has a mutant goat quirk. But it honestly wouldn't surprise her if Present Mic had taken up animal husbandry as a hobby and bought a couple of real baby goats instead.

“Shinsou,” Present Mic answers, his hands repeating that cute little sign name that he can’t help himself from signing whenever they talk about his ward. “So, I feel like I’m really getting closer to him. Being sick was not fun, and I know the kid was miserable, but we kind of...cuddled? And it was nice, he seemed okay with it, and today he kind of headbutted my chest because I was kind of bugging him, but it was...gentle, you know? He gently headbutted me, so maybe he likes me?”

Mayami can’t find the words to sign how *sad* Present Mic’s entire existence was to think that this kid for one didn’t like him after all the bragging she’s had to endure, and for two to think that *headbutting* was a substitute for hugging. She hopes that he caught on to all of that in the dry look she gives him.

Present Mic probably did, because now he was revving up into panic mode. “Look, I get it! I get it enough to know I *don’t* get it! Shinsou’s, you know, had it really rough and this whole thing is just new territory for him. It’s just really new to him, like - like he was raised on an island with no people around, you know? Not like one of our islands, he’s definitely never traveled outside of Japan so he *was* raised on an island, but-”

Mayami resorts to letting the air drag out of her lungs, ‘sighing’ which was something she had to learn how to do once she got access to specialized support equipment at Ketsubutsu. It still feels weird to do it, much like talking. “Hie likes yoh, dombass.”

Mic knows she doesn’t like talking, that even with the support equipment that allows her to use her quirk to hear herself, it never comes out right. He stops for a bit before he starts walking again, keeping himself at her pace instead of rushing ahead again. “I know he probably does. He at least likes me more than Shou, but uh.... What if I adopt him?”

Mayami turns to look at Mic fiddling with his headphones, pulling them half over his ears before he pulls them back. If he wants to put them on so he doesn’t hear a verbal response to that, he doesn’t have to worry because if she tried, she’d probably laugh. ‘*You haven’t already?*’

Instead of flustering, Mic drops his hands from the fidgeting and sighs, and that’s a *big* sign that teasing on her part should be a more serious question. “I can’t now, but... I want to? I can’t really say no to him when this whole thing has blown over, because it’s just.... I’m probably the first person in his life that he sees like this. And I see him like that. Even if things aren’t really like ‘this’ or ‘that’ and it’s... There’s so much this kid doesn’t know and what if I mess up? What if this headbutting thing isn’t good, maybe he was trying to tell me to piss off but I thought it was cute and-”

‘*Stop,*’ Mayami signs, nearly *begs*. ‘*You’re a dad now. You’re going to ruin him for life. Shin Amaze will be ruined if I don’t meet him. Give him sane aunt.*’

Mic stares at her in horror, and she’s beginning to think the horror might be from the last part. That’s *bullshit*, especially because she’s Mic’s sidekick and this wardship business was an extension of his hero work. It’s criminal that she *hasn’t* met the kid yet. “Byte. You know I love and respect you, so so *so* much. But you’re going to teach him bad things! Like not liking me, and trust me, he *doesn’t* need help with his attitude because the herolets are definitely getting him up to speed on the teenage moodiness!”

‘*Rude,*’ Mayami signs, but that’s not the *half* of it. Yeah, she gets that Mic probably took her on as a sympathy case. Her quirk means that she can hear electrical signals through skin contact, big whoop. Almost anyone could get a black belt in three different schools of martial arts if they tried hard enough, and that’s not enough to call yourself a hero or a sidekick.

She could have had it easier if she threw herself into the Support Equipment Department. She’s

heard plenty of times that her quirk and her test scores would have made her a fantastic engineer, but she doesn't have the heart for it. Her heart has always been set on something else.

It's stupid, but she had a dream when she was a kid. 'The Silent Hero.'

She had to wait until she was 16 to learn how to talk, because she was born without ear drums or even an ear canal. Sure, there were a few times that she tried to make her own support equipment with microphones and splintered input cords stretched over as much skin as she could manage with conductive plating. But even then, she didn't want to use it to *talk*.

She's pretty sure that's a normal thing for people like her. Clearly not for Mic, he's deaf and you can't *stop* him from talking. But she's sure there are other people who find it just as unnatural as she does. People who might want to know that it's okay to go through life without having to learn to twist their mouths a certain way, how to expel that air so it comes out closer and closer to 'normal' talking.

Maybe those kinds of people would like to see that a hero doesn't have to talk to make it as a hero. That you don't have to change yourself in any way that you don't want to, and that it's possible that you really can be anything you want, regardless of what anyone else says you have to do to be 'normal.'

"Byte," Mic says with a sigh, and he doesn't have to make it so serious when he tells her that she needs to piss off. It's *fine*, she really wouldn't have gotten this far if he didn't take pity on her, so if he wants to keep his little ward all to himself, she doesn't *really* care. She just wanted to meet this kid and maybe give him a little less pressure on the 'talking' thing. As stressed as Mic has been about the kid not talking, she knows he's probably been trying to push the kid to talk and he shouldn't. "If I bring Shinsou to the studio... can you promise not to not act like I'm so *lame*?"

Mayami looks at Mic, who looks like he's going to *cry* because he really is that fucking *lame*.

"I get that we have a little back-and-forth thing, you think I suck, I think you're amazing, but my show is my little baby and I don't want Shinsou to think that I'm... I don't know, I'm *clearly* not the 'Master of my domain' thanks to Ooro and the damn contract quotas, but maybe he can start to think that 'Present Mic' is a little cooler than he is at school, you know?" Mic says, and he's *so* far gone at this point it's almost funny. 'Dad' wants to show off how important he is at his job, and he doesn't want any sassy little sidekick taking the wind out of his sails and embarrassing him in front of his 'son.'

"Wow, *Present Mic! Su coohl! Yur a music god!*" Mayami starts gushing in English, holding her hands to a face that *isn't* blushing, but Mic's is. "Ohnly a music god could war such tight pants! Do youh use butter to--"

"Byte, we've been over this! They're *tailored* and *comfortable*," Mic interrupts, even if he's clearly lying about the second part. After that disaster demolition job they had a few years back, she knows he can only stand to wear his leather pants for 12 hours before they start chafing. "You don't have to act like that, because it's *so weird*, but just... Don't make him think I'm lame?"

Mayami signs a universal 'Okay,' and maybe she'll hold up her end of that bargain. But she *can't* wait to get her hands on that mysterious little ward who *absolutely* already knows how lame Mic is.

A Child's Sleepover

Chapter Summary

27 goes to his first sleepover, and finds it disappointing. Aizawa and Eri make plans to go on a mission together, and Aizawa receives Shinsou's essay as to why he should be allowed to see his mother.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Original Mocha's death mention, 50 mention

Previously on Wards of UA: Ashido sent Shinsou a picture Shinsou is embarrassed of, and threatened to send it to the 1-A chat if he didn't 'dress like a 5 year old, bring Mocha' and go to a sleepover she's holding. After Ashido gave her witness statement concerning Shinsou telling her that his mother sold him, she went to Build-A-Bear with Aizawa to get a lumpy orange bear made, which she named 'Rupert' after a teddy bear she had when she was younger and friends with Shinsou. Shinsou can talk to Ashido, Midoriya, and Bakugo as he had Brainwashed Ashido when they were children, and Brainwashed Midoriya and Bakugo when he tried to escape UA, but he believes he's overcome his selective mutism. The 1-A students came together and agreed that Aizawa would probably make Shinsou write essays if he had to discipline him, and Midoriya and Todoroki visited Shinsou's dorm without asking permission a few chapters ago, and Present Mic wasn't happy about the visit. 'The guy with the cat head' AKA Sansa, did not make a good impression on Ashido as he asked Aizawa to let Shinsou keep talking in 'Cat Fight,' even though Shinsou had just been slammed on the floor by his hair by Ojio. Todoroki told Shinsou that his father, Endeavor, asked Todoroki to befriend Shinsou in order to bypass Aizawa and get information about The Miasma. Shinsou was shown a video of Ashido's 4th birthday where he was invited. Aizawa and Eri had been living at the 1-A dorm while Shinsou was sick, and while Aizawa had been spending a lot of time with Midoriya, that meant that Eri had been in 1-A's care during that time. Eri got a Reverse Uno card from Kaminari after Kaminari explained that nothing bad can happen to someone no matter what they say, as long as they're holding it, which Eri took very seriously. Eri has been struggling with Shinsou not spending as much time with her as he used to, and in a previous discussion with Shoji, Shoji explained that he has a little sister Eri's age that he doesn't spend time with but still cares for. Shinsou's avoidance for asking direct questions has been noticed early on by 1-A. Shinsou has been 'coughing' in the middle of asking questions since he got over his illness. Shinsou intermittently has issues with his right hand, which would shake noticeably when he first arrived at UA, but has not given him as many issues after he found out that Chisaki was dead, but may still act up when he's under stress. Yamada made oatmeal that Shinsou was able to customize and realize that he could have had good tasting oatmeal instead of the bland oatmeal he ate for most of his life. Aizawa attempted to make Shinsou a mocha coffee with milk and chocolate syrup, which would taste more like coffee ice cream with chocolate syrup on top, but Aizawa never told Shinsou that it was a mocha. Bakugo has not only been disappointed in Aizawa and Yamada's ability to care for Shinsou, but has also learned that Aizawa has limited medical guardianship over 1-A students. Aizawa has been

trying to get Shinsou an appointment with a Quirk Specialist, and now is waiting for The Commission of Wardship Affairs to approve it. Shinsou's laptop has a keylogger, and Aizawa and Naomasa can see anything he types on it. Aizawa instructed Ashido, Sero, Kirishima, and Kaminari to copy The Japanese Penal Code multiple times after they drugged Bakugo and accidentally Shinsou with benadryl in Tooth Fairy. Aizawa knows that Shinsou still thinks of himself as 27, and that he was sold by his mother. Shiori, Aizawa's informant, gave Aizawa reviews from a Villain Yelp website where Miasma Numbers were mentioned, and from that Aizawa found criminal groups that contracted Numbers.

27 imagined that Ashi had been confident in her threats, but apparently he was wrong. When they get to the Class 1-A dorm, she's standing in the common room with a tight smile and a lumpy orange teddy bear in her arms, waiting for him to succumb to what she wants.

He's still not sure if he's dressed like a 5 year old, and maybe 5 year olds didn't wear face masks. He's not sure if Ashi is dressed like a 5 year old either. She's wearing an odd jumpsuit that covers her feet, and has a hood that looks like a snail's face. And more disturbingly, she's not the only one who's dressed differently.

Kirimson Shark is wearing shorts and a loose T-shirt, and also has a teddy bear in his hands. Izuku is probably lucky that All Might isn't here, since he's wearing a jumpsuit that looks a lot like Ashi's though it's styled to look more like All Might's hero costume with disturbing yellow bunny ears at the top of the hood to look like his hair. But he still looks nervous as though All Might could walk through the door and see him like this.

Bakugo looks the same, and 27 is far too relieved by that. But Zappy is holding a Pikachu stuffed animal a bit too tightly, staring at him too pleadingly. "Shinsou, can you brainwash me really quick so I can go to the sleepover too? We've got so much to cover with memes, there's so much I need to teach you-"

"Nope!" Ashi commands, holding a hand in front of Sparky's face. "Only people that Shinny can talk to are invited to the sleepover!"

"Curfew is still enforced on the weekend," Aizawa says, crossing his arms. "You can't be in the common areas after 10:30, and mixed-sex gatherings in the dorm rooms have to be broken up after 10."

Ashi pouts, but that really isn't going to convince Aizawa, and she knows it. "Sensei, Shinny's *never* had a sleepover before! And you can't make him have a sleepover with Midoriya or Kirishima or *Bakugo*!"

"I agree," Aizawa says, and while that brings a spark of light back to Ashi's eyes, Shinsou knows that it will be short-lived. "Which is why Shinsou will be returning to the Safe Room at 9:55. You have three hours."

Shinsou looks at Eri to see where she will go. Maybe she wasn't invited to this 'sleepover' event, but she never has to be invited to anything that the hero students do because she's always welcomed. It's supposed to be like a '5 year old's sleepover' anyway, and he's pretty sure this is just a convoluted way to invite her to it.

But Eri follows Aizawa after he turns to start walking up the stairs, and clings to Aizawa's sleeves

without even telling him goodbye. He doesn't know why, but it leaves him cold enough to be unable to tell her that he'll be back.

She must still be mad at him, and he doesn't know how to fix it. If he can fix it, or if this will just drag on and become their new 'normal.'

He hates it.

"Shinny!" Ashi says before she takes both of his hands, swinging them back and forth. "We're gonna cram a whole night of fun into just three hours! I've got snacks in my room, and movies, and no one else is invited!"

Even if she's still smiling, still swinging his hands, her voice drops to something colder and more serious.

"You brought it, right?" Ashi asks in an oddly grave way, a way that almost makes him not want to answer. But he does with a nod, even if he's less willing to bring Mocha out of his bag now. "Great! Let's get this show on the road, guys!"

There's no road, just walking up the stairs to Ashi's floor while Kirimson Shark and Izuku talk about sleepovers that they had as kids, and Zappy follows behind all of them still pleading for 27 to brainwash him so he can join.

He doesn't have to brainwash him to talk to him, and he *doesn't* want Zappy to know that. Bakugo apparently doesn't want to do this either as he tries to make a break for his own floor once they stop on Ashi's, but Kirimson Shark grabs him to stop him. "C'mon Bakubro, this is gonna be fun--"

"This is *stupid* as shit! Shitsou isn't fucking *five*, this is some fucked up kinky bullshit and it's fucking *disgusting*--"

"Kacchan," Izuku says, adopting that fearsomely cold tone that Ashi uses sometimes. "Wasn't that sleepover that we had when you turned three really fun--"

"*Fuck you*," Bakugo growls, killing intent clear in his narrowed eyes, but Izuku smiles like he doesn't see it. Or he doesn't fear it.

27 would be lying if he said he didn't fear the same thing that Bakugo did. '*Obey. There's hope.*'

He's not sure if Bakugo understands that sign, but he swallows and nods. He's being blackmailed into this too, probably with the same kind of threats that Ashi holds over him.

He doesn't remember anything about the picture that she sent him, he doesn't remember being a part of it. Even if he's changed a lot since it was taken, he doesn't have that much unscarred skin left anymore, he *doesn't* want the Class 1-A chat to see him like that.

He doesn't know if Izuku has a picture of Bakugo as a shirtless toddler, smeared with finger paint that turned brownish purple where it wasn't streaks of blue, red, green and yellow. Judging by how that younger Ashi was smiling proudly next to him, the only paint marking her skin on her hands, he thinks she was trying to paint him purple so that they could match. She was born with pink hair and skin, so it must have made sense to make his skin purple to match his hair.

It should be ridiculous, when he's so far removed from that moment in time, but he just *doesn't* want anyone to see that picture.

Ashi's room is small, maybe smaller than his, and there's blankets strewn everywhere along with

different movies and snacks and drinks half-organized on a small table. She also has pink string lights along her wall, and a few tiny potted cacti on her desk. He wonders if she names them too, like Eri named her little plant 'Beanie.' "We've got yogu-milk and popcorn and chips and candy, and ice cream downstairs for later! This is going to be the best 5 year old's sleepover ever!"

"And you can talk to me, right Shinbro?" Kirimson Shark asks, oddly nervously while he runs a hand through his oddly deflated hair. "I can't remember if you used your quirk on me when we were in school together, but-"

"I can," 27 answers, even if he's not sure if he did either. It doesn't matter anymore, but he doesn't want them to know that. At least with Kirishima, there's a reason that wouldn't raise suspicion. "I need to know how to write an essay after this."

He doesn't know why, but all four of the hero students look at him somewhat suspiciously after that. Ashi looks more shocked with her widened eyes, Bakugo more angry with his narrowed eyes, and Izuku and Kirishima look somewhere in the middle. "Oh. Did you get in trouble with Present Mic-sensei after Todoroki and I-"

"Who the fuck did you kill?" Bakugo asks, and he seems oddly content with the idea that 27 *did* kill someone as he opens one of the cans on the table. "If Shitsei's *actually* giving you some essay bullshit as punishment, you must have seriously fucked up."

"I didn't," 27 answers, even if he's not sure now. If the essay was a punishment, it was a bizarre form of one. And he wasn't intending to do something worth punishment. Maybe it was out of line to offer his help, maybe it could be seen as insulting, but it just seemed so easy if he just had to be seen by his mother to help the investigation. "The police want me to see my mom, and I told him that was fine. He wants me to write an essay to explain why I want to do that."

The hero students look like that was a mistake, and maybe he should be more cautious. He's getting oddly comfortable here, but he shouldn't forget how tenuous his position is now. If Aizawa was right and he wasn't useful to the investigation anymore, he should just keep his head down and enjoy what he has. He shouldn't make any bold moves like that and give him a reason to move him away or get rid of him.

Kirishima sits down on Ashi's bed and looks at the teddy bear he has, lifting up one of its arms. "Uh, yeah, maybe Sensei's right about not doing that. It probably wouldn't be good for you, you know, Shinbro?"

"Yep! Sensei's got the right idea, not those police officer guys," Ashi agrees, shuffling through the movies that she has on the table. "Like, that guy with the cat head kind of seemed like a jerk, and your mom's a total jerk, you know? Oh! Have you seen Howl's Moving Castle?"

"She's probably not," 27 argues, snapping as the tension does. *He* doesn't know what his mother is, he doesn't even *remember* and what he remembers might not be true. He can't piece out dreams from reality from that time, and he just wants to *know*. "It doesn't matter if she is, she's not Chisaki. It's the easiest way to help the investigation."

"Fuck that," Bakugo growls. "It's not your job to find those assholes, and Shitsei doesn't fucking want your help anyway. Fuck that and *fuck* your mom for getting you mixed up with that shit in the first place-"

"Um, Todoroki," Izuku says, wincing a bit after he does. "Todoroki really didn't mean to make you worry, Shinsou. If Aizawa-sensei says it's not necessary, you really shouldn't worry about it. That probably means that he doesn't need help finding those people-"

“The fuck does IcyHot have to do with-”

“I want to,” Shinsou says, loud enough to cut through Bakugo’s prying and make his intentions known. This wasn’t what he wanted to admit, but he has to admit it. It’s not just for the investigation. “Eri is fine, and Ashido is fine. But I need to know if my quirk drove my mother crazy.”

He needs to know if it’s her fault or his.

If she isn’t crazy, if she wasn’t hurt like that, then she sold him for no reason. She’s just a bad mother, and he can accept it more easily. The Miasma, the 8 Precepts, everything that happened to him to keep him underground and apart from everyone else who had a normal childhood was a result of his mother being a bad person, and himself being unfortunate enough to be born from her. He would have never had a warm mother, a warm childhood in the first place, and he can be more grateful for what he has now.

If it’s his fault and his quirk that drove her crazy, he can accept that too. He caused everything, his crimes and his violence didn’t start at The Miasma but started earlier. His mother was his first victim, and she rightly guided him to the place that he would have ended up anyway. The Miasma trained him because he was meant to be a villain with his quirk.

Maybe he’s not a villain, because he doesn’t want to be. He doesn’t know what he should be, when that question spans out more answers than he can even name. He’s never known what the future will hold for him to this degree, he’s never been less settled into his space because the threat of death seems to be missing now. Aizawa and Yamada won’t kill him, and The Miasma might not be able to touch him here.

He doesn’t know what the future holds, but somehow that makes him look to the past. He just wants to know the answers there, so he can know where he stands in one place. He wants to know where he started from.

He wants to know who he is, and that starts with his mother. His mother, who named him ‘Shinsou Hitoshi.’

“An essay starts with a thesis statement, then supporting paragraphs to back up-” Izuku starts to explain, before Bakugo and Ashi yell to cut him off.

“Don’t fucking help him with that shit, Deku-”

“We’re having a sleepover!” Ashi yells, holding her lumpy teddy bear out in front of Izuku’s face. “We’re watching cartoons, we’re eating candy, and we’re *not* doing school work! We’re going to have *fun*!”

27 sighs. “I just need help with-”

Ashido’s eyes cut to him, and he regrets inviting her attention when she’s so incensed about this. Especially when he knows what she’s going to demand before she says it. “*Mocha*.”

27 glances around the room, and his eyes settle on Kirishima’s teddy bear. Izuku and Bakugo don’t have a stuffed animal, but Kirishima and Ashido do. He knows it’s normal for five year olds to have stuffed animals because Eri does, but they do too. It might not be weird that he has Mocha, but it’s probably still weird that he wants to hide him.

It’s probably weird that he still thinks of the first Mocha, in a way that makes it difficult to remember that this one isn’t that same plushie. They look so similar, soft gray plush and smooth

black eyes, even if they're not the same. One has sat safely on his bed this entire time, has only made a trip to the vents once and was placed in his stash box a few times. The other was taken with him to The Miasma, hidden under his mattress unless he needed to feel his fur or show him to 50. The other was touched by 50, held by her too. Burned to ash in his room after he was discovered.

He finds himself staring at Bakugo's hands when he lifts the flap of his messenger bag to reveal Mocha's face for Ashi, who squeals in delight. "Mocha! Now Mocha and Rupert can be friends again!"

Ashi holds out her teddy bear again, and 27 remembers enough about that video that she showed him that it's not really 'Rupert.' Either Ashi outgrew that Rupert or she melted him with her quirk one too many times, and that Rupert was discarded and replaced. Maybe there's some sadness in that, how disposable the body was but the name was kept for another.

Maybe there's some comfort in keeping the same name. Despite how much time changed things, there's a part of it that lingered on and was able to be here for this.

Ashi manipulates Rupert's arms to give Mocha a hug once Shinsou lifts him fully out of the bag. He doesn't make Mocha hug Rupert back. It seems a bit weird to enforce whether Mocha will actually be friends with Rupert, even if he knows that Mocha is a stuffed animal and doesn't have opinions on it. Ashi doesn't seem to mind it.

Bakugo does, and whatever he was going to say about it is cut off by Izuku adopting that cold tone again. "Mr. Explosion Ma-"

"*FUCK OFF*," Bakugo screams, setting off a few explosions towards Izuku but they wouldn't reach him even if Kirishima didn't tackle the green haired hero to protect him. "Don't *fucking* bring that baby shit up, Deku! I'll *fucking* kill you and tear that *fucking* raggedy ass *creepy* *fucking* All Might plushie to *fucking pieces* you *fucking*-"

"*Midoriya*," Ashi calls in a saccharine sing-song tone, but that might be even more fearsome than her usual way of threatening people. "You said you didn't *have* a plushie to bring to the sleepover."

"It's at home!" Izuku argues, waving his hands back and forth to calm Ashi down when he should still be concerned by the sparks from Bakugo's hands, even with Kirishima still acting as a human shield. "But I'm pretty sure Mr. Explosion Man is-"

Bakugo screeches and Kirishima barely hardens himself in time, but for some reason Ashi seems fine with excusing Bakugo from this odd requirement when she smiles back at him. "Let's pick a movie that Mocha will like! I think Mocha likes cat movies, right?"

Shinsou is pretty sure Mocha doesn't have opinions on movies, since this one has seen so few of them. The first Mocha probably liked watching Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats as much as he did, but probably hated playing the part of Tiger when he was pretending to be Mandalay and needed someone to fight the villains that weren't stopping after he told them to with his mind.

It's funny, if that memory is true. It still seems like something he might have made up, just because it fits too well.

If he was using Mocha to play out a scenario where he had a telepathy quirk he wanted, and Mocha hated it and got hurt when he twisted him around to fight the invisible villains. If that was really just him preparing to use the quirk that he was really going to have, controlling and hurting Mocha with his will and commands.

The explosions and arguing fade in waves after Ashi starts the first movie, but 27 isn't paying much attention to it. Between the plushie in his hands that he's still stupidly concerned about, and the task he still needs Izuku's help with, this movie doesn't interest him much at all.

He needs to do well on that essay to know if his quirk hurt his mother.

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Aizawa was afraid of this. While he was trying to get to the bottom of the Problem Child's new quirk, spawned by a quirk he had no *idea* about, he had left Eri in Class 1-A's care a bit too much. He *regrets it*. He regrets it *immensely*.

"Hmph!" Eri kicked the pillow beneath her feet again, but he was sure that the coloring book that she was working on wasn't the cause of her frustration. "Zawa, we're having *so* much fun in here! Twenny's really dumb for not being here, because we're having so much *fun*."

Aizawa fights an intense urge to bury his face in his hands, settling for folding them under his chin. He *didn't* want Eri to pick up sarcasm this early, but given that she spends a great deal of time around teenagers, it was bound to happen. "I have a feeling that something is bothering you, and I won't be angry about whatever it is. You can use the Uno card if that would help you talk to me about it."

From the reflection of the computer screen, he sees Eri start to drop her head towards the coloring book, both legs kicking the pillow and laying there. Maybe this isn't the proper time to exercise 'Communicating Needs and Wants Clearly,' but he was hopeful that she might be a bit more forthcoming if the conversation seemed more like her idea.

And he sees when she rolls over to pull out the Reverse Uno card from her bag that she might still need a totem to make her feel more secure in this difficult conversation. She rolls off the cot and walks over to him, and holds the card out with a frighteningly irritated glare.

"I don't *like* Twenny not being here, Zawa! I know it's really bad, but I want Twenny to be here all the time and stop having friends if they're just going to do stuff by themselves!" Eri looks at the card with a pout that threatens tears, before she stomps and finds that she still has a bit of aggravation left in her. "It's not *fair*! They're having a little kid sleepover and I'm not invited! That's the *worst*, and they're heroes so they can't!"

Aizawa nods understandingly, finding a new layer to this irritation that he hadn't considered. "That might seem like they're trying to be cruel to you, but I think they're trying to give Shinsou a sleepover that he hadn't experienced when he was your age. I don't think they would turn you away if you wanted to ask to join them."

Eri starts bending the card back and forth, fidgeting with it while she considers what must be an unpleasant task, judging by the grimace on her face. "I don't *want* to. I just want Twenny to be here, 'cause he didn't even miss me."

Eri drops one of her hands holding the card and throws herself into his lap, and even though she needs a card to know that it's safe to speak her mind, he's reassured that she doesn't need any invitation for comfort when she knows a tearful fit will be coming on. Aizawa runs a hand over her hair, her face tucked against his chest, and he brushes her hair back when he hears the first sniff. "Shinsou did miss you. I understand that it's confusing now that he has other people that he likes to spend time with, but that doesn't mean that he cares for you any less."

"Li-ike Shoji?" Eri asks, wiping at her tears before she looks up at him. "M' not Twenny's little

sister, but Shoji doesn't spend time with his little sister, and that's o-okay."

Aizawa tilts his head, something that he had decided against becoming an option again. Perhaps it would be a more direct method of modeling how the Shoji siblings didn't have to be so different from the two wards. "It is like that. When Shinsou comes back, you can talk to him about this directly. But there's also a mission that I think you'll be interested in taking to help me tomorrow. Unfortunately, I can't bring Shinsou because he doesn't have the skills this mission requires."

The 'skills' that he requires from Eri are entirely related to her age and appearance, and Aizawa finds himself a bit too grateful to seem a bit less out of place at the venue that the Shoji siblings were going to meet. An older man sitting alone in a playground full of children might attract a great deal of attention where it wasn't wanted, but with the presence of a 5 year old child, it will seem completely disarming.

And as much as a trip beyond the walls of UA might work to Eri's benefit, Aizawa had his own reasons for wanting to keep his presence to a minimum to accompany his student on a family visit. Namely, why that visit was so urgently requested by Mr. and Mrs. Shoji.

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Kirishima *super* respects the way that Ashido operates. Like, he's never seen her get discouraged or give up on something she really wants to do, and that shows she has the manliest kind of fighting spirit that he's seen since Crimson Riot.

It also kind of put him off from being tight friends with her until UA. There's manly fighting spirit, and then there's bossiness, and Ashido can swing pretty hard both ways.

Shinsou seems to deal with it a little better though. He can also kind of rock the glittery purple nail polish too. "Ugh, purple or black, I still can't *pick*," Ashido whines, raking a hand through her nail polish bag.

Shinsou doesn't offer his opinion, just like he didn't when Ashido decided on his nail color. It's not just because Kirishima knows Bakugo will only let him have a turn painting his nails if it's black, but Kirishima kind of thinks it'd be cool if Ashido and Shinsou matched. "Dude, the last time you rocked that dark purple, it looked awesome."

"True!" Ashido decides with a nod, and Kirishima swipes the black nail polish with his free hand. Bakugo glances up from his super manly work of painting Kirishima's nails a *super* manly maroon, but Kirishima knows he won't say anything unless Midoriya or Ashido notices.

Midoriya's been busy on his phone, and Kirishima's kind of hoping he's right about what he's doing. Midoriya is kind of a whiz about quirks, so he might be able to pull out a bunch of facts about whatever Shinsou is worried about with his quirk and prove him wrong about making his mom nuts.

Kirishima doesn't really know if Shinsou's mom is nuts either. He knows that Ashido knows something, and he knows that she had to go on this weird trip with Aizawa-sensei where they got some crepes because of it.

But it's not really cool that Shinsou thinks his quirk can hurt people. Even if it can, maybe he was wrong about worrying about it so much. Shinsou is a pretty chill guy, and it's really hard to imagine a guy who has a stuffed animal that has a name and everything would be the same kind of guy who would tell someone to jump off a bridge or something with his quirk.

Kirishima grins when Bakugo's finished with his nails, because Bakugo gets the lines so even and the finish is so *manly*. Bakugo rolls his eyes when Kirishima starts opening the black nail polish, but he lays out his hand with his eyes boring a hole through Midoriya, sure to snap if he notices.

It's nice, though. It's a little closer to the Bakubro he knew before all that messed up stuff in Kamino happened. The anger was always there, but sometimes it seems too brittle. Too easy to snap.

But this is nice.

"I don't know how to do this right," Shinsou mutters, kind of *way* too focused on Ashido's nails as he paints them. There's a couple of splotches on her cuticle, but it's super hard to get the lines even at first, and he knows Ashido's been through way worse. And everyone knows the deal with the 'I don't know's from Shinsou.

"I've got some Q-tips--"

"*How* do I do this," Bakugo growls, enunciating in a way that's a little not cool. "Like I *fucking* said, no one gives a shit if you ask questions or quirk anyone. Hell, dumbass acid wash *wants* you to quirk her ass again--"

"But, it's cool if you don't want to, Shinbro!" Kirishima cuts in, even if he knows that Bakugo's trying to do some Baku-good, he's kind of forgetting some stuff. "Like, no one's gonna be mad about any way you talk, you know?"

Bakugo huffs and rolls his eyes, but that's just because he's a little too manly to admit that he might have forgotten that. People with any kind of mutism problems shouldn't be pressured to talk and all, and it'd be *super* unmanly to make Shinsou stop talking.

Shinsou glances at him before he takes the Q-tip from Ashido to clean up the edges, but it's kind of hard to know what that look means with the face mask and everything. "I'm not going to quirk you, but how do I--"

Shinsou kind of... sneezes, or something. It's kind of hard to tell, but he might still be getting over being sick. At least Bakugo doesn't look like he'll say anything or leave, because he's super proactive about not getting sick, but that can kind of come off the wrong way. Especially with Shinsou, who had to live with a different kind of germophobe.

"Do this right?" Shinsou asks, and he switches which hand is holding the brush to his left one. He might be ambidextrous, and that is *super* manly and cool.

"You're doing it right, it just takes some practice to get it down," Ashido says, waving her fingers to kind of make it harder for Shinsou to start practicing. "Just do tiny little strokes and try to keep them even. Like that!"

"Ask another question," Bakugo says, the hand that Kirishima isn't working on flexes but it doesn't curl like he wants to use his quirk. But something is definitely bugging Bakubro about Shinsou.

"Why--" Shinsou sneezes again, but this time it sounds closer to a cough, and Kirishima can tell Bakubro didn't like that before he hisses.

"If you're doing that shit on purpose, fucking *stop*, it's annoying as shit--"

"It's probably not like that, Kacchan," Midoriya cuts in, looking up from his phone but luckily

Bakugo just pulls his hand under the table instead of swatting the nail polish out of Kirishima's hands. "It's, um...."

Shinsou is staring at Midoriya with his head tilted just a little bit, like he kind of wants to know too. Maybe it's not as weird to Shinsou to have a bunch of people talking about his problems right in front of him, since he has so many, but Midoriya clues into that it could have been rude just a little too late.

"Uh, some emitter quirk users can have Activation Phobia, and sometimes they can do things to prevent their quirk from activating subconsciously. Like coughing, or keeping one of their fingers curled if it's touch activated, or-"

"It's fine," Shinsou interrupts, turning back to Ashido's fingernails. "I don't need to use it."

It's hard to know what to really say to that, because Shinbro's right that he doesn't *need* to use it. He's safe at UA, and he kind of seems like he could defend himself pretty well without it. But his quirk is *his* and all, it's a part of Shinsou just like his hand, and Shinsou being so messed up about his quirk has to be hard for him to deal with.

"I need to learn how to do this for Eri," Shinsou says, and that is the *manliest* thing that Kirishima has ever heard from Shinbro. Even though the 1-A girls could and *would* paint Eri's nails any time, Shinbro is kind of the coolest kind of big brother to want to learn how to do that.

Or, he's kind of Eri's big brother?

Like, there's the whole joke about Shinsou being Eri's mom, and it kind of makes sense that Shinsou would be a little protective over Eri with what they had to go through. But even though Eri seems to like being at UA a little better than Shinsou sometimes, it's still really cool that Shinsou wants to help Eri be a normal little girl now.

That just means it's even more important for everyone to help Shinsou get to know what a normal childhood looks like, even if it's important enough that Shinsou gets to know it for himself.

*

This is like Yamada's oatmeal, but worse.

27 knows that he's different. He knows his childhood was odd in hundreds of different ways. Children are supposed to have birthdays to mark the years that pass by, and he didn't. Children are supposed to go to school and have friends, and he didn't. But the gravest injustice in his childhood is apparently the lack of sugar in his diet.

Ashi and Kirishima's method of dealing with that is honestly *disgusting*.

He's never had ice cream before. He didn't know which flavor to pick. *He shouldn't have told them that.*

The 'bowl' that they're using is actually a mixing bowl, with exactly two scoops of each of the seven flavors in the freezer. Then, they added a small portion of each candy topping to each flavor, and a drizzle of both chocolate and caramel from the bottles. *Then* whipped cream, which is quickly becoming his favorite part but he's sure if he tells the truth, it will disappoint them.

It tastes like pure *sugar*. There's almost no other flavor, there's nothing to really enjoy. He wonders why Stress Bake wants to be a hero if he has to eat this to use his quirk. He feels nauseous every time he looks at the 'bowl.'

But Kirishima and Ashi are both looking at him, and he doesn't think they've blinked once since they started. They're ignoring their own ice cream too, and it's melting. Maybe he could get some amount of vengeance on them if he forced them to wait until it's all melted, but that would mean that he's the only one suffering from this awful, staticy feeling. "Vanilla ice cream, pistachios, and chocolate." He's pretty sure that's what they put in the corner that he can stomach the best.

Kirishima and Ashi give each other a painful sounding high-five, and maybe that was the answer they were looking for the most. He knows it's not really a test, there's nothing that they really want from this. There's nothing to *get* from this, knowing what kind of ice cream he likes.

He tries another corner, the one he thought was the second kind of chocolate - fudge, which Izuku says is better and Bakugo thinks is trash - but it's *not* and all of this pain so far has been worth it. "No, this one. The coffee one is better."

He doesn't care if they see that he's pushing some of the candy toppings aside to really enjoy this corner of *bliss*. Why did they only give him two scoops of this one? It's *coffee*, but it's cold and soft. The sharp bitterness even makes his stomach stop twisting and trying to revolt, because there's nothing to revolt against.

Ashi sighs, slumping over the back of her chair, and even if he thought there wasn't a wrong answer, apparently the right one is. "Shinny, coffee ice cream is so *gross*! It's not sweet, so it's not supposed to be an ice cream flavor!"

"Dude, there's natto flavored ice cream. Anything can be a dope ice cream flavor," Kirishima argues, and Bakugo seems to retch with a hand over his mouth. Even Izuku seems to turn a bit greener. Maybe natto was a dish that he should avoid trying, especially in ice cream flavors.

"Coffee ice cream is fucking great, don't *fucking* listen to Shitty Hair because his tastebuds are all fucked up," Bakugo growls, and he's right on at least one count. "Fucking *pineapple* in *pea soup*!"

"It's like a little tropical zest and stuff," Kirishima explains, but that must be an old argument because Bakugo looks too defeated to fight it when he glares with his hands steeped over his nose. Kirishima seems to take it as an argument all the same. "Hey, you've got to try new flavors out, 'expand your palate' and stuff."

Shinsou gives a withering look to his bowl again. 'Trying out new flavors' can be excruciating. He thinks it's better to stick to what he knows is good, and be grateful that he has it. He knows that coffee is good, but maybe with a bit of the chocolate, it could taste like a mocha.

It's sweet, a bit too sweet, but it's somehow familiar. Not like the mochas that he had before the interviews, but it's similar, just more sweet and somehow diluted.

He sees a shadow that he can easily identify on the wall coming down the stairwell, and while his first instinct is to sit straighter, the one immediately following is to eat as much of this coffee ice cream as he can. He puts a huge spoonful in his mouth and instantly regrets it as an odd, lancing pain seems to connect the roof of his mouth to his *brain* somehow.

His eyes are screwed tight against it, making him blind to Aizawa's entrance though he can still hear the door open along with a long groan from Ashi. "Sensei, it's only-"

"10:45," Aizawa states, and more than the freezing pain in his head he feels a cold chill down his spine. He was supposed to go back to the room at 9:55. He was supposed to watch the time, and he did after the first movie, and he did it after he stole that book, but he hasn't since they came down to the kitchen. "You're breaking curfew, and this is your only warning. You won't receive a second

one in 5 minutes.”

27 opens his eyes to see the hero students scramble. Ashi, Kirishima, and Izuku are dumping out their bowls into the sink while Bakugo puts up the ingredients at a slightly more relaxed pace. He starts barking at them not to use the garbage disposal because ‘You shits don’t know how to use it,’ and volunteers to do it himself.

Ashi turns away first to pounce on him, her arms too tight around his shoulders and pressing his face into her weird hood. “It was fun hanging out with you, Shinny! We’re gonna have a 6 year old’s birthday party next week!”

He’s not sure why he doesn’t want to answer that, why he just waves when Kirishima and Izuku tell him goodbye before they run up the stairs to follow Ashi’s lead. He doesn’t know why he wants to flinch when Bakugo tosses the spoons into the dishrack after he washes them, like that anger is directed at him, or why it would be a bad thing if it was.

But Bakugo seems more angry than usual since Aizawa came into the room.

“Family reunion, huh?” Bakugo growls under his breath, but he’s not talking to 27. 27 watches as he turns his head to look at Aizawa, how Aizawa glances at him and 27 looks away, the cold throbbing in his head fading. Bakugo is too damn *nosy*. “Look, I don’t know shit-”

“You don’t,” 27 utters, *half* under his breath but he means it even when Blasty turns to glare at him.

“But it’s pretty *fucked up* that no one’s told Shitsou that this fucking complex about his quirk driving his mom crazy is messed-”

“Can you-” 27 feels red, feels boiling heat in his coiled fists until he feels a cough bubbling out of his throat, coming out as a strained breath before it catches and comes out clearer the second time. Apparently, that makes Blasty mad too, and he flicks on the garbage disposal with a hiss.

“And you’re still not over that quirk illness bullshit because it’s all in your *fucking* head. You keep coughing when you ask questions, dipshit, probably because no one’s taken you to a real *fucking* doctor,” Blasty shoots a glare at Aizawa before he turns the garbage disposal off and the faucet in turn. “So, what’s Shitsou got to do to get that emergency medical decision bullshit from *someone*-”

“*Bakugo*,” Aizawa interrupts sternly, his arms crossed and feet a bit farther apart. 27 doesn’t know if he’ll use the capture scarf first, if that’s the only thing he’ll use. He’s never seen one of the students talk to Aizawa like that but he’s never seen Bakugo’s fists shake like that either. “Thank you.”

Blasty is *too fucking nosy*. He storms off before the numb chill leaves 27 with the inclination to teach him to keep things to himself - especially about 27 and *especially* to Aizawa. But he still feels the clench of that anger in his fist when he goes to dispose of his ice cream and he feels Aizawa’s stare boring into him.

“Your mother doesn’t have Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome,” Aizawa says, and he’s said it before. 27 knows it’s a possibility, his quirk might not have driven her insane. But he doesn’t *know*, and he’s not sure if Aizawa does either. If he’s lied to him about this too. “A quirk specialist will be able to tell you whether that’s even a risk with your quirk. I should have that appointment in less than a month.”

27 watches the mirky water fill higher, the globs of ice cream melting and ribbons of whipped

cream with it. He flips the switch that Blasty did and the garbage disposal whirs to life, grinding all the candy stuck at the bottom until it's something that can be disposed of. He rinses the sink clean before he turns it off, a flare of numb irritation lancing through him when he turns around to find Aizawa still *staring* at him. Like there's any part of that 27 is supposed to answer to.

Apparently, there is. "Is that why you wanted to see your mother?"

27 shakes his head. That's not all of it. He wants to know why it happened - why it *really* happened. Was he really that monstrous to his own mother that she had to get rid of him? Or was it only for the money?

Was there something that he could have done differently, to grow up normally? To grow up with Ashi, to have sleepovers and eat ice cream and have pets? What did he really *do* to her?

What can she do for him, after all these years? That's what he really wants to know, in a way that he doubts he should tell Aizawa. Even if Aizawa knows about it now.

27 knows how names work, and he's tried to make it work himself. He's tried to drive that name under his skin but it won't stick, not in any usual way. He knows it's because it's an unusual name for him now.

Everyone at UA can call him 'Shinsou,' and it won't matter. UA came after the fact, after the raid and after everything, but if Shinsou wants to keep this name, he has to go to the *beginning* of it.

To the person who gave him that name.

*

Between spells of typing, Shinsou looks at either his phone or a book that he seems to have borrowed, but Aizawa has barely been able to look away from his phone.

Essays need to be a regular occurrence. Weekly at least.

Aizawa knows that Naomasa will be reading the same thing that he is, the still building list of reasons why Shinsou *should not* see his mother under any circumstances. The keylogger likely builds that list even more clearly, the things that Shinsou types then tries to omit with the backspace key are still recorded here.

Aizawa tries to give no indication that he knows *exactly* what is in that essay when Shinsou turns the laptop around to face him. Aizawa finds that task easier because even though Eri was asleep when Shinsou began his task, at some point she woke up and rearranged herself.

She's laying on top of Shinsou's back, one arm curled under her head but the other and both of her legs are dangling off of him. It can't be comfortable to sleep like that, and it probably wasn't comfortable for Shinsou to continue working on his essay while trying not to disturb her. But Shinsou doesn't look like he'll move her, curling his arms under his own head and Aizawa worries that they might both sleep like that, despite any aches they'll wake up to in the morning.

Aizawa pulls the laptop to sit on his knees, reading the slightly more censored version of what he's read. Shinsou's lack of education is easy to miss with his vocabulary, but the essay structure is a bit messy, if easily overlooked. He also wonders if one of his students gave him a crash course in essay writing, as the finished product is double spaced where he would be able to add his own comments if it were printed out. And he's tempted to do just that if Naomasa tries to overlook this.

'There are several reasons I should meet with my mother. There are several reasons you should

want me to. There's no reason that you should not allow it.'

He had even more reasons *not* to.

He can't see the title of the book, but he recognizes the maroon cover and golden stripe on the spine from when he gave it to Ashido to copy by hand. Shinsou still believes that the actions that he took before the rescue are prosecutable, and he took the time to add up the toll of his supposed crimes. He believes he would be sentenced to 112 years in prison and 2,300,000 yen in fines, and that helping the investigation is a way to 'repay his debt to society.'

But that isn't all. He knows that one of his students, possibly Bakugo, was sending him information that he cherry-picked and cited in his second argument, to argue that he needs to see his mother to know whether his quirk affected her. Research indicates that most mental quirks are too weak to cause that kind of strain until well after they're fully developed, but Shinsou presents those same studies with an emphasis on 'most.' He includes all the ways he would be able to tell at a glance whether she had it, all of the symptoms laid out in a way that tells Aizawa he's already imagined the meeting taking place in hundreds of different ways.

And then there's a reason that's more disturbing than the one he first imagined. Shinsou doesn't want to meet his mother to form a bond with her. He wants her to *rename him*.

'I wasn't allowed to leave the first room I was taken to until I answered to 27 as my name. It will be my name until my mother takes that back, when she calls me 'Shinsou Hitoshi.' '

'I want to be Shinsou Hitoshi, not 27. I want to know whether my mother was hurt by my quirk, and see that for myself. I want to help the investigation, and you want that too. Now that you know my reasons, there's no cause to stop me from seeing my mother, and for you and the police to get the information that you need from her.'

There's no mention of the sale. There's no mention of the price, and Aizawa is still selfishly grateful for that. Over two million yen and 112 years are difficult to see regardless, even if he knows there isn't a sane judge in the country that would pass down that sentence on a victim of child trafficking. It's unnerving only because Shinsou didn't include his math, how many times 'kidnapping' or 'assault' had been boiled down to legal terms that certainly *didn't* apply to Shinsou.

Shinsou *is* Shinsou, absolutely *regardless* of what name his mother would call him in a meeting that will *never* happen. "You're not responsible for anything that you've done until this point. You're not going to go to prison, or pay for your actions in any way."

Shinsou's gaze hardens at the laptop for a moment, but flicks up to meet Aizawa's eyes with a sickening plea behind it.

"A quirk specialist will determine whether Mental Quirk Abuse was ever a risk for your quirk or ever will be, in a far more definitive way," Aizawa reasons, even if it sounds all the more hollow with even more mounting reasons why The Commission of Wardship Affairs needed to sign a *useless* document to allow that.

Shinsou still stares, more pleading than disheartened, and it's difficult enough to put to words the reasons why he shouldn't trust his mother to *rename him*.

"Your name is Shinsou Hitoshi. The reasons why it doesn't... seem to be yours to you are complicated. There is no simple resolution for it, and not through your mother," Aizawa states, closing the laptop and watching Shinsou's violet eyes follow the motion, almost clouded in

disappointment. “I’m glad that you were honest in this assignment, but that doesn’t change my decision.”

Aizawa places the laptop back in Shinsou’s bag, knowing that at 3 AM, the teenager was already going to miss a full night of sleep but he should try to recover a few hours. But he’s only slightly surprised that Shinsou doesn’t want to do that. *‘I want to see her.’*

Aizawa nods, taking that request for what it was. A rare moment of Shinsou being forthright with what he wants, and asking for something far greater than a cup of coffee or a photograph of Eri. It’s a bold request, and one that isn’t going to be granted. “You’re done with the investigation.”

‘E-N-D-E-A-V-O-R,’ Shinsou signs, pausing afterwards as though that were a weighty explanation. It isn’t, Aizawa doesn’t think for a second that Shinsou was concerned about Endeavor’s health after the Nomu attack. Despite all the blame he seemed to take onto himself, he doesn’t think Shinsou would take on *that*. *‘Take investigation from you.’*

That was an explanation, if an inexplicably formed one. “Why do you think that would happen?”

‘T-O-D-O-R-O-K-I told me. Meant to be spy,’ Shinsou signs, and if that was true, not that Shinsou would have much reason to lie that it was, that *didn’t* come up in his long discussion with his student. *‘Help investigation. Won’t leave.’*

The Commission would place Shinsou in *Endeavor’s custody* over Aizawa and Hizashi’s *dead bodies*. And he doesn’t doubt that Principal Nezu would rally UA to become a fortress to stop that from even becoming a possibility. “Endeavor can’t take over the investigation, and he won’t be able to take you from UA. We have enough leads, and closing the case is just a matter of time. You don’t have to worry about the investigation.”

They have leads, so far useless but Aizawa reasons that’s only because he hasn’t been involved as much as he planned to be. Naomasa and Sansa have talked to incarcerated members of named groups who contracted Numbers, and while the possibility of lowering their sentences should have loosen some lips, it didn’t. Aizawa knows there are methods that can’t take place in prison cells, and at worst he knows that Shiori knows more than what she’s divulged so far.

Shinsou gave him the name. Unwillingly, but it was done, and Aizawa swore time and time again that it was all he needed to keep Shinsou safe. Words mean nothing, but nothing was as powerful as action, and he would prove that he would keep that promise.

But that wasn’t enough for Shinsou. *‘I don’t know what she looks like. Wrong,’* Shinsou signs, and though Aizawa can’t see it from behind the face mask that Shinsou still hasn’t taken off, he can imagine the slight frown that would match the small furrow between his eyebrows. *‘I don’t know what my mother looks like.’*

That’s not a good argument for Shinsou to see her in person, when Aizawa could remedy that so easily. He turns back to the monitors and goes through the methods of getting access to the highly restricted investigation files, to pull up Shinsou Ui’s mug shot when she was first brought to the police station. He clicks on the photograph to enlarge it, and turns around to see if it had any impact on Shinsou.

He sees Shinsou’s hands fold together before he looks away, but there’s a strain behind his eyes in the way he focuses on the floor that makes Aizawa glance back at the photograph. His eyes catch on the white roots of her purple hair while his mind catches on a list of symptoms just repeated to him in that essay.

“Your mother is 40 years old. She’s old enough to have white hair naturally,” Aizawa says, even if he could go into greater detail with a list of reasons for premature graying. After Hizashi saw his first suspected gray, he quickly became an expert and passed that information along to Aizawa despite how unwilling he was to learn it. “You didn’t hurt her.”

‘I don’t know that. I want to know,’ Shinsou signs, still not looking away from the floor. His hands move sharp and irritated, but Aizawa knows this is far more complicated than a tantrum from a child being denied something they’ve asked for. But Shinsou still won’t get what he wants.

“I’ll ask Hanajima to do a thorough work-up on your mother while she’s in custody. A report from a licensed professional who can determine whether she has Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome. And I’ll give you that report as soon as I get it,” Aizawa says, even if he knows that much is risky. What Hanajima could uncover about that woman’s mental state could still devastate Shinsou, but he knows that Shinsou trusts documents more than words. Something he can hold in his hands is proof.

The document going over Hizashi’s monthly stipend for Shinsou’s care was what convinced him that Aizawa didn’t *own* him after all.

He knows that promise is not enough for Shinsou, but it settles the conversation enough for now. Just like he expected, Shinsou curls his arms under his head and closes his eyes, choosing to sleep like that rather than disturb Eri to make both of them more comfortable.

It makes Shinsou look more like a pouting child, and maybe he is. But he’s a child in Aizawa’s care, and thus likely to be disappointed in the choices made to take care of him.

Aizawa still doesn’t know if Shinsou Ujima was ever a good caretaker for Shinsou, but it doesn’t matter. Aizawa is Shinsou’s caretaker now, and that might mean disappointing him for his own wellbeing.

Girl's Day

Chapter Summary

Aizawa and Eri go on a mission off-campus to escort Shoji to meet with his family. Eri makes a new friend, Aizawa has a revelation, and Shoji thinks about the impact he can have as a hero.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Severe bullying among children, Body dysmorphia

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri dresses in long sleeves and leggings because the sight of her scars can make her distressed. Eri has begun calling Chisaki 'Fuck Chisaki' in order to overcome her fear of addressing him by name. Eri has been irritable at Shinsou at times. Shoji and Eri had been uncomfortable around each other, as Shoji avoided being around Eri because he was concerned that wearing a mask around her could make her afraid of him, and Eri picked up on that to assume that Shoji didn't like her, a dynamic that many people noticed. At Shichi-Go-San, a festival for young children, Shinsou made Aizawa and Yamada aware that Eri would try to hug anyone as short as her. Shoji wears a mask constantly because he's unnerved by his mouth not having lips, after being bullied in school for that. Eri will sometimes get distressed when she can't pronounce a word correctly, as Chisaki had clapped his hands or made loud noises when she misspoke in order to teach her to 'talk properly,' something that Shinsou tried to ease by reassuring her that it was a 'hard word to say.' Shinsou got upset and threatened Uraraka on the group chat when he learned that she was using her quirk to float Eri. Aizawa's 'Death Coffee' is extremely potent, and would aggravate underlying health conditions. Eri's horn has been growing from 'happiness,' which Mirio said he wanted her to learn to do because he didn't want to recover his quirk with her pain. Shinsou has been hiding that he feels he's able to talk and that he's no longer selectively mute. Shinsou has spoken to Mirio on very rare occasions before. Eri has pulled out a Reverse Uno card because Kaminari told her that anyone who holds it can't get in trouble for anything they say.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eri's never had a mission with Zawa before, but she knows that Zawa's missions sometimes means he has to dress different. Yama told her she just had to dress cute, and he said that whenever she wanted to pick out clothes for herself, she could do that from now on after she asked, but it's kind of hard.

It's not easy to pick out clothes for her like it is for Twenny. She knows Twenny likes to wear long sleeves and cats, and she does too. But some of her clothes don't have long sleeves, or the pants are short so she has to wear other clothes underneath them.

Yama used to tell her that it was okay for her to get dressed alone, and Zawa did too, but Eri really

kind of hates that. She can take baths alone if she has a whole lot of bubbles, but sometimes when she's getting dressed, she wants to talk to someone when she has to look at her legs or arms, where Fuck Chisaki made her ugly.

Yama was making sure that Zawa looked really cute for his mission, and that meant that Eri had to get dressed with *Twenny's* help, and she doesn't really like it.

"This looks cute," Twenny says, pulling on one of her pink overalls that she *did* think was cute before Twenny touched it with his sparkly hands. Ashido painted Twenny's nails while they were on a little kid's sleepover, and she even used the fingernail polish that Eri likes the most, so now Ashido isn't Eri's friend anymore.

Eri shakes her head, and pulls on her new favorite clothes so Twenny can get them for her. It's a blue and white stripy hoodie with little pom poms on strings, and when she's not wearing the hood on her head, it lays on her back and kind of feels like a cape, and she needs to wear a cape for her hero mission with Zawa. She needs to wear pants too, because heroes pretty much always wear pants, except for the Dragon Lady that visited her in the hospital.

Twenny also wants her to wear her favorite puffy pink jacket that makes her look like Thirteen because it's really cold outside, but even though Eri wants to not like it anymore, she can't. It's still her favorite.

"It's too bad you can't come too, Twenny," Eri says, even though she feels like it's kind of not. Twenny would just do dumb stuff if he went on the mission like hang out with other people, and Zawa says he doesn't have the 'skills' for it anyway. "You never get to leave UA, but I got to have fun going shopping with Yama and Zawa a lot."

It's kind of sad that she hasn't gotten to go shopping in a while, even though it's kind of scary sometimes. Especially when it was Yama, 'cause Yama always seemed kind of scary at first on their shopping trips, but after he took her to a nice place to eat, he seemed a little less scary. "I think you'll have more fun with Aizawa anyway."

Twenny talks in a kind of sad voice, but when Eri turns around, he looks like he's smiling. He's just being mean and sounding dumb and sad, but he's not really sad to be away from her. He used to always be sad about that, always. He sometimes used to look like he was going to cry if she was bad and already crying in The Chair, but he never does that now. He always seems happy to get to be away from her.

"And... Yamada wants to take me to his show for some reason tonight," Twenny says, kind of scratching the back of his neck, but his glittery nails still make Eri really mad. "I don't really want to, but he seemed excited about it."

Twenny is lying, and that's really bad.

Even when he says he doesn't want to, he smiles a little like he does. It's a really tiny smile, mostly just that he's not frowning, so he's really just lying to Eri and she hates it more than Twenny not going to the hero dorm with her tonight to do *dumb* stuff.

"You can't!" Eri knows it's bad to yell, and Twenny always used to tell her to be quiet, but he looks too surprised to tell her now, and that just makes her mad enough to stomp her feet. "You can't go! You're supposed to stay here!"

Twenny reaches out his hand to pat her head or tell her to be quiet, but she turns around and crosses her arms because she doesn't want him to. But she kind of does, really bad when he starts talking.

“I know, Eri. I’m not supposed to leave UA because of the investigation.”

Eri doesn’t know a whole lot about the investigation, but it sounds like a big mean monster. Twenny said the investigation made him do stuff away from Eri, and Yama said the investigation made Twenny have to talk to Fuck Chisaki. Eri kind of just wants the heroes to punch the investigation and make it go away so Twenny doesn’t have to do stuff, even if some of the stuff isn’t bad. But they’re not doing that.

“Yamada said it would be fine, but... I can tell him I don’t want to,” Twenny says, and he’s lying even more. He sounds really serious, and that means he’s really sad. He lied to Eri that he didn’t want to go, and he’s lying about it again. But this time it’s such a mean lie that it makes Eri kind of sad in her feet, like she’s standing on something cold. “I was worried about it anyway. The hero students have been kind of annoying, but we can do something fun together instead. Anything that you want to do.”

Eri has a lot of stuff she wants to do with Twenny. She wants to do *everything* with Twenny.

But she already knows that he’d rather be with the hero students, and he’s just lying to her again.

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After the disaster that was the Summer Training Camp this year, hero course students who have their provisional licenses are only allowed to go off campus unescorted for a maximum of one hour. Aizawa is keenly aware that new rules like that are highly restrictive, and that makes his attendance at every rare family visit highly invasive. But if there’s one benefit to the requirement of living in the dorms, it’s that commuter students like Shoji are better rested and prepared for their studies without a two hour long train ride in the morning.

He noticed that Shoji was uncharacteristically withdrawn last night, going to his room at an early hour, but despite that he doesn’t look well rested today. “I apologize for taking up your time, Aizawa-sensei.”

“It’s fine,” Aizawa says with a wave. Shoji was one of many of his students who was more than entitled to his time. More than entitled to his current preoccupation with glaring down any other passengers on this bus who stared at him a bit too long. “It’s procedure now. I doubt that anything will require my attention, so Eri and I will be keeping out of your way.”

That would be the right thing to do, the least invasive course of action to take. But something prickles at the back of his neck and reminds him that eavesdropping on private conversations is a useful skill in a great deal of his hero work.

On the surface, he knows there’s nothing to really rattle his guard like this. Shoji has always been an exceptional student, there’s nothing that would hint at any trouble from his personal life. He might be uncomfortable because Aizawa’s attendance at this family visit is uncomfortable. He knows it could even be due to bringing Eri along, or excitement towards seeing his family for the first time in months that he’s misread.

But he couldn’t miss the slight strain in Mrs. Shoji’s voice when she asked if the visit could take place as soon as possible. In particular, he can’t forget that she asked if Shoji’s little sister Mizuno could come along twice.

He also can’t miss that this is the first time that Eri will be in somewhat close proximity to another little girl her age, and with Shinsou’s advice given at Shichi-Go-San, he knows that comes with a risk. After they exit the bus, he lets a purposeful distance build between them and his student

before he reminds her. “There might be a lot of children your age at the playground, and a lot of fun things to do. Just remember our mission, and make sure that you can see me at all times.”

Eri nods, walking a bit closer to him with a swell of foot traffic and a particularly loud laugh from a group of teenagers passing by. She’s been a bit quiet since leaving campus, and hasn’t let go of his hand. UA is still more comfortable for her, but it doesn’t seem to be more serious than normal child-like nervousness in a new environment. “So you can see me too, and we can keep an eye on each other. And if I meet any new friends, I gotta give them a high five first.”

Aizawa nods, still finding *another* prickle of worry creeping under his skin. Eri’s first instinct when seeing someone her own size was apparently to give them a hug, and while he wasn’t ashamed of that, he was... worried.

Children can be cruel, and with her circumstances, she hasn’t learned that. She hasn’t learned proper social interaction with children her own age, because she’s never experienced it. And due to her circumstances, he didn’t want her to learn another layer of cruelty in this world, to have her reach out too boldly and be mocked for it.

He grew up as the weird kid, but he overcame any need to change that. He’s heard it all, that his clothes smelled weird, that he looked like a pirate with the eyepatch, that his mother didn’t love him because she packed his lunch in a brown paper bag instead of a bento box.

Children can be *cruel*. And painfully perceptive. Those words can strike true and they can *hurt*, and if a single one of those children hurts Eri he doesn’t know what he’ll do. What he’s truly capable of if it comes to that.

He knows it’s harder, because Eri isn’t ‘weird.’ Knowing her circumstances, she’s startlingly well-adjusted in some ways. But without knowing her circumstances, without the maturity to see past anything beyond the norm that small children somehow lack, she might come off odd and invite attention because of it.

Aizawa can tell by the way Eri’s grip loosens and she leans forward a bit when they come to the playground’s entrance that she’s already seen her first target. There’s a part of Aizawa that can see that as an opportunity, and there’s another that *dreads* what will happen if worse comes to worse.

Shoji’s smile is covered by his mask, but it’s unmistakable in his voice when he kneels to greet his younger sister with a hug. Mr. Shoji isn’t in attendance, but Mrs. Shoji is. His student favors his mother’s Dupli-Arm quirk more strongly, though her quirk gives her two fully formed arms with little webbing between them. Mizuno doesn’t have additional arms but there is webbing that hangs from beneath hers like a cape, seemingly blushing when it flushes to a bright pink with a pungent smell of roses seemingly coming from nowhere.

Shoji Mezo’s quirk was a blending of multiple appendages that could create additional sensory organs, but it seems that Shoji Mizuno’s quirk produced sensory events. It could change color and smells at least, and may even be influenced by her mood, which wasn’t uncommon in children that young who had little control over their quirks.

The members of the Shoji family that were here had many similarities - white hair, mutant based quirks, and while Mezo was the tallest, Mizuno also seemed tall for her age. But there’s one similarity that stands out to Aizawa.

All three of them are wearing clothes that cover their mouths.

Shoji can be startlingly mature for his age, and Aizawa had previously thought that his tendency to

wear a mask might be the singular indication that he was a teenager. That he might be so invested in the benefits for stealth in his quirk that he would pay homage to a certain ‘ninja’ aesthetic. But Mrs. Shoji’s scarf hiding the bottom half of her face, and the ill-fitting white medical mask on Mizuno’s seems to indicate something different.

It’s especially telling because that white mask is ill-fitting. A small grin similar to Ectoplasm’s peeks out at the edges, molars that are exposed but might not be for any purposeful expression.

The mask being ill-fitting, presumably new, and the need for Mizuno to see her older brother, an obvious source of comfort, reminds Aizawa of what he already knows. That children can be *cruel*.

When his student turns around with his little sister in his arms to politely introduce them, Aizawa is reminded that some children aren’t cruel. Eri tugs her hands to her chest, pulling Aizawa’s with it, and she’s far too excited to let Shoji speak before she asks, “Are you an angel?”

Aizawa feels almost overwhelmed at that, what he knows are kind words that might be due to how little she’s experienced, how she doesn’t know to hate what doesn’t appear ‘normal’ because she hasn’t seen enough of ‘normal.’ She’s seen ‘angels’ because of the costume that Ms. Joke sent her, and to her the webbing that falls from Mizuno’s arms looks like wings. She doesn’t know that could be an odd question to ask, that it might be better to know Mizuno’s name before saying something that bold.

Mrs. Shoji looks shocked with widened eyes, and Mizuno’s webbing colors in a swirl that seems indecisive as to how to take that. But as coolly confident as ever, Mezo nods. “Yes. This is my little sister, Mizuno, and she’s definitely an angel.”

Eri beams, because she hasn’t truly learned playful dishonesty, and runs forward with a hand outstretched because at UA, she seems to have forgotten restraint or fear in some ways. “My name is Eri, and I really want to be friends with a real angel!”

Mizuno doesn’t seem to know how to take that, curling herself a bit closer to her older brother for a moment, and Aizawa nearly feels numb when he sees what he can of her expression look close to tears. If this little girl cries, he knows he can’t blame her, but he’s not sure what he can tell Eri to explain it.

But the confused mottling of her webbing only flashes blue for a moment before it becomes a vibrant yellow, the smell of sunflowers nearly overwhelming. “I-I wanna be friends with you too!”

Shoji sets his little sister down, and she runs towards Eri with the same determination, but ignores the still outstretched hand to greet her with what might honestly be a normal response for children that young. She hugs Eri tightly, even if she dwarfs her by nearly half a foot, and Eri only hesitates for a moment before she hugs her back.

His student ducks his head with what Aizawa knows is a grin, a nest of worries that called for this visit seemingly resolved without much help from him. But with three hours still arranged for, and the excited way Mizuno runs to her brother to take the new pair to the swings, Aizawa knows that this visit will go far more smoothly than he anticipated.

Especially when he has some slightly prying questions for Mrs. Shoji in regards to what his student’s early education was like.

*

Eri thinks that her horn is going to get so big and full of happiness today that it’s going to be even

taller than Shozo.

There's so many things to *do*! She can swing on the swings and go up really high, and even though Shozo doesn't really want her to jump off, when she does she feels like she can *fly*! There's slides too that make her tummy kind of flippy in the middle of sliding down them, and there's a carousel that's a little scary because Shozo can make it spin around *really fast*!

Eri didn't really know what to do at first, but she has the best, greatest, most *awesome*, and *coolest* angel friend in the whole world to show her. And even though Zawa seems really busy talking to Mizzy and Shozo's mom, she knows he's gonna be okay, and she'll be okay because she has Shozo and he's a hero. "Mezo! Let's play hide and seek! Me and Eri want to be hiders first!"

Eri really doesn't know why Shozo didn't really like her at first, and she kind of hates it because Shozo is so *fun*. And his little sister is the best, and she knows so much stuff, and all of it's fun to do. Even when Shozo says stuff like 'Don't jump like that' or 'Don't leave the playground,' it's still really super duper fun! "Okay, I'll count to twenty, but remember not to leave the playground."

Mizzy grabs Eri's hand and already knows where to hide, so Eri runs to follow. She's never run so much in her entire *life*, and it makes her face really hot and her jacket feel kind of sticky, but Eri really really likes it.

Mizzy pulls her into a big circle-kind of thing with a lot of holes in it, and it's a little more dark but it has another slide in the middle. There's some box kind of places built around it that seem like good places to hide, and a princess tower in the middle that goes all the way to the top of the circle. Eri wants to run around all inside it, and maybe even climb that tower to climb on top of the circle. She could probably touch the *sky* if she was that tall!

But Mizzy reminds her that they're 'hidere,' so they've got to hide from Shozo, and they hide under the slide. The sand is really cold under Eri's hands, but she had to take off her mittens to really hold Zawa's hand and make sure it didn't get cold, and she really likes holding Mizzy's hand too much to put them back on.

Mizzy curls up really small, so Eri does too, and then Mizzy starts giggling so Eri does too. It's *so fun* to hide from Shozo! It might even be more fun than a logical ruse!

It gets so fun that it's almost scary, because they have to be quiet when Shozo walks by and tries to find them. He keeps saying that they must be really good hidere, because he can't find them, and Eri has to hold her hands over her mouth to keep from giggling at that. Shozo is a *hero*, there's nothing he can't do, so if he can't find them then they must be the *best* hidere in the whole world!

Eri accidentally giggles when Shozo sighs, and Mizzy does too, but it's a good thing he doesn't hear that because he walks away wondering if they're hiding under the carousel. That's really silly, because the carousel is only a little bit above the ground, so they'd have to be *super* little to fit under there.

But it's really nice that Mizzy is little, even if she's not as little as Eri. She's littler than any of Eri's other friends, and even though that means she can't pick her up or throw her in a game like the hero students, it's really nice in a way that makes Eri's tummy feel weird. It makes her feel like her tummy is full of flowers, and maybe it's because Mizzy smells like flowers a lot.

Mizzy peeks from behind the slide even though Shozo might see her, but then she pulls back around and giggles. "Mezo prolly gets confused with all the stuff he can hear and smell, 'cause sometimes he's really bad at this game."

Eri really doesn't want Shozo to be sad about being bad at this game, and she doesn't want him to be so bad that he can't find them. It's really fun, but it'd be really not so fun if he didn't find them, and they just sat here and waited for him to find them.

Mizzy gets to have a lot of fun, and she's really good at it. She knows how to play a lot of fun games with Shozo, but that kind of makes Eri sad.

Because Shozo is a hero, so he lives at UA, and he probably doesn't get to play these games with Mizzy a lot now. But maybe Eri can fix it. "If I ask Zawa, maybe you can get to come live with me at UA with Shozo! There's not a whole lot of places to play games, but we can play a lot of hide and seek because there's a lot of places there, and lots of places to hide!"

Mizzy doesn't really like that, and her wings change color to blue for a little, and the flower smell turns into something that doesn't really smell nice. "My mom said I can't, 'cause Mezo has to work hard at his school, and I gotta work hard at my school too. Even though... I really don't like going there."

Eri knows that UA is one of the best schools in the world, so she feels kind of sad that Mizzy can't go there. She feels really sad when she thinks that she might not get to show Mizzy what UA looks like at all, and she really wants to show her how awesome it is. "You're so good at having fun, so it's not fair that you don't have fun at school!"

Mizzy kind of gets really small, so Eri does too just in case they have to hide, but then she starts pulling at her mask like Twenny does when he's kind of scared. "Eri... I really like you, so if... you get kind of scared, I want you to just tell me, and not... be mean."

Mizzy's wings are really blue, but they're also kind of green, and Eri still doesn't know what it smells like but she knows it's not a nice smell like soaps smell like. Mizzy takes off her mask and looks at her kind of scared, but Eri doesn't know what she's scared about. "I'm not scared, Mizzy! You just got a whole lot of teeth! I used to have a whole lot of teeth, but I lost this one."

Eri smiles really big and pokes at the hole where her tooth used to be, but when she does she feels a tiny hard thing that she scratches at. She must be getting her adult incisor soon, like Momo told her she would!

Mizzy doesn't look at her like the heroes do when she shows her lost tooth to them, but it's a little like Twenny looked when she first showed him. She puts her mask back on and looks around like she wants to find Shozo even though they're hiders, but then she sniffs like she has a runny nose. "Eri, maybe your eyes don't work right. Or maybe your nose doesn't. I'm... I'm really ugly and smelly, and you really... really sh-shouldn't be my...."

Eri frowns, because she knows all her stuff works right. She had to get looked over by a whole lot of doctors when she was in the hospital, and they all said that she was doing really good. It was kind of like saying that Fuck Chisaki should have made her messed up somehow, but he really didn't other than the ugly marks all over her. "I'm kind of ugly in places, and when my horn gets too big, it's really gross. But you're an angel, Mizzy! You're not ugly at all!"

"Ew! Someone's dog pooped really bad!" Some of the other kids that were running around the playground start running over, and they sound kind of scary and loud. Eri looks to see a bunch of boys that look kind of bigger than she is, maybe bigger than Mizzy, and they look kind of mean like Ugo looks sometimes. "EW! They're crawling around in dog poop!"

Mizzy hides her face in her legs and tries to hide her head, and her wings are so blue that they're almost black. Eri doesn't know why she's hiding like that, but that weird smell gets kind of bad.

“Don’t crawl around in dog poop! You gotta bury it!” One of those boys says before he raises up his hand, and a whole bunch of sand starts glowing before it hits Eri and gets all in her hair.

Eri stands up and gives them a mean look, because they’re acting really *bad*. They’re so bad that her tummy is flipping so much it feels bad, and her skin is so itchy that she has to make her hands into fists. “Don’t do that! You can’t use your quirk on civi-visilions!”

It’s a *really* hard word to say, even though Zawa says it really easy, and it just makes Eri madder that she can’t. And it *really* makes her mad when that boy just laughs even meaner than Ugo can sound sometimes. “*Ci-vil-ians!* Don’t say words that you can’t, you big baby!”

Zawa says that people who use their quirks to do bad stuff like crimes are villains, and Eri really really *REALLY* hates villains. She stomps her foot but she still feels too big with all the mad inside her. “Go away or I’m gonna call the heroes to stop you!”

Shozo is already running over, and Eri knows that he can beat up villains really good with all the fists he can make, but Eri feels too hot and too mad even with that stomp, so she takes a deep breath and does what Yama told her to do.

She yells. She yells and she yells out a lot of the big mad, but even though she knows it’s bad, she wishes she had Yama’s quirk to make the villains hurt instead of look at her like she’s doing something weird.

But a whole lot of people start running over, even Zawa, and even though Shozo could probably beat up those villain boys Zawa says it’s always good for heroes to have backup and for them to do a lot of different team ups.

And Eri *really* wants Zawa to team up with Shozo to beat up those villain boys. “Eri, are you alright?”

Zawa is holding her shoulder, but she looks and sees Shozo picking up Mizzy from under the slide. If Shozo is doing the rescue part, then Zawa is probably going to do the attack part, even though hero fights and raids usually start with the attack part first. “I’m okay, but those villains are really bad! They used their quirk to throw sand at us even though we’re civi-silians!”

“They threw sand at us!” One of those villain boys says, even though they look really scared of Zawa. They really should, because they were lying and that’s bad too, and even the adults coming over might beat them up with Zawa. “We were just playing and they threw sand at us for no reason-”

One of those adult ladies holds her nose and makes a weird face like when Kiri makes food or Other Yama gets his favorite cheese. “Ugh, that smell. Don’t tell me you boys found another dead animal.”

“Sensei,” Shozo says, and his voice sounds kind of weird like he’s worried. Eri looks to make sure Mizzy is okay, but her wings are really black from what she can see with all of Shozo’s arms in the way, like he’s trying to hide her. “Could you-”

Zawa makes his hair floaty and Mizzy’s wings stop being black, and even though the bad smell goes away Mizzy starts crying. “Mizzy! It’s okay, the heroes are here to beat up the villains!”

“I’m not here to beat up villains,” Zawa says, but his hair is still floaty like he’s going to, and his voice gets really growly and mean in a way that Eri really likes. “But I’d *hope* that these boys’ parents are here to lecture them against using their quirks to bully two girls that are younger than

they are.”

One of those ladies pulls a boy’s ear like she’s gonna beat him up instead, but another lady just sighs. “We’re definitely going to have a talk about that. Even if someone is a little different-”

“This is the age of quirks. *Everyone* is different,” Zawa says, and his hair stops floating but he doesn’t really stop looking so mad. “There’s no place for that cruelty in this day and age.”

Zawa holds out his hand and Eri holds it so it doesn’t get cold, but she still gives the villains a really mean look before Zawa makes her walk away. She still wants to watch them get beat up, but she starts to forget about that because Mizzy is still really sad. Shozo seems kind of sad too, because he’s still holding her like he’s got to keep her warm and protect her.

And that makes Eri really mad, because it’s not *fair*! “Zawa, you should still beat them up! They threw sand at us and they were talking about poop, and they’re villains because they said I couldn’t say stuff right just like Fuck-”

“Eri,” Zawa says, really quick like Twenny does when he’s worried she’s gonna do something bad. “That’s... A mad word like that isn’t something that you should say when we’re not at UA. But I’m....”

Zawa has a really nice smile on his face, even before he looks to show it to her, and she knows that means he’s really happy.

“I’m *very* proud of you,” Zawa says, and even if he says that about a lot of stuff, like the doctor tests that used to scare her or pictures that she drew really good, this time it makes her feel really warm and kind of small in a good way. Kind of like it feels when she gets to cuddle with someone. “It might have been scary to face those villains today, but you did exactly what you should do and called for help.”

Eri nods, ‘cause she knows that part after all the times that Zawa told that to the hero students. “Cause Ugo said I shouldn’t punch anybody until he shows me how to do it right, ‘cause I might get hurt. I’m just supposed to yell really loud because I’m little and the heroes will come and save me, and save Mizzy too!”

Zawa nods ‘cause she got it right, but he rubs his eyes like maybe using his quirk hurt them. “Bakugo has *some* words of wisdom, but you shouldn’t punch anyone if it’s avoidable. And when there’s a need for that, I’ll teach you how to defend yourself. Bakugo... might be busy with his studies for a while.”

That’s kind of bad, ‘cause Ugo is a lot of fun sometimes, but heroes have to do a lot of stuff and Eri knows that means she can’t hang out with them when they do that. It’s really fun to live at UA with a whole lot of heroes, but it’s not really fun when they’re all too busy being heroes to hang out with her.

Zawa stops too far away when Shozo goes to talk to his mom, even when Eri tugs on his hand because his mom looks kind of upset. Eri knows that Mizzy is still really sad because she’s crying, and when Mizzy yells ‘No!’ it sounds so sad that Eri feels like she’s going to cry.

Zawa’s head gets really itchy ‘cause he scratches it a lot, but then he sighs like he’s only a little mad like some of the heroes make him. “Eri, I need you to wait right here. It’s very important to our mission that I speak to Mrs. Shoji privately.”

Eri nods, ‘cause Zawa sometimes has to talk about stuff she’s not supposed to know, and lets go of

his hand. She gets kind of bored of standing and kicks around the grass so she doesn't peek over, but she really *really* wants to because Mizzy is sad. But she knows that Zawa is a hero, so he's gonna make her feel better.

But she looks up and sees Zawa walking back with a kind of smile, and Mizzy looks like she's not as sad 'cause she's wiping away her tears. Even Shozo isn't protecting her with all of his arms, just the two big ones. Zawa crouches down with a really nice smile, and he says something that makes Eri smile so big she can feel it in her toes. "The Shojis are going to visit UA for a bit, and it would help if you could show Mizuno around."

Eri can't stop from hopping like Ko-Ko's bunnies, because even though Mizzy's sad, she knows all of her hero friends can make it all better!

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Shoji knows that Mizuno can get overwhelmed easily. When she was younger, a sharp downturn in her mood would precede the tantrum, which would give in too easily to exhaustion. She's not entirely shy, but there's only so much she can handle, and even if it wasn't his biggest concern, he was worried about that before she went to school. When she would have to deal with a lot of overwhelming things.

But if anything, Mizuno's mood has only lifted higher after all the antics his peers have pulled. Of course Sato would make two batches of cookies in 15 minutes, of course Koda would introduce his bunnies. *Of course* Uraraka would have to float Eri and Mizuno, so that they'd *both* be little angels giggling above the heads of Class 1-A.

He has more reasons to trust Uraraka than Shinsou does, but that only made the nervous pull in his gut all the more embarrassing when he watched that and had to bite back pleas to set them down.

He's a little protective of Mizuno, he has to be. He held her in his arms when she was born, and she was so *small*. He gets annoyed with her at times, when she can be a bit demanding with the games she wants to play and how insistent she is that he has to play them, *now*. But before he was even accepted to UA, as soon as he told her that he wanted to be, she's been his most devoted fan. She cheered at any brief sight of him at the Sports Festival, she packed him a snack for the Summer Training Camp. The granola bar was still in his pocket when he went to Kamino, and more than once he had to press his hand against it as a promise to return safely.

It's *embarrassing*, but it's almost too intimate to have her meet the rest of his peers. To somewhat share her like that. He was nervous the first time Tokoyami came to his house, but it wasn't because he's embarrassed of his little sister.

He loves her, *a lot*. He's loved her before she was even born, when she was just a promise that his mother couldn't stop smiling about, and a threat to the quality of birthday and Christmas presents he would receive. He's always known her, always needed to protect her.

He's always known that there are some ways he can't.

The teeth were bad enough for him, but when Mizuno turned 4 and revealed that her webbing wasn't just decorative, but wouldn't grow limbs or mouths like his quirk did. He *worried*. Her sour moods had a new threat to them, his family knew not to let it show even if it was almost painful for Shoji and his father with their enhanced senses. But he *knew*. He knew this would happen when she started school.

He hates that he isn't there, that he's not there for her to come home to. He knows his parents are

trying, his mother is considering quirk suppressant therapy and his father is looking into a special program for children with less than becoming quirks. He knows that makes it seem like the rancid smell of her sadness is all that her quirk is, but school is quickly making it seem that way. He doesn't even know the first incident that probably started this spiral, but he knows the last.

Mizuno tried to *cut off* her webbing. And there were three little girls who were going to '*help*.'

She's *six* years old, after only two years of school it's gotten this bad. He knew that most of his classmates tried to understand what they couldn't, that only people like himself, Tokoyami, and Koda could. Emitter quirks are still the majority, people introduce themselves with their quirks because it's not supposed to be *obvious*. People have changed in the last hundred years or so, but most look like they did before quirks evolved.

He's never met anyone who personally believed it, but he knows there are some people who look to the first person who had a quirk as a religious figure. That baby born with the first Glow quirk bestowed a gift upon humanity, showing what quirks are *supposed* to look like. People with mutant quirks, people who have quirks that change their appearance too much aren't just *wrong*, they're *unholy*.

It's a cult, he knows that. He knows it's a minority, that it shouldn't matter to him.

It does, now more than ever. Because that small minority doesn't just hate him, it hates his little sister too.

He's glad that there are people who don't see that, who see Mizuno as the angel that she is. He almost stopped *breathing* when he heard Eri say that, almost terrified that she somehow knew that was his little nickname for her. He knows that Mizuno is scared, that apart from the horn, Eri looks normal, and normal looks too much like her bullies. He knows that even his mom is worried, especially after that well-deserved meltdown at the playground.

But the pungent smell of sunflowers has only gotten stronger, and Eri giggles so much while Mizuno teaches her how to skip, which only sets Mizuno off too. He doesn't think Mizuno has ever been this giggly before, and there's just something about the sound of the pair going off like that that tugs at his chest. It's *embarrassing* but he doesn't want it to *stop*.

He knows it will. He knows that Aizawa-sensei probably had to pull some strings to allow an on-campus visit this suddenly. Mrs. Midoriya had to go through a very thorough background check, but his mother hasn't applied for a visit because she knows he's busy. And he knows that she's very busy too, and a two hour train ride can take up *a lot* of time.

There's an unreasonable part of him that wishes Eri were right, that Mizuno could live at UA, and a slightly more reasonable one that argues maybe these visits could happen more often.

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There's a frown Aizawa can't quite guard when Mizuno suggests playing hide and seek, and absolutely *all* of his idiots cheer for it to happen. The entirety of the 1-A dorm is considered but quickly voted down when Eri suggests that UA has 'lots and lots' of places to hide. There's somewhat of a reason why Eri hasn't learned that game, *because* UA has lots of places to hide, and there are reasons why a traumatized little girl might start those games without letting anyone know.

At the very least, he knows that she doesn't have the propensity or capability to start hiding in ventilation shafts like Shinsou does on occasion. *Yet*.

Given the freezing temperatures outside, he nearly makes it a point to excuse Asui, but she excuses herself to fetch a self-warming jumpsuit that the Support Department wanted to test out. He still observes the organization of this game, and breathes easier knowing that it will be done in teams. Eri and Mizuno are the first to be paired off, and if anything, Eri's new friend will keep her from becoming irrecoverably lost on UA's massive campus. Not when the smell of sunflowers is that pungent, and unlikely to wane.

Mrs. Shoji seems a bit less relieved to leave Mizuno in Class 1-A's care on this sprawling campus, even when it includes her son, but she doesn't say anything about her discomfort. Aizawa finds himself making a cup of coffee in an abandoned dorm, one of his student's parents sitting at the table, and feels an odd and irrational strain to want to keep watch over the game as well. It's wholly irrational, knowing his students so well and knowing that there's nothing to worry him.

He tries to ignore it, and simply enjoy a measure of peace, even if he had to steal some of Bakugo's coffee just in case Mrs. Shoji had any heart conditions that would be aggravated by his usual blend.

"Your class is very kind towards Mizuno," Mrs. Shoji says, a smile hidden by her scarf that he can still see in the fondness in her eyes. "I imagined that with heroes being so important to children that they would be patient with her, but... I truly didn't expect her smile to return so quickly after that."

Aizawa nods, drinking to hide his amusement and biting back words about how there was *nothing* his idiots would like better than to excuse themselves from their weekend studies to play with a pair of young children. "It's not entirely a part of UA's curriculum, but I think with Eri, my class has recognized that. It's a given that they might not be available for this every time."

There's shock that almost makes Mrs. Shoji drop her coffee mug, and given that it was Iida's, he's glad that he won't have to replace it. "Oh, I wouldn't."

"The security guard should have a more permanent visitor's badge for yourself and your daughter when we leave. The request wasn't filed, but a second background check really isn't necessary given that there was one performed before your son's admittance," Aizawa says, a reason that could explain why Principal Nezu decided on that course of action before he even mentioned it, when he had only wanted to make him aware that today's visit *would* happen. "Of course, you would still have to call to request a visit, but... I'm very aware that the dorm requirement can cause a strain. It's unfortunate that it's necessary."

He hasn't been approached, but he would do the same for any of his students. Their families were vetted, he would somehow make the time to be an escort. Mrs. Midoriya insisted that her son was busy and was thriving with a bit of independence, but there was a badge for her waiting as well.

He's not going to wait to be approached with this situation. Not when he saw too keenly the strain, how much his student meant to his little sister. Not when that little sister clearly needed him. Not when he has more selfish reasons to make it available.

"I do appreciate that, and of course I wouldn't.... I do respect what UA has done to protect my son, and he truly has done well here," Mrs. Shoji says, tugging her scarf down just enough so that she can drink the coffee. Her exposed teeth seem much like Ectoplasm's, given that she didn't have to tip the mug back too far to keep the coffee from spilling between them. Possibly fused together like his.

Like his student's. Like Mizuno's. "Ectoplasm also teaches here," Aizawa mentions after she pulls up the scarf. He's still not sure if that's something he should offer, if it would be more prying than gathering the names of every elementary school his student attended and the class names, a list that

he intends to build with it.

Mrs. Shoji waves her hand as if that's too great an offer, or a poor one. "I'm sure that he's busy, and he's not... exactly..."

Aizawa only barely keeps from rolling his eyes. "It's his hero persona. He's *very* different in person, and with children."

That hero persona had a tendency to slip out with the students, perhaps giving Mrs. Shoji a reason to still be under that impression even with her son enrolled in his math class. Ectoplasm was regarded by fans as being both part of a 'Horror Hero Group' and an 'Almost Villains Group.' Much like Gang Orca could borrow mafia aesthetics for intimidation and fan appeal, Ectoplasm could pretend to be a terrifying sadist, more highlighted with the mask that drew attention to his permanent smile.

If they *only knew* his favorite karaoke playlist, or how quickly he became Eri's main supplier of cat stickers after asking a few basic arithmetic questions to judge whether his tutorship might be needed. It wasn't needed, and neither Hizashi nor himself ever *asked*, but out of all of UA's staff who had quickly scrambled to be of some use to Eri in the beginning of her wardship, he was one of the most bold. But with only one maskless incident to prove it, Aizawa was sure he was one of the most *blushy* about it.

"I do appreciate that, but it's.... It's harder for Mizuno," Mrs. Shoji mutters, staring at the coffee in her hands. Aizawa knows, and knows there's nothing that he can do for that aspect of it. The Shoji family hadn't determined whether moods influencing Mizuno's quirk was a developmental challenge or a permanent feature. Various schools who had programs for children who struggled with their mutant quirk features might still have children too young to look away from an unpleasant odor. Small children could be like chickens in that way, able to cannibalize their own with the sight of a small wound they couldn't keep from pecking.

Eri could have shown her own wound, if the playground was instead a daycare or elementary school. Screaming like that, standing in a way a bit *too much* like his husband for him to entirely forget the sight, even if the sudden sound of Eri screaming bloody murder was enough to be unforgettable. The correct assumption that using a quirk on a civilian made the attacker a villain certainly made Aizawa realize that she paid a great deal of attention in his classes, but the vocabulary and passion behind it could make her seem odd too.

Neither of those two little girls could see each other's oddities, and their worlds could be made better for it.

"She has a friend with Eri," Aizawa says, still trying to hide a proud smile at the memory of that. He had been sure that if things turned rough on the playground, she would simply shut down, as that could be far more frightening than a nurse or too long a time alone in her room that used to cause the same trembling ball of frightened child. Instead, a bit of a bulldog came out in Mizuno's defense. "And to be blunt, my ward might appreciate companionship from someone her own age. It wouldn't have to be a commute for you either, if you're amenable to that."

He's not sure how he or Hizashi could manage a two hour train ride themselves, but they would manage. It would be irrational to place the burden solely on Mrs. Shoji.

Especially when he feels an incredibly irrational need to make sure Eri spends time with this little girl again. He's never really heard her giggle so much, even with Mirio.

"Oh, I'm sorry if this is an odd question," Mrs. Shoji says, pulling at her scarf a bit as she seems

nervous. “But is Eri.... Mezo told me she was a ‘ward,’ but if that’s changed...”

“She’s a ward,” Aizawa corrects, tampering down on a sudden flare in his chest that thinks of when that could change. “With her circumstances, she’s legally a ward of UA, and I’m her designated guardian for that. That won’t change for quite some time. Years.”

‘Years’ sounds more like a reminder to himself. Even though Shinsou could control Eri’s quirk, possibly giving a hint to how it could be controlled by Eri, it would still take time to master given that the quirk needed to build up.

She would still be a ward for years.

“Oh,” Mrs. Shoji says, then laughs a bit, that odd nervousness melting away. “I’m sorry, I thought I heard you call her your daughter a few times.”

Aizawa forces himself to look at the coffee in his hands, swirling it around a few times. Still holding his breath tight in his chest, unable to force it to release. “I don’t sleep on the weekends. That’s why.”

He hasn’t slept since 1-A’s homeroom on Friday. He usually takes a nap around this time. He’s more tired because of that. He probably said something odd from that exhaustion.

Living at UA was temporary, and it was already having an effect on her. Even if 5 year olds did tend to have an affinity for heroes, they didn’t know the logistics and legal aspects quite so well. He doesn’t doubt that if Eri found another home, she would still be visited by every student she’s interacted with, fully fledged heroes dropping everything to spend a few hours playing tag or dress up.

If.

Aizawa switches the hand holding his coffee, using its warmth to fight off a bit of the chill still lingering. Hizashi is just getting to him, it’s logical that living with Eri in their situation could lead to that kind of thinking. Hizashi has thought about their plans to adopt more often than Aizawa has, Aizawa has always had to remind him that they had too many obligations in the way. Having 5 demanding jobs doesn’t leave time to be parents.

Eri needed stability, normalcy. When she attends school, someone needs to be there to get her ready in the morning, to make breakfast and pack a lunch when she’s too young to have that responsibility on her shoulders. Someone needs to monitor her studies, attend parent-teacher conferences. Make sure that her teachers understand that absolutely *no* child in that class would have the right to put her down or bully her. Someone needs to encourage her to smile, to express herself, to make her feel safe.

Eri feels safest at UA.

For now, she hasn’t experienced anything else.

Hizashi gets her ready for school, packs her meals. His patrols tended to end an hour before most schools start, time that he usually takes to patch up any injuries. He would still have time to walk her to school, keeping her safe from the petty villains who target small children during that walk. Given the variety of courses that UA offers and the capable teachers on staff still *chafing* to tutor her even after two months have gone by-

He’s tired. Just very tired.

That can make him irrationally emotional sometimes. He feels things too keenly inside a body that's too worn to not feel hollow enough for that. He feels things that he could have hidden nearly swell when he notices them, too often it's irritation or anger barely guarded, but since Eri came to UA.

It's been other things. No less warm than that seething and childish anger that rises if Hizashi wakes him up from a nap, but warm in kinder ways. Impossibly warm for it.

He still feels that warm and tender pride in his chest when he sees that all of his charges have returned, and Eri runs to him with chill-blushed cheeks that instinctively makes him want to find a scarf for her to wear. He knows that she's still having fun with Mizuno, evident by how she still hasn't let go of her hand, but she wants to give him a little report for the events that he's missed, like she always does.

His chest feels too warm when he thinks he wouldn't mind if those little reports never stop.

*

This was a *stupid* idea.

27 glances up from a coloring book that isn't his, to see that Mirio still isn't bothered. He should be. These were *Eri's* coloring books, even if she had two or three copies of the same books, they were *hers*. He would have *never* done this before the raid, he would have *never* thought to use Eri's things for his own entertainment.

And even if it's *pointless*, it's so unbearably selfish that it feels criminal, 27 has to admit that it's a little relaxing. Deciding what color should go in which space, concentrating to make sure that the crayon moves in the same direction with each stroke so that it comes out smoothly. Knowing that absolutely none of this matters.

It's still not really what 27 was trying to get from Mirio.

Aizawa was taking Eri on a trip off campus, and since Yamada had left for his patrol early, that meant that Mirio was watching him. That also seemed pointless, 27 could be left alone and not get into any trouble. He'd been left alone for most of his life before he met Eri. But 27 didn't try to argue, because he wanted to use Mirio.

Eri seems angry with him over some slight he hasn't figured out, but she gave him an opportunity to make it right at the hero dorm tonight. She hadn't said what she wanted to do, but he knows that Eri enjoys spending time with Mirio, and if he could do the same things Mirio does, then she could have fun with him, and this odd frigidity could blow over into nothing.

But Mirio said that he spends a lot of time coloring with Eri, and seemed too enthusiastic about doing it with 27 for him to stop him.

27 notices Mirio glancing up again, sure to tell him that he's doing a good job on *coloring* like it's an amazing feat, but then sees that his phone has a new notification from the group chat. That notification is quickly replaced by another, by a flood, and Shinsou is relieved to have a distraction and a reason to hopefully stop Mirio from saying anything.

UraRAWR: sHOJI UR LITTLE SISTER IS PERFECT Y WERE U HIDING HER IM

Dipsy: KODA. BUNNIES. S T A T

Blood Maroon is so Pretentious, it's RED: Im CRYING THIS IS SO CUTE

Frog Under The Kotatsu: @Shoji Be aware that Ochan is going to kidnap Mizuno. There's a reason that my siblings haven't visited....

Weeb Man Supreme: nononnO KODA DONT I CANT

SHUT UR FUCKING HOLE DEKU: THEY'RE FRIENDS!!!! THEY'RE FRIENDS ERI HAS A

Weeb Man Supreme: koda if u do this to me i'll die I CANT

Dark Thots: I'm coming down, don't startle Mizuno. She's a gentle soul.

Weeb Man Supreme: the inherent power of moe... it's too strong. I'm dead

A Cop (wee woo wee woo): @Bakugo Please remain in your room. We have a very young visitor, and Aizawa-sensei has advised me that drastic action will be taken if you don't heed this warning.

Meme Man Supreme: @Sero RIP but I'm different sHE CALLED HER

UraRAWR: AWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW MY HEARTTTTTT

Blood Maroon is so Pretentious, it's RED: IM REALLY CRYING HELP

Celine Dion Twink: Je vais pleurer putain, elle l'a appelée un ange, mon cœur est fondu dans une flaque d'étincelles, je ne peux pas X__X*~**

Put Your Hands DOWN: @Bakugo we have a murder to plan, im gettting deets

UraRAWR: SHE SCREAM FOR HEROES IM

Dark Thots: @Yaoyorozu I'm calling for aid. Todoroki has failed me.

Blood Maroon is so Pretentious, it's RED: TODOBROKI IT'S OKAY TO CRY IT'S MANLY TEARS DON'T LEAVE

SHUT UR FUCKING HOLE DEKU: @Everyone CALLING ALL HEROES but please don't swear Kacchan maybe you can stay in your room but WE'RE GOING TO CHEER MIZUNO UP!!!!

Weeb Man Supreme: @Shinsou prepare yourself. It's too cute. They're too powerful.

UraRAWR: !!!! SHINSOU ERI HAS A FRIEND YOU'VE GOT TO MEET HER THEY'RE SO CUUUUUUUUUUUUTEEE

SHUT UR FUCKING HOLE DEKU: *Tap to download 22kb*

SHUT UR FUCKING HOLE DEKU: This is for all of us, but

SHUT UR FUCKING HOLE DEKU: Okay im gonna cry but

SHUT UR FUCKING HOLE DEKU: Im so happy that we rescued Eri

UraRAWR: IZUKU IM GONNA TT_TT

Blood Maroon is so Pretentious, it's RED: DUDE I C A N ' T IM ALREADY CRYING

Frog Under The Kotatsu: Okay, I'm coming down. After I stop crying. Thanks Midoriya.

Shinsou couldn't trust that the face mask would hide his smile, covering it with his hand. The little girl standing next to Eri, their joined hands, Eri's *smile* was so wide. He's grateful that Izuku took a picture of this, to have a piece of that smile to keep. But he doesn't ignore the messages that come after it.

Eri having a friend. Eri meeting children her own age. He's never even *fathomed* that, as much as he's never imagined seeing it, he's never imagined something so *normal* for her. Being free from pain and fear was enough, imagining her dressed in colorful clothes to replace the bandages, he *imagined* her smile but never thought it could look like *this*.

He knows who deserves to see this, who wanted to see her smile too. He knows that Mirio might not even notice at first that Eri's horn has grown again too, he might not know that it's happiness now and that even if it grows more slowly, it doesn't seem to be less effective. The horn aches might begin soon, there's a chance this still won't work as well as they want it to, but when Shinsou turns over his phone to show Mirio, he knows Eri's horn is practically invisible to him at first.

Mirio brings his hands to cover his mouth, that same weepy, almost agonized look falling over him like it does over Yamada when Eri does something they recognize as cute. 27 hadn't noticed that he was holding his breath, but when Mirio's eyebrows drew too close, the agonized look becoming closer to agony, he remembers the messages.

The tears come for Mirio too.

27 starts to pull the phone away, but Mirio shakes his head, his face still too red. "No, I'm- m' fine, it's so *cute*." Mirio's voice breaks on the last word, each one coming more choked up and forced. One hand is waving to say that all of that should be ignored, but Mirio's other hand is wiping at his tears. "I'm so happy!"

There were heroes who paid a higher price for Eri's happiness.

27 knows that Mirio is happy, and knows that sometimes overwhelming happiness can come out in tears. He knows that Mirio doesn't want him to see him like this, that Mirio only smiles like that when he doesn't want to be seen any different way. It's stupid, after all the ways that Mirio has seen 27 in unflattering lights, that he would be embarrassed about a few tears. That he would ever doubt where they came from, because 27 was standing right there. 27 saw a part of Lemillion's last stand as a hero.

"Thank you," Shinsou says. It's a miracle that his voice didn't break as well, not with this tightness in his chest. When he means it more than what he says, he wants to thank Mirio for *everything*. When he wants to give him everything he can in return, if he can use his quirk with Eri's to help her restore his quirk, to give back *something* that was lost after so much was.

But the wideness of Mirio's eyes stops him.

He *said it*.

Mirio could tell them now, he could tell them that he wasn't mute. They could *know*, they could *know* now and he doesn't want to know what that looks like. He doesn't want Monoma to test it, he doesn't want to use his quirk on Yamada. He doesn't want to *know* what they'll see if they know, if

they see him like that. What he'll lose, even if it's as small as the way everyone looks at him.

If that warmth becomes a sudden chill.

But Mirio bends towards the kotatsu with a watery huff, scrubbing at his face with both hands as he snorts a laugh. "Jeez, you're always saying stuff to make me feel better, Shinsou! I wish I wasn't such a mess that you had to, but..." Mirio looks up, a more honest smile on his face. More honest because the redness around his eyes is less sad than the strain of that fake smile. "Thanks for that."

Shinsou barely feels the relief, knowing that it would be stupid to trust it. He's slipped before, he was able to speak a few times, but this was dangerous. This time might be fine, but there might be a next one. He can't forget himself like that.

He can't forget the rest of those messages either. "We should probably make some snacks if Eri's friend is coming over! I feel like I should change, this is such a big thing! I hope Yamada still has some apple juice."

27 wants to change too. In ways that he can't, unless he finds a way to peel back the scars on his skin and become something that looks as normal as Eri does.

But he feels the skin around his face mask and wishes that the fabric stretched a bit wider.

*

This is the *worst* day of Eri's life.

She's trying really hard not to cry, and she holds Zawa's hand really tight even though she doesn't want to, because it kind of helps her not cry. Zawa said that Mizzy couldn't go to her house after Zawa frowned at his phone, and said that Mizzy and her mom had a long train ride to get to their home.

Mizzy looks like she wants to cry too, and she hugs Eri really tight. But Eri feels like crying even more when Mizzy hugs Shozo even tighter and doesn't want to let go. It's kind of bad, but Eri wishes that Mizzy hugged Eri just as much as Shozo.

"Come on sweetheart," Mizzy's mom says, rubbing Mizzy's back when she starts sniffing, and her wings start turning blue. "We'll be able to visit again, because Mr. Aizawa was kind enough to set that up for us."

"And you can call me when you get home," Shozo says, wiping away Mizzy's tears when she pulls away. "As soon as I get out of class from now on, I'm going to call you, okay? So you can tell me about your day, and I can tell you about all the things my classmates have gotten up to."

"A-And Eri-i?" Mizzy asks, and her voice is really sniffly and snotty. "A-And Chako?"

Shozo nods, laughing a little under his mask. "I'll tell you all about your new favorite hero, Uravity."

Mizzy shakes her head really hard, and makes her hands into fists at her sides like she's mad. "Tentacole's the coolest! Tentacole's still my favorite! You're still my favorite!"

Mizzy hugs Shozo again, and Shozo's face is kind of red where the mask isn't, and his voice comes out kind of shaky. "I'm happy that even if I can't make you float, Tentacole is... still cool."

"Tenta-cool," Mizzy says, and nods really fast. And when she looks at Eri, her eyes get kind of

pinchy like she's smiling a whole lot under her mask. "I'm gonna miss you Eri, but we're gonna have a lot of fun next time! I'm gonna bring all my stuffed animals and we can have a tea party with all of my dress up stuff!"

Eri really wants to do that *now*, but Zawa wouldn't even let her show Mizzy *her* stuffed animals. But Eri tries to be good, and smile really really *really* good so Mizzy can still be happy and smell like flowers. "I'm gonna miss you too, but we're gonna have a lot of fun!"

Mizzy waves to Eri a lot, even when her mom takes her hand to take her away from the gate, and Eri keeps waving too. Even when Mizzy turns around, Eri still waves and wants her to turn back one more time to see it.

"Thank you again, sensei," Shozo says, and his face still looks kind of red when he says it. "Mizuno... really needed that. I can't thank you enough for this."

Zawa shakes his head, looking at the big gate with a hum kind of noise. "Children are inspired by heroes. It's important to recognize that at this stage in your studies. 'Tenta-cool' especially."

Shozo's eyes get kind of big, like he's surprised that Zawa knows his hero name, but Zawa knows all the heroes' names. Eri walks with Zawa and Shozo until Shozo goes to his dorm, and when he leaves it's really hard not to stomp when she walks with Zawa.

"Zawa, why couldn't Mizzy come to our house?" Eri asks, even if she kind of wants to use her Reverse card just in case Zawa gets mad, because she's asking about something that's kind of bad. She really wanted Mizzy to meet Twenny and play games with her, and maybe play so many games that Zawa would forget that she's supposed to leave.

"She could next time, but we weren't ready for a visit that suddenly," Zawa says, but he looks at his phone after he says that. "Mirio made snacks, and I'm sure he's excited to hear about your day."

Eri looks up really hard and wants to stomp her feet really big. *Mirio* could have met Mizzy too! Eri knows that Mizzy would have had so much fun with Mirio, and they could all laugh together and do all the fun things all at once today.

But when Zawa opens the door, Eri runs to Mirio, and as soon as she grabs his pants she remembers the big news. "Mirio! My quirk works when I'm happy! And my horn is super big now, because I had so much fun with Mizzy! Mizzy has to live at UA now, so I can fix your quirk super fast!"

Mirio smiles really big, but when he looks at Zawa he kind of laughs. "I'm really glad you had that much fun, Eri! I think Mizzy has to live with her parents, but that just means that when you get to spend time together, it's even more fun!"

Eri frowns, but she tries not to pout. She kind of thought that Mirio could make Zawa let Mizzy live at UA to fix his quirk really fast. Then she really has to try not to pout when she looks around, because Twenny's not there, and he might have gone to have fun with Yama without even telling her goodbye. "Where's Twenny?"

"He's probably getting dressed," Mirio says, and holds up a glass of apple juice and plate of apple bunnies to ask if she wants some, and Eri nods even though she ate a whole lot of cookies. "His friends told him that Mizzy might stop by, and he wanted to make sure he... looked nice for it."

Eri kicks her feet when she sits down at the table to eat her snacks with Mirio, because Twenny

trying to look nice for Mizzy makes her tummy feel kind of slippery. Twenny doesn't have to look different for Mizzy, and he didn't get to meet her today anyway. "I wish Mizzy could eat apple bunnies with us."

Zawa sits down and it sounds like all the air goes out of him when he does, so Eri gives him a big apple bunny because he didn't eat any of the cookies. Zawa smiles at her really nice, and looks at it before he eats it. "I'm sure that you'll have plenty of ideas for the next time that Mizzy visits."

Eri has to kick her legs a lot to keep her from thinking about all the fun things they could be doing *now*. They could eat apple bunnies, and play with Mirio, and she doesn't even know if Mizzy *likes* apple bunnies yet. "But if Mizzy lived here, we could do fun things all the time. I can't even think of all the fun things we could do, 'cause we could just do everything, 'cause Mizzy's always fun."

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder," Mirio says, and makes his apple bunny do a little hop before he eats it. "If Mizzy was here all the time, then you might not even notice how fun it is when she's here. Even if it is kind of sad that she's not here to eat apple bunnies with us, you can be excited to eat them with her the next time you see her, and that'll make them taste even better!"

Eri doesn't really like that. She wants to be with Mizzy all the time, even if it's not as fun. Missing her feels so bad that she doesn't think the fun makes up for it.

Eri didn't like living at a compound, and she didn't like living with Fuck Chisaki. But she liked that she was always with Twenny, except when he had to leave. She hated it a whole lot to be alone, but he always brought her books to make up for it, and he would always smile under his mask really big, and hold her close when he got back.

She wanted Twenny more than she wanted the books, but she kind of misses how he would smile like that, and hug her so tight. She wants that so much that she doesn't even like her apple bunnies now, and she's gonna hug Twenny so tight that he has to remember how to do it right.

"I'm gonna talk to Twenny!" Eri says, and slides off her chair so she can run to his room. Even if Twenny's still getting dressed, she doesn't really care. Even though Twenny always got dressed by himself and she doesn't know what he looks like without clothes, he helped her get dressed and take baths a lot. It's not really fair, anyway.

Eri opens the door, and Twenny's not naked, he's wearing too many clothes. He's wearing a face mask even though he doesn't do that at home, and his hands have gloves too, even though he's not going outside. Twenny looks at her kind of surprised, but he wasn't changing his clothes, he was just sitting on his bed and looking at his phone. "Mirio said that your friend wasn't coming. I'm sorry about that."

Twenny says he's sorry a lot, and he's always sorry about stuff that isn't his fault. But he sounds really sad, like he already knows how awesome Mizzy is. "It's okay Twenny, you can meet Mizzy next time! She's super fun, and we played a lot of games together! Some villain boys tried to be mean to Mizzy, but I stopped them and yelled and Zawa and Shozo came to stop them, and Zawa said I'm only supposed to say 'Fuck' at UA, and Mizzy got to be here at UA too! She was right here and she almost came over, and-and she's an *angel*, Twenny! I got to be friends with a real angel!"

Twenny smiles, and it's the same way he used to smile when he got back from going outside. Eri can't help but run up to hug him too, and she hugs him so tight that he remembers how to hug her tight too. "I'm really happy about that, Eri. You deserve an angel for a friend."

Eri pulls away because her face feels really hot, and maybe it's because Twenny is wearing so

many clothes, but she looks at Twenny's phone and sees a picture of her and Mizzy. "You got a picture of us?"

Twenny nods, and he smiles. "Yeah, Izuku sent it to the chat. You look really happy."

Eri is a little happier, even if Twenny didn't really get to meet Mizzy. At least he really knows that she's definitely an angel. "Mizzy has a whole lot of teeth, so she wears a mask kind of like you. Maybe she can get really cute ones to match with you too!"

Twenny tugs on his mask so it goes under his chin, and it's easier to see that he's trying to smile, but he doesn't really. "She shouldn't feel like she has to wear a mask, but... She could have any of mine, if she wants them. If she comes over. But it's fine if you two just want to play by yourselves if she does."

Eri pulls on Twenny's gloves, because he never wears gloves, and it's not cold enough to do that inside. And if his hands are still cold, she can hold them and still keep them warm, and she wants to do that. "I want you to play with us too! Mizzy's really nice, and she's not scary, Twenny! And I like Mizzy and I like you, so you're gonna like her too!"

Twenny smiles, and takes off his gloves for her, and she holds both his hands but they feel really warm and kind of sweaty. "I do like her, Eri. It's just..." Twenny stops talking, looking at his hands when he pulls them together, but Eri doesn't let them go. "I look a bit different. I can look scary to other people. It's fine if Mizzy is a little scared of me, and would rather spend time with you."

Eri looks at Twenny's hands and all the marks they have on them, like the marks he has on his face. Twenny's marks are cute, and hers are the only ones that are ugly, and she doesn't think that Mizzy would be scared of them. "Mizzy said she doesn't care about that. Mizzy's really fun and nice and she's gonna like you a whole lot, Twenny."

Twenny smiles, even if it looks a little sad, like he doesn't believe her. Twenny doesn't believe anything Eri says, and Eri really hates that, because she's right. Twenny just doesn't know that Mizzy is a super big angel.

When they were hiding in the bushes outside, Eri got kind of itchy under her hoodie, and had to scratch it. She didn't want her to, but Mizzy saw some of the ugly marks on her arm, and asked her what happened. Eri felt really cold, and felt like she couldn't say anything, even if she was at UA and could have said 'Fuck Chisaki' did it, but then Mizzy started pulling at her pants, and telling her there was a big scar on her knee that she got when she fell out of a tree, and it looks kind of like a star.

Mizzy is a super big angel, because she doesn't know that 'scars' can look ugly sometimes. They can look so ugly that they make people cry, like onion monsters. Eri likes a lot of things about Mizzy, but that's the thing that she likes the most.

"Twenny, are you still gonna go with Yama?" Eri asks, and her tummy gets a little flippy, but only a little. She stares at Twenny's sparkly nails that Ashi painted, and even though she thought they looked really dumb at first, she kind of likes them now. They make Twenny's hands look prettier.

Twenny shakes his head, and he hums like he's saying 'no.' "When he gets back, I'll tell him that I'm too scared to go out. He probably won't make me, and then we can play all the games you want together tonight."

Eri pinches at Twenny's hands, because he's talking like he's happy about that, but she knows he's really not. He's just lying to her again, and she wishes he didn't. "It's okay, Twenny. I got to have

fun with Zawa, so you got to have fun with Yama or he'll be left out, and that's not fair."

Twenny kind of laughs at her really quiet, and holds her hands with his bigger ones. "It's really fine. I know Yamada wants me to go but I want to spend time with you. I know that I haven't lately."

Eri stares at her toes, because Twenny hasn't, even when he said he would. That made Eri really mad, because Twenny does a whole lot of stuff that makes her mad now, like lying and lying is *really* bad. But Eri shakes her head, because she wants Twenny to stop lying when they spend time together, and Mirio said it's a good thing to feel really bad and miss someone a lot. "Nope! You're gonna hang out with Yama on his show, and have a lot of fun! So much fun that you miss me a whole lot, so I can miss you too!"

Twenny looks at her really surprised, and maybe he doesn't know how it works either, but if Mirio says it works then it's gonna work.

"But I'm gonna pick your clothes to go, because you need to look cute on Yama's show! And whenever you go somewhere from now on, I'm gonna pick your clothes, and you can pick my clothes when I go somewhere! So it's fair, and so you can remember to miss me!" Eri says, and it's easy to not feel sad when Twenny's gonna have to remember to miss her.

She knows she's gonna miss Twenny, and it's gonna feel really bad because she's making him go, but she wants Twenny to tell her all about his fun trip with Yama, and maybe if he has a lot of fun, it'll be really easy to be happy that he was gone.

*

Tentacole is Tenta-cool.

Shoji can remember the first time that Mizuno said that, vividly. He had announced it that day at school to be met with polite claps. His mother said it was nice, his father said that it definitely had a ring to it. But Mizuno said that it was '*Tenta-cool*.'

He knows it's mostly her age, and how he's her older brother. She seems starstruck by him as much as she gets irritated that he doesn't want to play a hundred rounds of tag. Aizawa didn't say it, but the timing is suspicious, and while he wants to go to his room to think about it, he finds himself walking to Tokoyami's.

When Tokoyami lets him in, it's easy to see that he wants to know why he was called to talk to Aizawa in the surveillance room, but Shoji welcomes himself to sit on Tokoyami's bed and pull down his mask. For some reason, he's wanted to see that more.

Given Tokoyami's quirk, it's hard to see when he's surprised, but he seems like he is. It's just the wideness of his eyes given that the beak can't smile or frown, and Tokoyami takes advantage of that a lot. He turns to sit on his desk to pretend that he isn't surprised, but he stares too long before he speaks. "How does it feel?"

"Horrible," Shoji answers. He doesn't need to see his mouth to know that it shouldn't be seen. He feels naked, even if he's been naked in the locker room and not felt half as ashamed. "I hate it."

He finds a hand wandering back to the mask pooled around his neck, but forces it back down. He *wants*, but he won't. This is the first time that anyone has seen him like this since elementary school, but Tokoyami might understand. "You don't have to force yourself," Tokoyami says, as if it's that easy. As if he hasn't told him to *try* this a million times, like he's wanted it more than he

should. “If it makes you uncomfortable to not wear the mask, wear it. That’s never been the issue I’ve had.”

Shoji finds himself glaring, finds himself weak to the slightest suggestion and takes it, breathes easier through his blue spandex blend. “I don’t understand the *issue*. Aizawa-sensei seems to think it’s because of a few games in elementary school. He went down a list of people I haven’t thought about in years to tell me that they’re in trade schools or they didn’t go to high school. That doesn’t make me a better person just because I’m at UA.”

UA is a prestigious hero school, and he knows that. He knows he’s either the first or one of few from his hometown to attend. That doesn’t make him feel *better* than anyone, he doesn’t want to feel that kind of superiority. He just wants to save people and be a hero, and that doesn’t involve anyone but himself.

“It’s not like that,” Shoji says, finding his hand still wanting to pick at the edges of his mask, as though having his mouth revealed made him colder, makes him seek more coverage. “I just....*hate it*.”

He hates his mouth. He knows that’s odd to anyone but him, but he *hates* it. He knows he *shouldn’t*, people shouldn’t hate their own body parts, and he knows that especially after seeing Mizuno. He hated that she wore a mask too, almost more than he hated the sight of his mouth. He would stare at it in the mirror until nausea turned his stomach if he could convince her that it was safe not to wear one. Maybe Aizawa was trying to convince him to do that.

“But, children look up to heroes,” Shoji says, a piece that Aizawa-sensei said in parts, didn’t say in that surveillance room. “Children with mutant quirks could feel better about themselves if they had a hero that looked like them. The... mouth is a common one-”

“Shoji,” Tokoyami says, first sounding awestruck, but when Shoji turns his gaze from glaring at the floor, he sees a sigh, almost disappointed. “I’ve never seen you so rattled, my friend. It’s very clear that it isn’t an odd preference or a complex. I apologize for speaking in such a way, when I shouldn’t have pried.”

Tokoyami is the only person that Shoji trusts to pry. Tokoyami knows things that no one else does in 1-A, and even when Shoji doesn’t follow his advice at times, he still trusts it’s good. It’s just too difficult sometimes. “Mizuno wears a mask now. She’s not even bullied for that, she just... wants to be like me.”

That *hurts*. Of all the things that Mizuno could want to imitate, it hurts that she chose that one. It’s too painful for even himself to touch, but she wants to take on that wound. Even if he wasn’t a hero, even if he only wanted to protect his family, he’d *do this* to make her stop before it festered.

If it festered for him, it doesn’t matter. It’s what he has, and he can deal with it in easier ways than the ones he will take on. He’d rather be a coward, to look away just like he does when he brushes his teeth, but he won’t. He can’t anymore.

“I imagine that Mizuno admires your strength,” Tokoyami says, with a chuckle that reminds Shoji that her *favorite* game is to be tossed into the air over and over, something that Tokoyami was unfortunately a witness to. “I think that children want to imagine themselves in a stronger image, and I think that the diversity of heroes allows for that in a personalized way. But I think there’s a thin line between heroism and martyrdom, and martyrdom is rarely needed as much as it’s exercised.”

He’s not going to be a *martyr* if he just convinces himself that his mouth is a part of him. That’s

not a struggle that people are supposed to have. It's not a fight, and if it is with him, then it's wrong.

"I think that it's far more worthwhile to have a different voice enter the fray. An honest one," Tokoyami says, folding his hands as he leans back, relaxed in a way that Shoji envies. The mask was only off for a minute at *most* and he still feels nauseated. "A voice that says that those sentiments are wrong, that they can cause wounds. But that voice isn't as strong if it's shaking like yours does."

The difference between martyrdom and heroism isn't dying for a cause, or dying for a good one. It's dying when it's not necessary, taking risks that could have been avoided. Heroes and martyrs both make powerful statements, a dead martyr's cause is stronger, but only if they're remembered for it.

Tokoyami is right about more things than Shoji tells him he is, and Shoji trusts him more than anyone else he knows. He knows that he could retort by bringing up the nightmares that Tokoyami brings on himself when he trains too much with Dark Shadow, but he won't. Not when he knows that Tokoyami is right.

It doesn't matter where the mask came from, it's his now. This nausea is his, and there's nothing he can do to remove it, except the things that he does.

Tentacole can still wear a mask, and be a hero. But his voice won't shake when he talks about the wrongs in the world that have to be righted, for future generations, and for Mizuno.

Chapter End Notes

1-A Chat Usernames:

UraRAWR - Uraraka Ochako

Dipsy - Ashido Mina

Blood Maroon is so Pretentious, it's RED - Kirishima Eijirou

Frog Under The Kotatsu - Asui Tsuyu

Weeb Man Supreme - Sero Hanta

SHUT UR FUCKING HOLE DEKU - Midoriya Izuku

Dark Thots - Tokoyami Fumikage

A Cop (wee woo wee woo) - Iida Tenya

Celine Dion Twink - Aoyama Yuga

Put Your Hands DOWN - Jirou Kyouka

Due to how the POVs lined worked out, it's left up to implication to figure out why Mizuno didn't go to visit Eri's dorm, or why Shinsou seemed guilty. But what happened off-screen was that Mirio noticed Shinsou 'dressing up' for Mizuno's visit by wearing gloves and a different mask, and let Aizawa know. Aizawa doesn't know if the sudden change without warning would have made Shinsou more anxious about the visit, but because of that, the visit was cancelled.

Come on The Radio!

Chapter Summary

Yamada brings Shinsou to the radio station to spend some quality time with his ward, and discovers a devastating mistake from his past. Shinsou asks Yamada to help him find closure, and Aizawa and Yamada have an important discussion about their wards.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Brief mention of Bug, Shirakumo's death

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri created a rule that whenever Shinsou is apart from her, they get to pick each other's outfits so they remember to miss each other while they're gone. Shinsou's sign name for Yamada is 'Sunshine da', which Yamada wonders is a way to express how Shinsou might feel like Yamada is a father figure to him, but Shinsou means the literal translation 'field of sunshine,' which is a very meaningful image to him. In Chapter 2 before the raid, Shinsou mused about how improbable it was that no villains had ever attacked Present Mic's show given all the public information about it. After Todoroki's family situation came to light, Todoroki asked everyone to forget about it by using a '~forget~' spell in the chat. Shinsou believes he's no longer selectively mute, and he asked Aizawa to let him see his mother who is being held in police custody, but Aizawa refused him. Shinsou was reportedly kidnapped when he was 4, but soon after Shinsou arrived to UA, Eri told Aizawa that his mother 'gave' him away, though Aizawa later learned that Shinsou Ujima sold her son. Yamada's biological parents abandoned him at the hospital after he deafened them as an infant, which led to Yamada being placed in foster care and eventually adopted by his mothers. Yamada took care of Shinsou while he was sick, even to the point of feeding him at one point. In the previous chapter, Aizawa accidentally referred to Eri as his daughter and swished his coffee several times after it was brought up.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sneaking out against direct orders from the police is supposed to be *fun* for a teenager like Shinsou. *Especially* for Shinsou, since he's been pretty much on house arrest since he came to UA.

But if there's one thing that Yamada has been afraid of with this little adventure, it's Shinsou not having the slightest bit of fun. And it's off to a *great* start on that.

Eri apparently decided to give her little 'blessing' on this outing with a big condition - that she gets to dress Shinsou up for it. That little habit had been waning at the edges, given that there were a few times that Eri doubled back to Shinsou's room to get him ready for the day but found he had dressed himself, but the look she picked today seemed just a little bit *vengeful*, if Yamada was being honest.

Another little shout-out to his show was nice with the black facemask that had his show's logo in

bright green spraypaint. But that edgy piece didn't quite match the fuzzy purple sweater, and nothing matched with the dark green sweatpants. Eri might be a 5 year old, but she honestly dresses herself pretty well, leaving Yamada with nothing else to really place this blame on.

Shinsou didn't seem like he really noticed it at first, and he didn't take Yamada up on the offer to switch a few pieces out to look a bit more stylish. Yamada was well prepared for a bit of nerves when they got in the car, and he tried to set them at ease with a tried and true method of picking up a little sweet treat, since that always worked with Eri. But with Shinsou, it worked in the opposite way.

'No,' 'No,' 'Not hungry,' 'Don't want.' Shinsou was *not* making it easy to treat the kid, and Yamada finally just resolved himself to ordering something nice to be picked up by the ever-helpful swarm of station interns when they got there.

It wasn't until after they parked and started walking towards the building that it started to click into place. Yamada watched Shinsou picking at his face mask, running a hand through his hair. Eyes constantly looking around them, falling behind Yamada at times just to speed up, walking just a bit too close for how Shinsou usually does. Yamada felt the kid startle and almost stop in his tracks when he put an arm around his shoulders, pulling him a bit closer to say that closer was okay. Closer was perfectly safe, and Shinsou was safe here.

Yamada very purposefully tries to avoid thinking about how Shinsou's nerves at Shichi-Go-San, while still present, were nothing like this. He tries not to do the math for that, even though the answer is pretty clear. *Eraserhead* is a strong hero to Shinsou, perfectly able to protect him from any Miasma baddies, but Present Mic is just annoying.

That's a *little* bit of why he wanted to pull Shinsou into the radio station tonight. To see that 'Present Mic' isn't just a loudmouth dolt screaming at students if he's not screaming on the airwaves. Present Mic can be cool, Present Mic gets a *lot* more gushing calls that don't make it on the air. Whenever Shinsou feels like recognizing that and retiring the little 'Now Music' and 'Existing Amplifier' names, he'll be perfectly fine with it.

A bigger reason was that other little sign name that he hasn't seen since - 'Sunshine da.' It's been stuck in the back of Yamada's mind, pulling to the surface with every little touch that goes well, every little bit of trust that he can see building within his little ward. There's so much that sign language *can't* say, and repeated gestures can mean a lot. 'Stay. Stay. After investigation. Stay.'

Yamada wants to know what 'Stay' means for Shinsou, what he wants that to look like. If that's going to be the best for Shinsou, and even though Yamada doesn't want it to be anything else, can barely stand the thought of that, he knows this is a big part of it. Doing something fun, so *normal*, so very much what his darling yet embarrassing sidekick Byte Sound called it - bringing your kid to work day - could be a big sign of how things would go once the whole investigation was done with. If some fun times with 'Present Mic' could lead to a little more trust being built up between the two, that would be a very good sign.

Yamada isn't quite *nervous* about his little sidekick meeting Shinsou. He's not.

He wasn't until he saw her grin, a bit too sharp with a bit too much teeth, her eyes a bit too narrow. She *promised* she'd behave, but he's heard that before, and she *didn't*. He made the mistake of bringing her to a little spotlight interview only three times, and her catty little signs made it pretty hard not to laugh, leading to some *great* outtakes. *When it wasn't live.*

But Byte Sound gives Shinsou a wave, moving quickly to sign. 'Nice to meet you. I'm B-Y-T-E S-O-U-N-D. Tiny sound.'

Yamada tried *really* hard to convince her that even if the ‘Byte’ came from some computer mumbo-jumbo, it’d be a lot simpler and sleeker if she picked her hero sign name to be ‘Bite Sound.’ But like practically all the career advice he gives her, she didn’t take it, and while he eagerly awaits for a special little correction from the knock-off-hero-namer-extraordinaire, he doesn’t see it. ‘*Nice to meet you. Tiny sound. I’m S-H-I-N-S-O-U H-I-T-O-S-H-I.*’

Yamada sees that little wicked grin cross his sidekick’s face, and tries to stop it from spawning into any sasses that he *knows* his ward doesn’t need for inspiration. “Yep, this is my ward, Shinsou, and this is my lady behind the green curtain, Byte Sound. I don’t know what I’d do without her, and I know you two would have so much fun getting to chat, but it’s getting a little closer to airtime and I need to find some interns to pick up some take out. Do you think you can pick off a stray from the gaggle, Bytey?”

Yamada got one of those *looks* that rehashes the familiar argument of ‘I’m a sidekick, not an intern, and not an errand boy,’ but a pleading one in answer had Byte Sound huffing off down the hall. Yamada pulled Shinsou into his side of the sound box, flicking on the lights and realizing that Byte Sound had actually made it look a little more presentable, given that there’s usually a fine coating of snack debris from the prime time traffic reporter.

“Yep, so this is my studio, where I get to shout out the tunes and listen in for any callers. I think I’ve been put down for a little advice session, and that’s always pretty fun,” Yamada says, turning around to see that Shinsou was staring pretty hard at one of the more *interesting* decor pieces in his studio.

He has a little wall of fame for all the hero students he’s taken in for an internship over the years, with autographed pictures and everything. But there was *one* little herolet who made him move a few things around to be the centerpiece, with a frame and everything. Only, that frame wasn’t around her headshot.

“Oh Nejire-chan,” Yamada says, falling into his usual chair with his hands behind his head, taking in that glorious and unforgettable moment. “I just happened to mention that she might try taking her all-out blasts and putting a volume dial on it, and that was her attempt at a ‘1.’ I think it’s closer to her 20% now.”

The crater in his wall with interesting spiral cracks around it was memorialized with a tacky gold frame Yamada insisted on putting around it. Miss Hadou’s autographed picture was right in the center below it with plenty of ‘X’s and ‘O’s, and a handmade redeemable ticket to an exclusive on-air interview underneath that.

While he’s gained plenty of stories with every intern, the sight of Hadou staring and not entirely breathing with her arms stretched forward, and her quick and hurried explanations that she thought her spirals would be *shorter* was pretty unforgettable. Hadou was definitely not one for getting rattled, or for apologies, but he’s looking forward to cashing in her interview ticket to spotlight that story. It’ll definitely help with her post-grad hero ranking too, to be brought onto his very big and very popular stage.

Shinsou definitely sees the open seat next to him, but Yamada invites him to sit down with a little pat. He starts setting the few little details to rights, pulling up his chat programs on his laptop so he can communicate with Byte Sound and all the interns in one place. His station manager also has a chat window, even if he never uses it. Yamada has honestly never seen his station manager, only heard his voice on the phone on the rare occasion he wasn’t given a memo. But he imagines that his station manager looks like a Noir film villain stuck in the 1950’s, given that deep and abiding love of *memos*.

Yamada sees one such memo sliding under the door, but he doesn't stand up to see what it says. He knows it's probably a reminder that guests aren't allowed in the studio when there's a lounge area for that, but Yamada has ignored that every single time it gets brought up. He is successful in opening the door and snatching one of the radio station interns who delivered the memo, a lanky college kid who's been here long enough to lose the frazzled look. "Hey, want to make a whole lot of money and escape for about an hour doing it?"

Shinsou still doesn't pick anything, just shaking his head, but Yamada puts in an order for a couple of coffees and pastries, and three convenience store bento boxes. It's not a whole lot of food for 10,000 yen, but he's feeding a poor college kid along the way, so it's worth it.

Byte returns with one of the more skittish ones, a young girl who has only been at the station for a few months and hasn't gotten the steel spine implanted yet. Yamada signs to cut her loose, but he's tempted to send her on an errand to escape. His manager works closer with the new ones, and that tends to lead to more new ones not lasting. There's only so many memos that one person can take before they crack.

Yamada feels like he might crack while he's waiting for the intern on the food run to come back, because Shinsou is still palpably *uncomfortable* with this.

The kid sits completely straight in his chair, looks forward when he's not looking around and looking a lot at the door, with his hands folded in his lap. Neither Yamada's mumbling about the playlist tonight nor Byte Sound trying to spin up a sign name for him through the glass partition seem to be entering Shinsou's stratosphere.

Which is *great*. If Shinsou works himself up to the point of having a panic attack before his show even starts, that is a *great* sign that Yamada is *truly* capable of taking care of Shinsou long term. He's just the best dad if that happens, when his son can't stand to be in the same room with him for thirty minutes if it's an unfamiliar room.

There's a little button that Yamada doesn't use a lot, that Byte has only seen in action once. He presses it without a second of hesitation, making the audio equipment cut out completely and the glass partition fog up to the point that Byte couldn't read lips. He doesn't like that he has it, he doesn't know *why* it's installed in his studio, but he figures that it might make Shinsou a bit more comfortable to talk with him. "Hey, is everything okay? I know this probably isn't your idea of a fun Saturday night and all, and we can call it quits on the whole thing-"

Shinsou shakes his head, eyes going wide, and he raises his hands to sign before he lowers them a bit, almost bringing one to his neck before he makes another glance around. '*Want to. I like this. Not.*'

Shinsou checks the door again, and maybe Yamada could make a show of locking it to convince Shinsou that a *door* could keep him safer than the top 100 ranked pro hero he's staring at.

'*Villains attack show? Know location. Know time.*' Yeah, Yamada guessed it, but it doesn't really sting any less.

"There were a few little bands of merry fellows trying to yank me off the air when I first started," Yamada says, trying to laugh and trying to resist the urge to spin around in his chair too much. "But talking for a couple hours doesn't really do what I think they were expecting - instead of finding me gasping for breath or losing my voice, this show primes my vocal cords like nothing else. I should honestly switch it around so I do my patrol after, but I'm not a huge fan of working all night if I can help it."

He used to do that, but one kid led to two, and that was a patrol shift he was glad to cut loose.

“And there’s a whole mess of alarms around the entire perimeter. We actually have a dedicated dispatcher at the local station because some people call me instead of the police for villain attacks and whatnot, and we have the equipment to trace down the odd threat. Byte has been my sidekick for seven years and we make a great team, and if it ever really came down to it, I’m pretty sure my boss would just unleash some eldritch horror from one of the supply closets and shut the whole thing down.” Yamada doesn’t poke his nose into any places he’s not supposed to be for a *reason*.

Shinsou looks a little relieved at that, but the subtle picking at the sleeve of his jacket doesn’t make Yamada wholly surprised that he’s not totally convinced. ‘*Won’t get hurt. Because of me.*’

Yamada stops his half-spins, realizing *why* the nerves really were so much worse this time. Shinsou wasn’t worried for himself, he wasn’t worried that Yamada wouldn’t be able to protect him. He was worried that since Miasma might be a little more pissed if they knew Shinsou was forced to name them, that *Yamada* would get hurt.

The kid really does care about him, a lot more than Yamada expects sometimes.

“Nope! I’ve been a pro hero for about ten years now, so I think I can handle any sort of mess that comes my way. I signed on to protect you in a lot of ways, Shinsou, and the people making that decision wouldn’t let me if I couldn’t do it,” Yamada says, and it’s more complicated than that, but in some ways, it’s more simple. “If someone came here to hurt you, the first thing I would do is press the panic button and call every hero in the area to respond. I’d make sure you were safe, and that means staying by your side. And since my quirk can be pretty powerful at long range, that means you’d have front row seats to see me blowing out their eardrums for trying to get anywhere *close* to you. That’s what these nifty headphones are for, you could watch the show but not get caught in the crossfire.”

He’s handed his headphones over to more kids than he likes to think about. Terrified, shaking children who have seen or heard too much of a cruel world, and need it to cut out for a bit in more ways than one. Kids who were caught in the path of a villain’s destruction, kids that were kidnapped. Kids that needed to be protected from his own quirk as much as the villain’s, and kids that have a shy grin when he works the headphones off their heads and thanks them for tuning in for his show.

Shinsou looks at them a bit warily, but he seems curious about how well they work. They work *well*, he can scream at his highest decibels and it’s completely silent inside those headphones, but Yamada doesn’t test it.

He thinks Shinsou might get better adjusted to this loud room if he could look at it properly, a little silence allowing the space of mind to do that.

It seems to work, because Shinsou only gives the room another lazy glance, and Yamada just rambles on about how he can’t hear anything now so he can see that it works. There’s a little smirk that he can only see the top half of with the face mask on, and he can see that Shinsou tries to hide it in other ways.

He glances away after he hands the headphones back, seeming to debate on signing it. ‘*Like you. With headphones.*’

Yamada nods, maybe a little swept away with how that’s Shinsou’s first thought on that. “Yup, a limited trial on being deaf. Some people find it more peaceful, especially when they first get hearing aids. My dear Bytey can hardly stand adding audio to the mix when she feels a certain

way, and my mom *especially* hates it. But sometimes there are things that you miss out on, *like* my super awesome show that's going to start soon. And if you have any favorites or songs you kind of like, just let me know because I have just about *every* song in existence at my fingertips."

Yamada gets about three more memos before his food runner returns, and they're probably about how he's supposed to send a memo to request the use of the interns, how he's not supposed to press any buttons that he hasn't been given permission to, or the astrological report that always comes off more ominous than it should. His luck always seems to be 'Devastatingly poor' and his chances of a promotion are listed as 'Forbidden.'

Yamada thought he'd get quite a few more eyerolls than he does when he goes completely into character, but he thinks the hidden smirk comes out a lot more when he says something cheesy and looks over for Shinsou to disapprove. 'Present Mic' might never be cool, but he's not entirely meant to be. He's just supposed to be loud, and be loud in a way that's entertaining.

Yamada tries to imagine that when Shinsou's on his phone, he might be looking up a few songs or putting down notes to do that later. Yamada fully intends to ask about it on his next commercial break. But when that commercial break comes, he gets an oddly *sour* look from his ward, and a couple signs that don't make sense.

'You owe blood debt.'

*

Jirou has been hate-listening to 'Put Your Hands Up!' radio for about six years now.

She only called in twice to bash him, when she was younger and got a little more overwhelmed by the tasteful art of 'hate-listening.' She couldn't really hide the shaking in her voice, and the lady that answered asked if she needed *emergency services* to be dispatched, which just sent Jirou into a numb and furious state that had her screaming at the top of her lungs about how Present Mic was the biggest asshole in the world and doesn't deserve to call himself a hero.

Her parents *hate it*. Even her dad just wanted her to put the feelings into a song to make something more productive out of it, but the nice jam session that introduced her to the finer points of thrash metal couldn't persuade her to stop.

She knows it's not productive, especially when she tunes in when she's not particularly in the mood to hate-listen. Sometimes, she finds herself tapping her pencil, or finding that Present Mic actually found a single good song out of the four hours that he has for his show. That just makes it worse, because she almost feels sick when she does that. She *hates* the prick, and she can't forgive him, and anything he does that she doesn't hate just makes her feel like the bad guy.

She's not the bad guy, because she can put her feelings aside when it matters. She can *try* not to glare in his class, even though the first few weeks had her sweating and breaking pencils like *Bakugo* has somehow infected her. Even during her Spring Final, she wanted to run up and kick him in the teeth *so bad*. She could practically see his grossly oversized teeth popping out like a carnival game. But it was a test and it was her final *grade* for the semester. She's going to be the hero that knocks Present Mic off of his domination for hero-endorsed music merch, and that means doing well at UA, and not failing her first Final.

And if she had to pick a local hero who didn't know blues from jazz to intern with after the Sports Festival, that was fine. She might have giggled too much when she set Present Mic's internship offer on fire.

And they probably got on the air to start the whole thing, with that bump in rank in mind from the beginning.

Arson = Crime Brulee: @Friendsou Hitoshi, you're not at the study group. #no #stickers #for #you #coco

No head empty thoughts: @sero we r LEARNING and im PROUD and its still BEAUTIFUL in its own way.

Midobot: Counter for times @Midoriya has asked @Shinsou to check their chat +=1. Current counter == 53.

Hang the DJ: it's gonna break in three days

[illegible]

Wow SOMEONE has a life off of their phone: If you break my phone, I'm going to tell Eri that you did it, and it made me sad.

Ya Momo so cool that: Eri says hi, and that she hopes you and Yamada-sensei are having fun

together.

Float On By: !!!! She wants a pic of you and Present Mic and Byte Sound and I DO TOOOOO!!!!
Gunhead still talks about Byte Sound, she's almost like his fave intern!!!

Jirou springs up once the realization hits her, that Shinsou was at Present Mic's radio show. It was weird that he wasn't with Aizawa or Eri, but a lot of weird stuff happens with him, and it's not worth getting worked up about it every time.

But if *Shinsou* was at Get Your Hands Up! Radio.

Hang The DJ: Shinsou. I will do. Literally ANYTHING you want. If you make Present Mic play Seken Sun's 'The One To Remember' album in full.

Wake Me Up When Spring Comes: Present Mic doesn't play a lot of indie bands. Let it go, Jirou. There's other radio stations to listen to.

Ya Momo so cool that: @Jirou I don't think this will work out the way you want it to.

No head empty thoughts: Jirouuuuuuuu nono nooooo ur not doing the hate listen thing just come up here and spend time with memes!!! I got some music memes for you!

Wow SOMEONE has a life off of their phone: *Tap to download 22Kb*

Wow SOMEONE has a life off of their phone: Yamada doesn't seem to do that. Is this a Morrissey thing?

Jirou only taps on the image to make sure Shinsou was at the radio station, and she doesn't know who would let him go out looking like that. But she's sure that the face mask with the 'Get Your Hands Up!' logo is all Present Mic's doing. He'll probably do something stupid like blast Shinsou's face on his Twitter account to brag about helping Shinsou to get another undeserved bump in rank, and completely forget that Shinsou is probably in a constant state of danger since he's a ward.

Hang the DJ: No, and remind me to give you a better playlist. But I'm serious, I will do l i t e r a l l y anything if you pull puppy dog eyes on Yamada and make it happen.

Arson = Crime Brulee: Heart eyes monster trucker.

No head empty thoughts: Were LEARNING SO GOOD Jirou please just END THIS MADNESS AND DO MEMES!!!

Wow SOMEONE has a life off of their phone: Does this have something to do with you hating Yamada

No head empty thoughts: Shinsou you sweet summer child u have NO IDEA wat ur gonna get into rn

Jirou closed the chat, trying not to roll her eyes. It probably wouldn't work out anyway, and she's not going to spill that story to Shinsou. She doesn't know him like that, and he seems weirdly attached to Present Mic. It's not like that's a bad thing, especially because it makes so much sense. Shinsou spends time with Bakugo of his own free will, so he probably has the worst taste in people.

Jirou doesn't even get to catch up on the new forum posts before she hears the footsteps from the stairwell, and notices Eri floating towards her right before Uraraka releases her quirk and Eri drops onto the couch cushions in front of her. "Hey, kiddo."

Eri looks a bit pouty at her for some reason. "Kyou, you gotta *stop* the *madness* and stop hating Yama! I really like Yama, and it makes me really sad!"

Jirou *would* believe that, if Ashido wasn't standing right there, nodding along after Eri spoke the words the Tik Tok fanatic spoonfed her. "Well, I'm sorry that makes you upset Eri, but Present Mic is a jerk, and until that changes, I'm not gonna change," Jirou says, but before she can turn back to her phone, she sees Eri's exaggerated pout change, softening into something that looks genuinely sad. "What's wrong?"

"Yama is nice," Eri says, wiggling one of her feet towards Jirou. "He likes music, and you like music too. And you're both heroes. You should be good friends, instead of being mad at Yama."

"Well," Jirou says, stretching her arms over her head. "I'm not really going to be friends with the guy who bashed the album my parents wrote for me so bad that my mom couldn't renew her record deal, and pretty much had to give up being a musician."

*

"Oh wow, she really must have gotten all the musical genes in that family," Yamada mutters to himself, still staring at the phone that 27 was holding out for him. 27 gives a pointed glance to the microphone, but Yamada throws up his hands when he catches it. "Look, Shinsou, I feel... *kind of* bad about that, I was definitely more harsh back in the early days, but that album. That album was *bad*."

27 just pulls away the phone and crosses his arms, because clearly, Yamada wasn't understanding this.

Yamada didn't just insult Amplifier 2.0, he insulted her *family*. 27 might not know what that means in some aspects, but this one seemed to be in line with what he would expect from an insulted yakuza family. Long Lobes was going to hold a grudge until either her family was avenged, or until peace could be reached, and it would be far better to settle the dispute before it devolved into war.

'*Make peace. Blood debt is bad*,' 27 signs, because even *Chisaki* stepped carefully along different mafias when he was forced to associate with them. Shie Hassaikai was a very old mafia from the peddler side, wars had been fought and peace ironed out multiple times, and oaths sworn hundreds of years ago still held weight, even in the face of the yakuza's extinction. Honzo wasn't a peddler, and could only claim to be a new gambling mafia because the gamblers were looser, but even *he* stepped carefully.

"Yeah, I get that... insulting Jirou's family like that is bad," Yamada says, but he says it with a wince that says he isn't going to make amends for it. "I wouldn't have said half the things I did if that album came out today, but I still wouldn't put my seal of approval on it. It's just... the composition was so *off*, the sampling selection was *jarring*, I don't know if it was an experimental piece into some weird new-wave dark-pop indie sound but it was just so *bad*. And that weird screeching sound laced through three songs could have been a statement if it wasn't"

27 glances at his phone when it starts buzzing, and turns it back to Yamada, only to see his face whiten.

"Oh. Oh yeah, yeah she's not happy," Yamada says, and while that was probably true, it wasn't the

concession to make peace that 27 wanted to see.

No head empty thoughts: so yeah, Jirou's mom lost her record deal and everything but

No head empty thoughts: Jirou helped make the album too! She was a lil baby picking out songs and stuff and she SANG too!! And apparently PM hated her parts the worst, so like, its bad with her mom and everything but PM called JIROU OUT and PERSONALLY ATTACKED a baby, so like hes kind of a jerk? But I dont think anyone knows that part

Hang the DJ: now everyone DOES THANKS KAMINARI

Hang the DJ: @Shinsou just forget it, it's stupid. And if everyone else wants to do a whole ~Forget~ spell, that'd be great.

Arson = Crime Brulee: ~forget~

Sparkle Dion: Mon amie, I will listen to this album in your honor and swear vengeance upon those that wrong you. And creme brulee?? Would you like to make this with me, mon fougouex friend?

Sugar Might: I want in on this if it happens????

Arson = Crime Brulee: As long as it's not crime brulee, Iida will approve. So yes.

27 put his phone back into his pocket, because even if Jirou wanted him to forget too, he wasn't going to. She was obviously more upset about this than she would show, and would rather try to make it seem like she wasn't upset at all. She would act like she was perfectly fine with it, even if she wasn't, because there didn't seem to be an option to make things right that she could achieve herself.

'I want to hear that song,' 27 signs, and he knows he might have already won without saying it, because while Yamada is still wincing, the look in his green eyes seems defeated. *'My song request.'*

He's never requested a song for Yamada to play, and that means that it carries more weight now. It's a tool made more powerful from disuse. He doesn't know what 'pulling puppy dog eyes' on Yamada would look like, but he knows that this is as effective as Eri pulling that expression on him. "Okay. If you... *really* want to do this, I can work it into my next set, and try to find some nice things to say about it. Maybe Kaminari's wrong about no one else knowing about that, I'll look up some fan forums and try to get more info."

'Thank you,' 27 signs, and tries not to think about other tools that could be more powerful from disuse. He knows from observing Chilli that it was, that speaking less often drew much more power and attention to his words. That Yamada might believe him more, cave more easily even if he was more likely to cave than Aizawa.

He feels a ghost of that familiar mask when he thinks about it.

Yamada would believe that 27 should meet with his mother if he said it, if he could bring himself to ask for it. Maybe it would be better not to ask for it outright, but to just say it. *I want to meet my mother.*

Writing that essay for Aizawa proved what he shouldn't say, that he shouldn't be honest with it. That he should say it in a way beyond questioning, to have no intentions to prove except for an honest want behind it.

27 can't even explain it, but he *wants* to meet his mother. She sold him, she's probably a victim of his quirk, she absolutely *hates* him no matter what her reasoning was to get away from him. If he wasn't sold, he wouldn't have had to meet Bug, or Chisaki, and so many things wouldn't have happened and made him into a completely different person.

He feels like he might know more about who that person would be if he met her. If he could just have that answer, he might feel more complete. More normal. He *wants* that.

He just has to convince Yamada of that, because Yamada will do almost anything that 27 wants.

*

Yeah, Yamada kind of blew it with that one.

He was younger when 'The One To Remember' came out, and it happened to fall right into the perfect storm when his manager insisted that he work it into his playlist. He wanted to just ignore it, ignore that the guitarist and second vocalist from one of his favorite bands had spun off into such a *disastrous* side project like Seken Suns. He was *hyped* before he pressed play on that exclusive pre-order, and kept desperately skipping around to find a gem hidden in that rough. And he *couldn't*.

It was worse than when Duely's swapped out their lead guitarist for that vocalist, because Yamada only fumed for a few days before he finally took a better look at that picture of her and nearly laughed. With how bad Shirakumo was crushing on Nemuri before he died, he knew that Shirakumo would do nothing but approve of the new line up of their favorite band. Shirakumo probably would have snatched up any merchandise that starred that new 'Jirou Mika.'

Yamada just *wanted* to like Seken Suns too much because of that, because he felt like he had to in order to let Shirakumo enjoy it too. He was still trying to 'live' for Shirakumo sometimes, because Shouta hadn't called him out on it yet. That album came out before the Great T-Shirt Debacle, when Yamada nearly went on a *rampage* because a moth had dared to fly into the very back of his closet and make a meal out of the last shirt Shirakumo loaned him, that he never had the chance to give back.

Shouta, the absolutely *rigidly hypocritical* love of his life, asked him to go to therapy after that. It worked wonders, honestly, for both of them, but in terms of the Seken Suns and by secondary casualty Duely's, it came a year too late.

Yamada heard he went viral after that rant when he was forced to play a song from 'The One To Remember' on his show, but Yamada couldn't bring himself to listen to that show recording. Even back then, he knew he had anger issues sometimes, and he used to try to chock it up to how little he let himself slip. He knew that he didn't want to hear the audio evidence of how there was something else inside him becoming a monster with his own voice. With his *show* of all things.

If he knew that it caused Duely's to break up or the Seken Suns project to devastate Jirou Mika's career, he probably would have tried to make amends earlier. But he ended up cutting all ties to anything regarding Duely's, feeling utterly betrayed that things would change over the course of six years. That the world would move on and change from what he *thought* Shirakumo would want it to be.

It might be close to the ten year anniversary of that rant, fittingly enough, but Yamada doesn't bring himself to check the dates on the forum posts to see if that's true. This isn't some PR stunt for his show, and he hates when his manager wheedles him into doing those things. It's far less genuine if it has anything to do with anniversaries, if it's just a coincidence of how time moves

along in the world. The day is meaningless, because Yamada just feels *bad* about this.

And he doesn't want to go back to that day in the slightest, especially in the same room that he let himself be made into something he's *not*. So he tries to be as genuine and far from that anger as he can be when Byte counts down the green light.

"Listeners, Listeners! Lend me your ears, not that you haven't already! Tonight, we're having another special event that's becoming not so special, given that it's happened a lot and it will happen more often. I know a few dedicated listeners *think* they know the next song, and since it's not Open Mic Night, you *should*, but I've got a giant apology to make and this is the place to make it!" Yamada sees two memos shoved under his door already, and he wonders how on earth his manager can type so fast. "So, about ten years ago or so, there was a little band called Seken Suns who earned a *whole* lot of undeserved ire from me. I'm not sure how many of you are old enough to remember it, or how many of you *want* to remember it, but your friendly neighborhood DJ was not too friendly when he was talking down that debut album."

Yamada feels a numb horror when he sees his light go red, and comes as close as he's ever been to firing Byte Sound when he hears the audio clip come through. Mostly, he just wishes Shinsou was still wearing his noise cancelling headphones.

"Oh wow! Wow, listeners, music will take you places, and I feel like I've been transported to some hell daycare for demon babies! I GET experimental sounds, but unless that's supposed to be experimenting in torture - which these Seken Suns are VERY good at, believe me - actually, you don't HAVE to believe me, you heard it yourselves! I don't - I don't fucking GET it, I get A LOT of stuff but I DON'T get this. Let's try the third track - actually I've tried all these tracks and I can't get a single second of enjoyable audio, but let's just take this time to enjoy how far we can get from music for a while with these 'cool tunes.'"

Yamada doesn't even remember most of that show, but he definitely doesn't remember getting so worked up that he used his quirk. He can hear the squeal of it through the playback though, and every word he screamed ten years ago nearly makes him flinch.

He doesn't want to look at Shinsou right now, but he convinces himself that he has to. This was an angry side of him, a side that he's worked past for the most part, and Shinsou might be just as disturbed by it as he is. He knows that it's impossible for anyone to be more disturbed by it than Yamada is right now.

Shinsou looks back at him, his eyes a little wider, head tilting a bit to the side. He's surprised, which isn't shocking, but Yamada finds the lack of fear reassuring enough. Maybe Shinsou knows him well enough to know that the way he is now isn't a fragile facade holding that angry tantrum back, that he's a different person now than he was 10 years ago.

"Yeah, that's... That's not really your friendly DJ there," Yamada says, even if he fights not to duck his head too far to where the microphone won't pick up his voice. Byte is in his line of vision when he does raise his eyes from the soundboard, he sees a wince that pulls a bit more guiltily than other times he's had to remind her that their chat is open for these kinds of discussions about program planning for a *reason*. "That's a very loud, very angry jerk who thought he could define what music is, and thought he had the right to get angry about any artistic decisions that a musician makes, because he was a pretty entitled prick back then. I didn't know it, but that rant actually caused some devastation in the music world. The lead singer of Seken Suns pulled out of music entirely, and since Seken Suns was a side project to the band Duely's that she was a part of, they broke up too. Two bands blown to smithereens thanks to yours truly, and if that's not an act of villainy, learning the reasons why the album sounded like that definitely made me feel like one."

He honestly doesn't know how Jirou could *stand* to look at him, or do so well in his class if she had heard that rant in full.

"So, I found out today that Seken Suns was actually a family project. Jirou Mika, the amazing second vocalist and guitarist from one of my favorite bands, Duely's, started this project with her husband and composer Jirou Kyotoku, and their daughter who was six years old at the time. This family is *amazingly* talented, they did absolutely everything in house - lyrics, every instrument, recording and audio mixing. The album is called 'The One To Remember' because it was meant to be the debut of that daughter into the music world, because this family had no doubts that she would make a name for herself in the music industry, and this labor of love could be the embarrassing footnote in every interview she'd ever have, for years to come. And that is a parenting style I can get behind!" Yamada says, and he can't decide to count his blessings or hate the fact that he wasn't selected to meet the Jirou family before the dorms opened up.

He'd probably get a sucker punch to the face from one or both of them, but at least he'd know what he did wrong before now.

"The screeching that I complained about was a 6 year old having fun with professional autotuning. The samples that I hated were this little kid's favorite songs. The time signatures changing nine times on track three was this little kid trying to do an homage to *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and wow, I feel like a jerk just saying that! But it's worse, because 10 years later, I'm the airhead ranting and raving about how this amazing young woman had put on a show that knocked my socks off, and I find out *it's that same kid*. I went on that crazy rant about how much I hated the way 'The One To Remember' sounded, like I had any right to decide what good music should sound like, and if I just opened the little booklet that came with the special pre-order, I'd know exactly why it sounded like that. That album was a family coming together, to express and explore the meaning of music because music is always expanding in definition, and I just said 'Nope! I don't like it, it's trash, this is a personal attack on me because I don't like it!' What a *jerk*."

Yamada would *like* to say something a bit stronger and more accurate, but he knows there's a precious five year old tuning in. And even if that five year old has an F bomb in her arsenal, he's sure that Shinsou and Shouta will murder him if she learns any fun new words from his show.

"So, playing that album over again isn't enough to say sorry for that. I've done a little research online and found a *lot* of things I didn't notice before, a lot of things I didn't see 10 years ago because I was an angry twit when I was 22 years old, but older and wiser and all. It's enough that I want to personally and professionally apologize, incredibly sincerely to Mrs. Jirou Kyouka and her husband Jirou Kyotoku, but I really can't apologize enough to their daughter, who I'm not going to name because I know how some of you little listeners are, and I can't say enough how much I *don't* want to hear that you're going to go after an incredibly talented and incredibly *wronged* teenager," Yamada says, and finds himself glaring at the microphone just at the thought. "So, the next hour or so is going to be all of us becoming bigger people than we are, to look back at the things I've done wrong and to appreciate what can happen if you just *look* at a little booklet that was *in your hands* before you work yourself up into an unprofessional tizzy on a national stage. This is Seken Suns' first track, 'Intro!' And that's *not* an uninspired title, because the humming you hear is actually an homage to XX's 'Intro.'"

Yamada sits back and takes a long, *well deserved* drink of lemon water when he does. He didn't spare a second to plan out his thoughts, so he just ended up chunking them all out on the air. He's still not sure if he wants to talk about what Shinsou heard, how he can explain how young and dumb he was and convince him he's not that way now.

But he sees the phone sticking out at him, and he almost sputters some water up his nose because

he was *sure* he passed the message along to Shouta to let Jirou know what he thought, thinking that she wouldn't want to hear his gushing in class and direct from the source where it might have been too embarrassing.

Hang the DJ: ...Present Mic was at the cultural concert???

My quirk, my weird quirk, and me: He was! His hero fan forum noted that his patrol route was taken over by Mr. Right that night!

Brololi: yo Tetsutestu said PM was trying to dance with Aizawa-sensei at the concert!!! He really thought you rocked!

Tik Tok on the Clock but: MARRIED. SO MARRIED. HOW DID WE NOT SEE IT????

Arson = Crime Brulee: They're not married. Aizawa-sensei doesn't have a ring, but Yamada-sensei has 10. Yamada-sensei has 10 partners, but not Aizawa-sensei. #we #do #not #see #it

Yamada takes a minute to appreciate Todoroki's math on that, before he starts wondering how publically he can insist that Jirou's cultural festival concert was a *blow out*. He doesn't know whether Jirou wants to be a hero with a second job, and he wants to now more than ever, even if he knows that his students are still in training for their *first* job as heroes and probably shouldn't put too much thought into it. He hopes in the next round of internships, he can sit down and talk with her about that, even if he's not sure how to wrap up this apology face to face without making it too awkward.

But when Shinsou pulls back his phone, he doesn't seem to be able to look Yamada in the eye, even if his cheek is raised just a bit in a smile that doesn't seem to be a smirk. *'Thank you. Don't insult families.'*

Yamada doesn't *need* to look to see his darling sidekick Byte Sound smelling blood in the water, and signing that little suggestion in greater detail. "Yeah, no, that was a big jerk move on my part. I don't... really act that way, and I shouldn't have at the time. I'm just sorry you had to see that, or hear it."

Shinsou shrugs, and while Yamada knows an angry voice like that is probably the least that Shinsou has suffered, he still shouldn't have heard it from Yamada. Yamada is supposed to be better than that, to show Shinsou the best side of himself. *'People act dumb when angry. Now Music dumb.'* Yamada *doesn't* need to look at Byte to know that she's enjoying that sign name *too much*. *'But not horrible.'*

Yamada will settle for not being horrible in Shinsou's eyes for right now. Especially when his ward is going to have to suffer through this little venture that he was so insistent on.

Yamada *does* feel bad for the things that he said, and the outcome that he didn't intend from it. But 'The One To Remember' is still not an *enjoyable* listen. Yamada finds he can only like it for the *intentions* behind it, and he finds himself looking at it like one of his student's essays instead of a piece of music that has something intangible behind it to make it work.

He still tries, though. He tries to connect to that ephemeral 'it' factor by closing his eyes and really, truly *immersing* himself in the sound. When that doesn't work, he tries humming along, and then tries singing, even if some of the lyrics that he *knows* had to have come from a 6 year old's hands make him grin too much when he serenades his ward.

Shinsou gives him a pretty dry look to make him stop, which Yamada puts down as a success in

exploring the fun possibilities of being an embarrassing father. But before he gets too wrapped up in those possibilities, he sees Shinsou singing along out of the corner of his eye. *Signing* along to the lyrics.

Given that the current track was sampling an English song, Shinsou was translating *two* languages outside of his native Japanese without a second of hesitation. And Yamada didn't need any more excuses to be blown away by how Shinsou took to languages, given that he's seen the kid study from conversational JSL to fluent in a little over a month.

So, of course, Yamada has to join in.

There's a moment where Yamada thinks that this being the only way they could sing along right now might be sad, it might have been a jerk move to throw Shinsou's mutism in his face by singing to him before. But there's a part of Yamada that treasures this moment more, because even if he wasn't there when Shinsou was a kid learning to speak, he was there to teach him the signs and English words that he knows now. This is honestly something that he feels more connected with Shinsou through, that he treasures more for it.

And even if he *knows* Byte is recording their little show on her phone, she's under strict instructions to not let any of it go online. Yamada welcomes the day that he can give those Miasma goons what-for, but he's not going to put Shinsou in danger by linking his face to his show.

She's still going to send him the video of it under pain of termination, and he'll *try* not to save it under something embarrassing like 'Shinsou's first sing along song.'

"Thank you guys for coming out to listen to 'The One To Remember,' and I hope you'll remember this listen more fondly than the last one!" Yamada says once he gets that green light, and just looking at the clock reminds him that he's made a *huge* mess of his schedule with this move.

"We're a bit overdue on our Q&A sesh, but that just means that there's plenty of callers asking what the hell I'm thinking these days. And to that question, I can answer that I'm doing whatever the heck I want! I'm older and wiser, and my hair has only grown higher. If you don't like it, move along and don't make an a-a butt out of yourself on national airwaves. First caller, you're up and on the air with Present Mic, the Voice Hero himself, here to give you some advice even though I've definitely needed it sometimes."

There's a fumble of dead air, and that happens a lot, but Yamada hears a weird clicking noise that he only identifies after a familiar voice cuts through. "*So, there's this guy that I've hated for a long time. Even when I don't have a reason to hate him, I hate him, and even when I know he's not that big of a jerk, it just... It pisses me off that he's not. Even if he apologized and all, it's still... messed up.*"

Jirou tends to click the ends of her earlobes together when she's pretty frustrated and peeved, and Yamada understands why that happened so much in the beginning of the year now, better than ever. "Well, obviously this guy would be a huge jerk if he's only apologizing because he *wants* to make you stop hating him. Your feelings are your own, you know, and sometimes they're the only things you have. Sometimes those feelings are a big indication that you're not ready for whatever the mind wants to do, and you've got to listen to those feelings and sit with them sometimes. Self care and all."

Yamada thought his therapist was the biggest *idiot* in the world when she suggested that he needed to take his cues before that anger slipped out of him. He was convinced there *were* no cues, it just happens like a quirk slip, but just like a quirk slip, it *does* have cues. He was pissed off that his manager was running *his* show, he was angry that Shirakumo was dead and he couldn't just *ask* if he thought Seken Suns' was trash too. He just barrelled through all of that instead of taking a step

back to realize that he shouldn't *be* in that mess, and if he had gotten fired for sticking to his guns so early on in his radio show career, he could be in a better place or exactly the same one he's in now. He could have at least been a bit more *honest* running his show, and making it more of *his* show.

"So, this guy apologizing is completely irrelevant to you, in a way. If you don't want to forgive him, don't. If you want to come around to that, you can go at your feelings' pace with it. It's a sad fact that the world doesn't have enough honest apologies, and that the world doesn't apologize for being a rough place to be."

Yamada spent too long being angry that the world would never apologize for Shirakumo's death. That the universe at large wouldn't even send him a little note to say 'Sorry, that was kind of messed up.' The world would go on like it hadn't happened, like it didn't notice Shirakumo wasn't there, and being angry about that wasn't the right way to acknowledge that it *hurt him*. It was a long, awful process to sit with that hurt, but Yamada was so much better off after doing it.

"There are a lot of people that hurt and do hurtful things because of it, and it's worse because there are people who don't have that flimsy excuse and just hurt people because it's easier to do that. It's hard to tell the difference, but the only person you can ever really know and trust is yourself. So if everything inside you is still screaming that this guy is going to do nothing but piss you off, don't worry with him," Yamada says, even if he hates it.

Even if he wants nothing more than to sit down with Jirou and talk about her future, to have her headshot on his wall of fame, to endure the utter *devastation* when Byte Sound gets her hands on Jirou and they both make his life absolutely *miserable*.

But, given that Yamada is going to be Jirou's English teacher for the next two years, he *does* have to add, "But, for what it's worth, I am honestly, sincerely apologizing. I think you're an incredibly talented musician, and you're one of my favorite students. And it's because I've seen that, I know I deserve any icy shoulder I get, and I'm totally cool with however this plays out. There's a standing internship offer, but if that's not a stepping stone on your path to becoming the amazing hero I know you'll be, I totally get that."

Byte has a little *habit* of punishing any dead air that happens after the usual initial hesitation with her soundboard, and drum roll is completely unnecessary. But it's a tribute to her quirk that she could end that sound bite right before Jirou speaks up. "*I heard interns get to destroy your studio, so I might take you up on that.*"

Byte Sound couldn't look any happier or excited if she *tried*, and Yamada knew he was purely, devastatingly *fucked* now. "Whoa, whoa, that was *one* time, so you only get *one* shot! This little studio is kind of a rental, so I don't need any *expansions!*" Yamada says, knowing that Jirou *could* turn his studio into an open floor plan if she went at it with both sets of speakers. "But, I might have a sledgehammer on reserve, and we can both autograph it afterwards. Capiche?"

"*Pretty lame way of getting my autograph,*" Jirou says, with a tone that would serve her well if she did dip her toes into music after graduation. "*But yeah. Capiche.*"

Yamada sees a new record of five memos fly under his door and ignores it. "Well, now that we've gotten the plans to destroy my studio ironed out - next caller, you're live and on the air with Present Mic, who might need to look into some advice on how to properly knock holes into walls."

Yamada both loves and hates Q&A's. At first, he was flattered by fans trying to get information about him direct from the source, and he *loved* going on about himself. But there's only so much he can say, and some fans dedicated to other heroes would try to get an insider scoop on those

heroes through him. And sometimes there were some requests for personal advice he had no idea how to answer, and just fumbled his way through it.

Pretty much all of his Q&A's turn into advice panels at this point, and there's only so many times he can say 'I don't know, just do what feels right,' in an hour and a half. Shinsou raises an eyebrow at a few things Yamada isn't sure he should hear, because it's incredibly unfortunate that most relationship issues devolve into some kind of sex thing before the end. But while Yamada is excited about a lot of aspects of parenting, he's more than happy to postpone *that* kind of conversation until everything is finalized and all.

"Alright!" Yamada says, stretching his arms above his head and feeling like that coffee didn't do *nearly* enough for him for this show. "We have gotten our hands up until our hands just can't get higher, and it was kind of fun! Not the worst Saturday night on record?"

Shinsou rolls his eyes and shakes his head, and Yamada is starting to like earning those eye rolls a little too much, if he's honest. *'One more question. Can't call. I'm mute.'*

Yamada spins around so he's facing Shinsou, and considers pulling up the smokescreen on Byte Sound before he checks and sees that she's already escaped her side to probably get a snack. "Well, I'm always on the air for you, little listener. Go ahead and ask away!"

Yamada knows it could be pretty much anything from Shinsou, but he's not surprised that despite the teasing beforehand, something makes Shinsou hesitate and duck his head, hand curling behind his neck.

Yamada gets a bit more worried when he notices Shinsou's jaw drop a little lower under the face mask, and that defeated kind of sigh follows it. Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned that bout of illness could have been due to his quirk, that it could have cleared things up for Shinsou. He shouldn't have made it sound like promises Yamada had no way of keeping.

But he sees Shinsou pull himself to sit a bit straighter, worryingly straight, before he looks him in the eye. *'I want to see my mother.'*

There are two ways of signing 'mother' in JSL, and Yamada has never overlooked that Shinsou always uses the formal and distant one. He's never forgotten why that is. Even before he got confirmation from Eri on a suspicion he didn't want to believe, that Shinsou being distant from his mother was something his mother *wanted*, he knew this would be a difficult conversation to have.

Even if it's only gotten more complicated.

"So, I kind of get that," Yamada says, and he tries not to say it more than he means, what he's pretty sure it *isn't* thanks to Shouta cluing him in to a little essay project. "Shou told me that you wanted to do that, to help with the investigation and other things, but... part of the whole 'keeping you safe' thing is making sure that you don't get hurt in other ways, you know? And Shou and I both think that if you met with your mother right now, it might be kind of hurtful, you know?"

He gets an eye roll that he can't really appreciate, given how frustrated Shinsou looks before he throws his hands down and looks away. *'Didn't say right. Not like that. Just.'*

Yamada knows Shinsou is probably running through every trick in the book to still get his way, and Yamada doesn't exactly like that it's his job to *not* let him get his way. But practically hearing the horror in Shouta's text messages about how Shinsou wanted his mother to *rename him* makes him pretty sure that this still shouldn't happen.

'I don't know mother. I want to know. I want to. Stop. Wondering.'

Yamada is pretty sure Shinsou couldn't have hit him any harder if he tried.

Yamada wants to brush that off, but the hesitation before every sign, the frustrated jerks and glares that finally ended with folded hands and a dedicated stare at the floor makes him think this is too much honesty for a kid trying to find the boundaries to his new circumstances. Yamada knows that sign language can be limited, but he feels too much of what Shinsou signed despite that.

Because he felt that too, a lot when he was Shinsou's age. "So, you know that my biological parents decided to, you know. Not do the parenting thing with me," Yamada says, and despite how much he loves his moms and his family and wouldn't trade them for the whole damn *world*, he still finds a tiny piece of himself still stinging about it. "One night, I got a call to my show, and the caller said they were my mother. She said that my parents were proud of me, that they made a mistake in giving me up, that she wanted to make things right now. I got a little fuzzy-headed about it, because it was so sudden, I didn't really know what to think about it. I took down her phone number, and a few hours later, I got another caller. And she said that she was my mom."

Shinsou's eyebrows furrow together confused, but he seems to piece it out faster than Yamada did, when he looks a bit horrified.

"I had an interview earlier that week where I talked about my biological parents giving me up for the first time. I don't know if those callers were trying to make me feel better, or if they thought they could wheedle some cash out of me if they were in desperate financial straits. I don't take calls like that anymore, anyone claiming to be my parents is a no-go. Especially because after that night, I really started to wonder *why* I was always wondering about them," Yamada says, and he almost feels stupid that it took him nearly 20 years of wondering to figure it out. "I didn't really want an apology, even if it would be nice. I kind of wanted to have a reason outside the obvious, but that doesn't really matter to me anymore. Even if I'll probably never know, and it's probably better for me that I don't know how they're doing or what they did, or what kind of people they really are. I stopped wondering because I realized I wouldn't really get what I wanted from them."

Yamada knows this will either make or break this entire night when he asks flat out, and he knows that Shinsou might not be ready to answer. He still thinks that it's better that he ask the question, because while Shouta might wish he completely lost contact with his own mother, he's never sat with the kind of wondering that Shinsou surely is.

"So, just hypothetically, if you did meet with your mom... What would you want from that?" Yamada asks, and he wants the answers to be so many different things. In a perfect world, he'd like Shinsou to realize that he *doesn't* need to meet with his mother, that he could have a family that wouldn't hurt him and one of those family members is staring him right in the face. But Yamada knows this isn't a perfect world, and this world has been cruel enough for Shinsou already. Despite how heavy the 'wondering' is, he wishes that Shinsou didn't have to deal with it on top of everything else he's been through.

Shinsou looks at his hands, and Yamada imagines if he wasn't wearing the face mask, he'd see the corner of Shinsou's mouth working up and down like it does when he's really thinking. The kid can translate through two languages in seconds, but Yamada is sure this question needs a lot more consideration before those feelings can be accurately translated in sign. *'To see her. Seeing enough. Just. C-L-O-S-U-R-E.'*

Yamada imagines just seeing his mother would be a lot. To see a woman who took him from the world and put him underground, into the criminal underworld that Shinsou got lost in for 12 years. If Shinsou knows just as well as Yamada does that if Shinsou Ui doesn't crack in a few days and

admit something more chargeable than Ashido's testimony, that seeing her in handcuffs at that police station might be the only way of getting that closure.

Shinsou Ui could run, she could disappear and never face what she did to Shinsou. She could leave one last torment for Shinsou to overcome through that, to leave the question hanging about who she is and why she did that. The worst part is that Yamada could never answer that question for Shinsou either.

"Well," Yamada says, even if he hesitates to go on. "Why don't we grab a bite to eat, and talk a little more about it? And if you still feel the same way, I think just seeing her is easy enough to do."

Yamada knows it's still not. He wishes Shinsou could just give up these feelings, but he knows it doesn't work like that. He wishes he didn't have any apprehension prickling under his skin when Shinsou looks so relieved, when he signs '*Thank you,*' so genuinely. It's as much a kid wanting to be heard, to be acknowledged for his feelings and to have them considered, and a *kid* who probably has no idea what they could find themselves mixed up in.

"But I want you to know that this is only happening for *you*. Not the investigation, not-not with any of that stuff. We're just going to pop over to the police station and look through the window, no talking or anything," Yamada stipulates, because he doesn't want 'seeing' to come off as anything but that - *seeing*. Yamada *will not* give that woman a chance to see Shinsou with her own eyes when she doesn't *fucking* deserve to. When he is the amazing kid that he is *despite* her.

Shinsou nods, and if he's a bit put off by that, he hides it well. It's just a hesitation, and Yamada can't decide whether it's disappointment in Yamada *trying* to put his foot down or a bit of embarrassment when he decides to sign that. '*Thanks. Tuning in and listening.*'

Yamada *cannot* stop the ugly and half-inappropriate snort from bursting out of him. "*Lame! Do not use my catchphrases on me! You're gonna have me thinking you're a fan or something, if you keep with that.*"

Shinsou tosses in a '*Now Music*' just to cover his tracks, but Yamada knows better.

He knows Shinsou is *at least* a fan of his show.

*

27 couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to lie to Yamada's face like that. To talk, to ask for what he wanted with that, to use it as a weapon.

It surprises him that what convinced him not to wasn't fear - he knew it would be a risk if Yamada knew he wasn't mute, and that even that simple sentence could be proof he didn't want to give. He just felt *guilty*, it felt too heavy.

He's so *lucky* it still worked.

He's not really lying to Yamada, in this at least. He wants to stop wondering about his mother. He wants answers, and he knows he might never get all of them. He doesn't know if Yamada was really able to stop wondering about his parents, if those questions ever really *stop* if they're not answered. Even now, he just has more of them - if she's at the police station, is she in the same room that he lived in? Does it feel different to her because of that, like she knows he used to be in that room? Should it? Would she even know who he was if she saw him?

He's seen three pictures of her - two from that article about her disappearance, and the one that

Aizawa showed him. Pictures aren't enough, and at one point, he probably thought they would be. He just wants *more*, he wants to keep searching until he fills the void, until he finds the ground he can stand on. Until he knows everything that happened to him - *everything*. He doesn't know *anything* at this point, and the things he forgot when he was younger at The Miasma are probably best left forgotten. He knows Bug didn't treat him any more kindly then, and he's sure that he remembers every piece of 50's visits clearly. He wouldn't lose that.

Eri doesn't remember everything, and some things that she doesn't remember almost baffle him because it didn't happen so long ago. He knows that children forget their early childhood, those memories are lost except to the other people who were there, who were old enough to remember them.

He wonders what it was really like for him. He has things he's not sure of, feelings more than images, and fuzzy things that might not be real. It would be easier if he could just have those pictures, things he could hold in his hand and never forget. Even if it's embarrassing, he still saved that picture of himself smeared in fingerpaint that Ashido sent him. It's *one* thing, one picture, and he takes pictures of Eri in hopes that she'll always have more for when she's too old to remember this time in her life.

When they leave that studio room, Yamada puts his arm around his shoulders again. Shinsou doesn't want to admit it, but he breathes easier, even if the touch almost stings at first. He knows he's weird, he likes and hates it. He knows it feels nice but there are times that it doesn't.

Byte Sound smiles at him too much, and looks at him too often. He doesn't know what she intends with those looks or those smiles, whether she means her constant signing as mocking or accepting. What he wants it to be, when he's only pretending that he needs to use it. '*Your dad lame. Bully him for me.*'

27 doesn't know *what* that means, why she signs it, or what she means by *that*. She's not Eri, she's older, she knows Yamada. She knows who he is. He doesn't know what she sees. Yamada *isn't* his- he *can't* be his-

Yamada's arm feels oddly tense around his shoulders, before Yamada sputters until he finds words. "*Byte, you-you're- you're supposed to bully me, not my poor, defenseless ward! How dare you?!*"

Yamada turns and makes a poor shield with his body, his other arm stretching across 27 but he can't step in front of him without taking his arm away from his shoulders. 27 is glad he doesn't, in more ways than one. But Byte Sound just ducks so that 27 can see her under Yamada's arm, and has a smaller grin. '*Don't do anything for anyone. Not even him. Especially him. Easier to bully him in sign.*'

27 at least knows what she means by that. The way her eyes went a little wider, her expression more honest, tells him that she meant that more than what she said. That her signing was accepting his signing, in a way bigger than he first thought.

It makes him feel guiltier, because he doesn't need that reassurance. He wasn't broken because he couldn't talk. Because he *could*.

Yamada sighs after he shoos Byte Sound away, and even if he practically chased her off, he still asked her to be safe on the drive home. "Byte is a *mess* and I *want* to hate her, but I can't. I'm just glad she didn't corrupt you too much from the other side of the glass. That glass panel is for your own safety, *believe me.*"

27 doesn't know what to say, because Byte Sound didn't seem that bad. The show wasn't bad

either, even though Yamada seemed to hate it for some reason.

This was actually pretty nice. *Until she said that.*

It's just a *weird* thing to say, that Yamada was his father or something. He's not like Eri, he doesn't need a father. He never needed one, he has no idea what that even looks like. He doesn't need someone to read him books or take care of him or feed him or-

He's just lucky that Yamada hasn't gotten the wrong impression this far. He wants to stay at UA, but he knows he's not like Eri. Yamada and Aizawa will be Eri's fathers, he can just be there. Just like things are now. Maybe better. But not like *that*.

27 tries to drive it out of his mind when they reach the parking lot. It's dark, 27 has always worked in the dark so he knows who *else* works in the dark too. He sees Byte Sound walking further ahead, he thinks she might keep Yamada from getting hurt if they were attacked. 27 wouldn't be able to do much on his own, and he'd have to rely on her.

"Shinsou, I've really got to level with ya," Yamada says, and the serious way he's talking underneath that forced playful tone is absolutely *terrifying* right now, given what 27 had been thinking about in this silent walk. "I really, *really* need to know... what your little hero name would be for Byte Sound."

Yamada mumbles that last part, almost like he's embarrassed about it. 27 is almost embarrassed for him, because it's just *stupid*. It's just a thing that 27 does, what he's always done to people that he didn't have names for. He'd give them names, and they'd be stupid names, stupid and mocking names because he would keep them to himself. He'd always have that power over them, that chance to laugh at them behind a locked mask.

He doesn't know why Yamada asks about that so much, asks him to make up names even if he seems to hate the ones he gives him. He doesn't know why Yamada acts that way at all, why he wants to know what he thinks. No one has *ever* wanted to know about those stupid little things he thinks about.

27 doesn't know why, but he likes it. He never would have let anyone else know, and he knows that it's fine that Yamada does.

He knows the signs he could use, but they're not quite *right*. And it's short enough, he's just desperate enough, to think it would be fine.

"Edible Audio." 27 goes numb when he realizes it's *not* fine, he *fucked* up, this wasn't *worth it*, *why the fuck would he say that-*

"BYTE!" Yamada yells, and he probably uses a bit of his quirk to get that loud. Byte Sound doubles over like she'd been hit by it, then turns and probably glares, but it's too dark to see it. "You're EDIBLE AUDIO NOW!"

This time she *does* fold over, defeated and shaking her head. If she tried to sign to him after she pulled herself up, it's too dark to see it, and 27 is too grateful.

Too grateful for too many things. That Yamada doesn't say it, doesn't mention that he *said it*. That Yamada turns on the radio station and talks about the guy who takes over his studio for the early morning slot, and how his voice puts people to sleep with how slow and flat he talks.

He's grateful that Yamada didn't ask that *terrifying* question, whether 27 was thinking about what Byte Sound signed.

Because he still can't put it out of his head.

*

Yamada might not have slept a *wink* on his designated rest day, but he can't stop buzzing about it. He feels just a bit of his body crying out for sleep when his husband and Eri walk through the door, and though both of them seem a bit groggy this morning, he has coffee on hand for one and a cheerful smile for the other. "How was the--"

"Twenny!" Eri yells, perking up a bit *too* fast and definitely running too fast on those little legs to throw herself at Shinsou where he's trying to man the frying pan for breakfast. "I missed you and the heroes missed you and Zawa missed you too! Did you miss me?"

Shinsou abandoning his post to crouch down to Eri's level and pull her into a hug, one of those rare and carefree smiles on his face definitely answers that question. "I did. I had a lot of fun, but I wished you were there. Were... you still awake for Baby Shark?"

Eri nods, and that probably explains some weariness, which might *also* explain why Eri seems to be melting more into that hug with her eyelids looking a little heavier. "I was busy missing you."

Shinsou gets a guilty pull against that smile, and Yamada feels a tug of it too. But they both probably hope this makes up for it a little for a miserable little bean who couldn't sleep so well without her Twenny at her side. "Yamada and I sang it together for you, with our hands. I can teach you how--"

"Really?!" Eri asks, jolting a bit more awake at the possibilities. "I wanna learn! I wanna sing it together, all of us! And dance too! And-and it's okay if you go again. If you do that and you miss me a lot, and you still sing for me."

Yamada thinks that's a pretty big step for a little bean, to put her blessing on another night away from Shinsou when the one that happened last night was so miserable for her. And he can't chock *all* of it up to the magical power of 'Baby Shark.' "We'll make sure that happens! And I do mean *all* of that. It's a little hard to get the hand-singing down with the dancing, but I think we can do some choreography--"

"It's very difficult, but I'm sure Hizashi will work it out," Shouta says, taking a long sip from his coffee after sending a pleading look that practically *prays* for Eri to forget that little idea after a mid-morning nap. Unfortunately for Shouta, neither Eri *or* Yamada would give up on that little family plan.

After the show, Yamada ended up giving in when Shinsou still seemed uncomfortable grabbing something from a late-night diner, and had been worried that going home to an empty dorm might inspire the end of the night. But it didn't, and maybe Yamada should have been more responsible and insisted that Shinsou get some sleep, but the hours just ticked on at the kitchen counter, just talking and cooking and it was practically *everything* he wanted from that night.

He got Shinsou to *laugh*. He got Shinsou to *talk*, about how he likes fried eggs and foreign languages, how he's *sure* that this 'meme' thing is practically a cult and Yamada *tries* to reassure him that it's just good and weird fun between teenagers, but he's not sure if he explained it too well.

Shinsou talked about how Eri was when she was younger, the more that the night dragged on and morning dragged in. How that fascination with cats started *young* with her favorite books, how Eri used to try to make up games when she was too young to explain them. Things that Shinsou wishes

he still had pieces of, memories that would last.

He got another look at that picture of Shinsou after begging and practically *bribing* him with some embarrassing pictures of himself. Even if Shinsou cattily signed that *most* pictures of Yamada were embarrassing, he knew that was just one of those rare moments that Shinsou remembered he was a teenager and entitled to sassing.

Shinsou signed that he didn't know *why* he was covered in fingerprint, but his guess about Ashido trying to make him purple sounds solid. Yamada almost wants to make some unprofessional calls to Ashido's parents to get more information about those playdates that must have happened, knowing that the way Ashido is *now* might not be entirely different from when she was 4, and Shinsou must have been entirely too maleable to her schemes back then.

The parent that would have more information about that, about how Shinsou was when he was a child, definitely wouldn't tell him. And if he did ever talk to her, he'd blow the roof off before she got a word out.

As much as Eri was definitely in a cuddly mood, deciding to perch on Shinsou's hip while he finished up the omurice, she still insisted that Shouta do his usual magic with the ketchup. Yamada is *perfectly* capable of drawing a cute cat, and he's sure that Shinsou is too, but this has apparently been a Shouta and Eri thing from day one, before any of them knew it would be.

Yamada is a bit too giddy to write his usual little 'love notes' on Shouta's, so he settles for a very accurate depiction of what his husband's eyes look like after a few too many nights without sleep. He gets a dry look that seems very appreciative of his efforts.

Yamada wanted to add a little 'Thanks for tuning in' message to Shinsou's omurice, after Eri declared that she was decorating Yamada's, but he sees a surprising little gesture that makes him almost swell with pride. '*Stop. Dislike. It's cold.*'

Yamada agreed to Shinsou seeing his mother on one condition - that he learned to sign 'Stop.' Not that the kid didn't know the sign already, but he needed to practice setting up boundaries. Little things, even a *tiny* thing like saying no to the universally accepted ketchup on omurice was a big thing for Shinsou, and backing out of meeting his mother if he realized he wasn't ready was so much bigger.

Yamada doesn't want to see 'It's fine' unless it *is* fine, because Shinsou should know him well enough to know that it's safe to be honest with him.

Even if it's *totally weird* that he doesn't want ketchup on omurice.

After breakfast, it seemed like Eri's mind had caught on to the fact that they were all awake on a rare Sunday morning, and the math seemed to add up to so much more time to spend together. Her first pick was a movie, of course, but that was unfortunately her undoing. Still cuddled up on Shinsou's side, she barely made it through 10 minutes before passing out.

Shinsou himself seemed a little slow to realize it, a fond smile picking at the corner of his mouth when Yamada had to point it out. Shinsou's arm was still trapped around her, which made carrying her to her bed an easier venture, but Yamada wasn't entirely surprised that after 20 more minutes, Shinsou was unlikely to come back.

Two kids down for a nap, a groggy but surprisingly cuddly husband at his side, and a movie they no longer had to watch on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Yamada would love to just lay his head on Shouta's shoulder and enjoy it, but there was *so much* to talk about. "Shinsou talked to me."

Yamada can't help smiling so wide, even if Shouta looks at him in utter surprise.

"Two words. 'Edible Audio,' which is Byte Sound's new name. *Two* words, he wasn't really panicking and wasn't- *Shou*, it went *great*, and we talked so much-"

"That's good," Shouta says, too quickly and he takes a drink from that second cup of coffee a bit too quickly. Shouta probably already *knows* that a Grumpy Gus appearance would *not* be appreciated right now, but he *insists*. "It doesn't seem like Principal Nezu reported it to The Commission, but if they knew about-"

"*Shou*," Yamada whines, deciding to throw himself over his husband's lap as punishment for raining on yet another of his parades. "I know, the testing thing, gotta make sure my brain can't be washed like Midoriya's, but *please* just listen to me? I had a wonderful time with my ward last night and I'm going to talk your ear off about it, then you can tell me about your adventure with Eri because I haven't heard enough about it-" Yamada watches his husband *swish* his coffee, and that's always been a sign that there's some emotional upheaval he's trying to swish out of himself. "Shou. How *was* that little daddy daughter date?"

Shouta doesn't even flinch, doesn't even try to look away, and Yamada practically feels like he's falling through the couch and into cloud nine.

"Shou-?!"

"Hizashi!" Shouta hisses, leaning against the armrest of the couch a bit more to look down the hall, worried that little slip of near hysteria could break this little spell, this rare time where they can properly talk outside of their bedroom. He *swishes* again, and Yamada practically doesn't need him to say it at this point. "It was nice. She has a *best* friend now, Shoji's little sister Mizuno. They're good for each other, and Eri did well with being with someone her own age. We need to make sure they can do that again."

Hizashi heard about that - *a lot* of that over text messages. But that doesn't explain the coffee swishes.

"She correctly identified some boys as villains for using their quirks to attack others," Shouta says, and pauses, like that's some *great* revelation hidden in there.

"Shou, she doesn't just *live* at UA, a famous hero school, she lives with *you*, the guy who could practically write a college course on hero law and hero ethics, and that's *not* what I'm asking about." Yamada watches *two more swishes* and he wonders if Shouta will even say it before he starts drafting out the legal papers.

"Eri's situation won't change soon. Years, probably, given the nature of her quirk," Shouta says, because he might complain about *Yamada* taking too long to spit something out, but Mr. Rational needs to lay out all the logic before he dives into something as terrifying as *emotions*. "Things could change in that time."

Yamada knows there's a 'but,' and he leans a bit closer and feels like throttling it out of his *ass* of a husband.

"I wouldn't mind if this... stays the same."

Yamada spills some coffee, mostly on himself but a bit onto Shouta, but he lunges up and tries to kiss this *oaf* senseless because if he doesn't do something else with his mouth, he'll probably scream. "Yamada Eri-"

“We still need to-”

“Be *aware*... of the possibilities of *Aizawa* Eri,” Yamada says, and has to bury his face against Shouta’s newly wet shirt because he *knew* Shouta would blush, but he wasn’t ready to see it. “It’s not *fair*, we should do the family name thing all over again. I’ll even take the part after the hyphen, and I’ll put up with all of Nemuri’s teasing about it, because Aizawa-Yamada Eri does have a ring to it-”

“But-” Shouta tries to dump yet another gush of cold water over his parade, but Yamada is prepared this time, and makes him do something better with his mouth with another kiss.

“Yep, things change, she’s a little kid, she needs what’s best - but she *thrives* here and she loves us, and we’re *ready*, Shou.” Yamada sees fear in his husband’s eyes, and he’s been with the man long enough to know to take big things *slow*. So he’s forced to endure a little sprinkle when he sighs. “Another month-”

“A year,” Shouta counters, entirely too quickly, and that’s *way* too much.

“Her birthday-”

“A *year*,” Shouta insists, and if two insists happened, it usually had some *fantastic* logic behind it. “Adoption typically takes 18 months, and I know you’re going to involve your mother to hurry the process along. It will even out to 18 months if we wait a year.”

Yamada raises an eyebrow, not entirely surprised that Shouta would *force* them to wait a year and a half just because it was ‘typical,’ even though *nothing* about this was typical and it shouldn’t be for their darling and extraordinarily special daughter. But he was surprised that he would forget something in all of that math. “Nezu basically has legal custody, and he will have it done by the end of the day when we ask for it.”

Yamada almost laughs when Shouta *tries* to look surprised. “So. A year.”

He has to cover his face with his hands, because he can’t *believe* he almost bought it. “A year. Or sooner, if we agree to it. It’s not like Eri’s mom is standing in our way or anything.”

Shouta hums, drinking what’s left of his coffee, but if he wants to get up and change his shirt, that’s unfortunate. Yamada is entirely too comfortable laying on his husband, too tired to get up to any other antics in the bedroom, and not willing to move an inch from where he’s draped over Shouta’s chest, even when he tries to put the coffee mug down. “Other than Jirou, which Eri already told me about, how was it with Shinsou?”

Ah. Yamada remembers there’s something he probably should have filled Shouta in on first, and now that everything is so comfortable and peaceful, he definitely doesn’t want to ruin it. “I’m going to take him to see his mom.”

He feels Shouta go still under him, and maybe he regrets the timing but he still doesn’t regret his decision.

“Look, we talked about it - you and I talked about it, but I talked about it with him, and, you know. I get it. He wants closure, he wants to put the kaput on it and have something more final to look back on-”

“He *knew* he would get you to say yes,” Shouta growls, and Yamada probably *should* stop hiding his face in his husband’s hair, but he knows what he’d see. “I don’t know how he could-”

“He *didn't* know, beyond the- well, yeah I told him a little bit about it-”

“It’s not *about* that, he knew he would get you to say ‘yes’ because you never say ‘no’ to him,” Shouta argues, and he can feel him pulling away before Yamada finally lets go of him and sits up. He still doesn’t like that Shouta is glaring daggers at the wall, knowing too well that he’d rather be glaring at him. “You *know* what he wrote and what he said-”

“I *know*,” Yamada insists, because he hasn’t forgotten it. There’s a lot of messed up things inside his ward’s head, he *knows* that so much better now. He knows that the only *real* way to know about it is to talk to Shinsou, and he *does*.

Shouta’s little essay thing might have had merit, but just taking those things like ‘I want to help the investigation so Endeavor doesn’t take me away’ or ‘I want my mom to rename me’ is just scratching the *surface* of what Shinsou’s worried about. It’s just what he puts to words, but that isn’t what he’s feeling underneath.

“We’re going to look at her through the window, and that’s it. No talking, she’s not even going to know about it. I know that’s still going to stir up a lot of stuff, but we’re working on boundaries and communicating, and he’s going to tell me when it’s enough, alright? I know he’s just - he has so many questions about it, what could have happened and didn’t and what things could be like, and I had those questions too, so I know it. I feel like he just wants a part of where it all began for him, just to close the book on it, and I want that-”

“She sold him.”

The words catch in Yamada’s throat, and he nearly chokes on them. Yamada leans back, watching Shouta pull further away to cross his arms.

“He knows that. He’s known that all this time, and he didn’t tell you-”

“Why the *hell* didn’t you?” Yamada growls, his voice almost breaking at the end. Shouta knew this. *Shouta* knew about this, and he didn’t *fucking* tell him. His ward - a goddamn *person* and a *goddamn child* had been sold *twice*, and it wasn’t easy to learn about that from the investigation files before Yamada took on the wardship, but his *mother*. That goddamn *Shinsou Ui*.

And *Shouta knew about it*.

Shouta still won’t look at him, but he’s not glaring and he’s not glaring at the wall, but staring at the floor because he *knew better*. This is goddamn Chisaki all over again, but worse, because Yamada was going to drive Shinsou to the station himself and not know a *thing* about it. Not know this about his ward.

Shouta stands up, and still won’t look at him. Yamada only turns his head to look when he gets to the shoe rack and he hears the first shoe drop on the floor.

“Shou-”

“I’m going to the station,” Shouta answers, and that’s been an answer in different arguments. Nothing like this, not *anything* like this. “And I’m going to talk to her.”

Yamada pieces it together all too clearly in the back of his mind, that Shouta didn’t want to. He didn’t want to meet with Shinsou Ui, or he would have been stalking the station since she arrived. This isn’t as much running away from Yamada’s anger - though he knows Shouta should and *would* fear that. This was Shouta trying to close the door on that option for Shinsou.

Yamada breathes out, head in his hands, and wonders what the *hell* he can say to Shinsou now that he knows this.

Chapter End Notes

1-A Groupchat Usernames:

Arson = Crime Brulee - Todoroki Shouto
No empty head thoughts - Sero Hanta
No head empty thoughts - Kaminari Denki
My quirk, my weird quirk, and me - Midoriya Izuku
I do not c++ it - Hagakure Tooru
Hang the DJ - Jirou Kyouka
Bakuroli - Bakugo Katsuki
Wow SOMEONE has a life off of their phone - Shinsou Hitoshi
Tik Tok on the Clock but - Ashido Mina
Ya Momo so cool that - Yaoyorozu Momo
Float On By - Uraraka Ochako
Wake Me Up When Spring Comes - Asui Tsuyu
Sparkle Dion - Aoyama Yuga
Sugar Might - Sato Rikido

You Know The Line When You Cross It

Chapter Summary

Aizawa meets Shinsou Ui, which stirs up memories that he'd rather leave forgotten. Yamada and Shinsou talk about Shinsou's parents, which leaves Shinsou deeply hurt by the revelations in that conversation. Toshinori speaks to his successor about a new worry.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Mention of sexual harassment directed towards a child (Skip the paragraph that begins with "She seems to find that funny" in the Hanabusa Kaede interview), Reference to Chisaki's torture of Shinsou, Original Mocha's death mention, Bug mention,

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou wrote an essay describing why he wanted to see his mother, including how he felt it would repay his 'debt' to society after the crimes he committed, and how his mother could 'rename' him as Shinsou. The best lead for the investigation right now is the 'reviews' that came from a Villain Yelp website that include the names of some criminal organizations that rented Numbers from Miasma. Shinsou believes that he is no longer selectively mute, but has been trying to keep that a secret. Shinsou had a habit of trading questions, answering questions only when one of his own had been answered. Byte Sound called Yamada Shinsou's father while talking to Shinsou in sign. Yamada has recently asked Shinsou to sign 'Stop' whenever he doesn't want something to help him establish boundaries and safely communicating them. Shinsou and Ashido were childhood friends before he was sold to the Miasma. Midoriya was able to manifest Black Whip as a second quirk after Shinsou brainwashed him, and Midoriya recently learned that Shinsou's investigation is related to the Nomus. Yamada has noticed that Shinsou tends to sign 'It's fine,' when he's really not fine with the situation.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's not exactly procedure for a pro hero to visit a suspect in custody like this, but Aizawa isn't exactly a procedural hero, contrary to what he convinces his students to think.

He's done it before, and Sansa and Naomasa both have listed those visits as *visits*. Possibly requesting the use of his quirk if there was a criminal who had a one that couldn't be fully suppressed during questioning. There are several skills he's honed, and putting pressure on when something needs to break is one of them. It happens in the field, and it happens here. The field has looser rules, but he still plays by these.

Naomasa looks surprised, but Aizawa knows he's also hopeful. He knows Naomasa probably only wants the photos on Aizawa's phone, and if the detective is right about his interrogation process like he usually is, then Aizawa could wait outside the room after sending them over.

But he won't, because it's irrational to feel like this.

"Shouta," his mother says, sitting stiffly on the couch. She doesn't look at him, and he notices that too much now. It's only been a week back at 'home,' but he sees it every time she makes that pointed effort not to 'see' him. "Your grandfather said that you applied for that hero school in Mustafu."

He's surprised she mentioned it, because he's sure he's going to be gone next week, or the week after. These little 'reconciliations' never last a month at this point. "The entrance exam is next month. I'm in the top 20% for the practice admissions tests. I applied to Ketsubetsu as a second option."

He's made an effort not to 'see' her either, looking at the wall above her head. He still sees her frown. "Mustafu is far away, it's too far to commute. We don't have family in that area either. Tondechi is more reasonable, or one of the local schools here-"

"I'm not going to live here," he says, and he nearly chokes on a bitter laugh. He doesn't know why she does it at this point, if his grandfather makes her. If this is some kind of act to convince herself that she's a mother, he'd rather her leave him out of it. It's irrational. "UA is the most prestigious hero school in Japan, and I have a good chance of getting in. Not many people have that, and my quirk would be-"

"Don't-" She starts shaking her head, the hand wringing starts up. She might cry this time, if she's really hurt by this. At this point, he's stopped being hurt by it, and wonders why it took him this long to realize that she's only pretending to care. "You're not going to that school, Shouta. You're just going to apply there and not have a place to live?! Do you- you're a child! You can't make these kinds of decisions! You didn't even tell me-"

"I don't even live with you." He makes his voice even, because he knows she'll take any waver as a reason to start screaming. He's not a child, and he's thought this through. "I qualify for scholarships, and I've applied for them. I can rent an apartment and Grandfather only has to sign the lease-"

"You're 14! You're not going to live on your own! You-you're still a child, you can't do things like this!" He already knows it from her pitch, knew she was going to knock against the table when she stands up too quickly. She stops and stares at him, like she always does, and it's such an old act that he wants to laugh at it. "You did that. I saw you, you used your quirk and made me-"

"I didn't!" he yells, he breaks back. A week is too long, apparently, it's making him too much like his mother. But unlike his mother, he doesn't need the act.

"Where are you going?! Shouta-"

"I'm going to pack." He doesn't need to hear the last parts, but she still mutters them under her breath, like she needs the routine. He honestly wonders if she just sits in this house when he's not here, waiting to go through it again.

"I can't trust you, not when you do that. You-you just need to live with your grandfather for a while, you need to learn you can't do that."

His grandfather did exactly one thing right by Aizawa, and that was making sure he could *actually* attend UA. He tried to be responsible at 14 years old, to plan ahead, and he's lucky that his grandfather already saw the shortcomings. He didn't get half of the scholarships that he thought he would, but his grandfather gave him half of his inheritance early. 5 million yen, in one lump sum,

and Aizawa was probably the only 14 year old boy who would take that briefcase full of cash and have any of it left after he graduated high school.

Of course, he was disinherited when his grandfather met Hizashi, but Aizawa had learned that blood relatives are completely meaningless long before that point.

Aizawa waits outside of the interrogation room while Shinsou Ui eats breakfast, and Naomasa luckily doesn't make small talk. Aizawa would rather wait with Sansa, because he knows Sansa doesn't see it. He's fidgeting, it's irrational, but he does it. Crossing his arms, winding one over and under the other over his chest. He knows Sansa doesn't see it, because he didn't see it with Eri's mother when they met with her.

"I couldn't live with h-that," Hanabusa Kaede hisses, her hands folded together on top of the table, but one hand digs fingernails into the back of her other. Almost punishing herself for referring to her daughter, a two year old the last time she saw her, as something other than monstrous. "It killed him. It could have killed me. That horn, it's not even a quirk-"

"You placed your daughter in your father's care, and never attempted to see her again," Aizawa says, as evenly as he can. He looks at her hands, because he doesn't have papers he can look through pointlessly like Sansa, and she has a ponytail. As long as he doesn't raise his eyes, he doesn't see that white hair, or the familiar shape of her nose. "Were you aware that he was involved with racketeering and illicit drugs, as the head of an organized crime family?"

She seems to find that funny. "Of course, I grew up in a yakuza mansion! Guys five times my age have been trying to flirt with me since I was 10, just to get closer to him. Like any of that really matters. Like it matters if they have a line of succession," She winds her fingers together, raising them to keep her hands folded under her chin. "Father wanted an heir, and I gave him one. That thing is probably going to be promised to that Chisaki guy when it's old enough, Father always wanted to have a reason to adopt him into the family properly."

Sansa made sure that conversation was transcribed and attached to the court record that had terminated Hanabusa Kaede's parental rights. She had voluntarily waived them, perhaps in a bid for a plea deal, perhaps just taking the opportunity now that it was public knowledge that she abandoned her child like that. Nezu had copies of all of it on hand, in the same file as Eri's wardship documentation.

Women who give birth, grow to hate their children for their quirks, and abandon them. Aizawa has seen too much of it, too often, and he has to see it again now.

Naomasa pointedly doesn't introduce him when they enter the room. Shinsou Ui is handcuffed to the table, but she seems to cower as much as she can, angled towards the corner like she'd like to hide behind the table. Naomasa sits, but Aizawa leans against the wall, still fighting the urge to move his arms crossed over his chest.

He hears Naomasa flipping pointlessly through papers, but Aizawa doesn't look away from the opposite wall. It's procedure. It makes him into a wordless threat.

"Why France?" Naomasa asks, still not looking up from his file. A casual question, almost spit out by the normally pleasant detective. The pause that follows seems to indicate that Shinsou Ui hasn't heard that one before.

"Different," she answers, weakly. Aizawa has no idea what she looks like beyond that mugshot, and he has too many reasons to keep it that way. Just her voice, one word, snaps against something inside his chest like a rubber band, and he feels utter disgust for her.

“Different,” Naomasa says, in a lighter tone, like a reward for a dog barking on command. “Different, and far away. Maybe you had reasons to leave the country, legitimate fears.”

Aizawa noticed in the reports he’s poured over that Shinsou Ui reacts poorly to direct questions. Aizawa imagines that his ward’s quirk has something to do with that oddity. “No... I didn’t. I just wanted to.”

Aizawa slips up, glancing at the source of that timid voice, one that sounds too much like a child. He sees a thin woman, the roots of her hair growing white, with a tremble in one hand worse than the other. She seems to feel the weight of his gaze and looks at him, fear barely hidden. Purple eyes, purple hair.

He tells himself that she doesn’t look anything like Shinsou.

“ ‘Just wanted’ to leave the country, after coming into contact with a criminal organization that we know are responsible for numerous murders, among other violent activities,” Naomasa says, as coolly as if he were reading the news. “Obviously, I walked into this room two days ago under the belief that you were a woman who needed help, who might have done some unsavory and desperate things, but you’ve certainly convinced me that you don’t want help. Eraserhead, how many people have Miasma killed that we know about?”

“65,” Aizawa answers, making his voice deeper and raspier, more intimidating. That was the macabre number that they found from ‘127’s reviews. What they know only scratches the surface.

“65, that we know about, but they have at least three criminals that specialize in assassination. Silencing people,” Naomasa says, dropping the file and the act on the table. Aizawa would love nothing more than to drop an implication with the reminder that Shinsou Ui will be leaving police custody soon, even if it’s hollow given that Interpol will be escorting her back to France from the embassy so that she can face a few fines for having a forged passport. “How many times have they tried to kill Hitoshi?”

Aizawa bristles with that, even if he knows its purpose. Grasping at any shred of desire to protect her son, referencing that connection with Shinsou’s given name. But it feels all the more wrong from Naomasa’s mouth. “Twice.”

He doesn’t have to fight to growl his words in answer, to shift his eyes and their weight to the woman who could *stop this*. Her mouth drops open, but not much. She’s heard that before, possibly not the same way. Her hand pulls against the handcuffs before she clenches her jaw tight. She won’t *talk*.

“He’s under a hero’s protection now. My protection,” Aizawa says, stalking forward slowly. He knows how to make the distinction, a walk towards the empty chair beside Naomasa becomes an *advance* in Shinsou Ui’s eyes as they follow him. “They’ve tried to kill him in a hospital, in an isolated cell. I have to keep my eyes on him at all times, but I’m here,” Aizawa says, and that’s an empty threat to Shinsou given that he’s safe at UA, but it’s not an empty one to Shinsou Ui when he sits in that chair and folds his hands too close to where hers are trapped. “Talking to *you*.”

They both let her sit with that, letting the pressure mount. Letting a hero, a protector to the public, become a trained professional with different implications in that silence. It’s a matter of perspective, whether that implication is a real one.

Shinsou Ui’s hands are practically vibrating on the table, rattling the cuffs. She’s staring at him, not quite at his eyes, but his chin probably. Her jaw moves up and down, and with her whitened face and disturbed expression, it almost looks like she’ll puke. “I...How is... He hates plums.”

Aizawa fights not to raise an eyebrow, watching her hands stop shaking entirely when her tone drops like that. Fear falls away too quickly, almost disturbingly. He watches the woman almost *laugh* to herself, shaking her head.

“My son hates them. *Hates* them. Just hates purple, I think. His favorite color is yellow, such an All Might fan-”

“Not ‘Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats?’” Naomasa asks, and if Aizawa wasn’t struggling to understand what had just happened here, he would be impressed that Naomasa could say that name with a straight face.

“Pft, no. He’s always been a fan of All Might. I had to buy all of his merchandise, even if it was cheap, it was quite a collection. He did horribly in school, we didn’t think he was going to graduate-”

“Mrs. Shinsou, I know when you’re lying,” Naomasa says, and he usually doesn’t give that away. But it doesn’t seem like that’s what’s surprising to Shinsou Ui, when she furrows her eyebrows, confused. That odd spell of too-casual gushing, like she was a normal mother talking about her son among fellow parents. “How did you get into contact with The Miasma?”

There’s a shake of her head, and Naomasa nudges Aizawa’s foot under the table because it’s already reading as a lie. “I didn’t. And my son is dead, this is- this is *cruel*, what you’re doing. What you’re doing to me, putains de monstres-”

“Tell me how you *didn’t* get in contact with The Miasma,” Naomasa says with a sigh. “Since you have spoken nothing but lies this entire time.”

Aizawa glances at Naomasa to see the man have a break in his character, staring at the ceiling in honest frustration. If Shinsou Ui honestly has only spoken lies every time she speaks, perhaps there was a reason for it. Some kind of quirk that was used to cover The Miasma’s tracks, though it’s odd that they wouldn’t just silence her their usual way.

“I haven’t?” Shinsou Ui insists, shaking her head, and her eyes are disturbingly honest. “I’m fine, I wouldn’t- no, I don’t- you don’t understand, I’m just tired. I’m tired of this and I just want to leave. My son was taken from me 12 years ago, he *hated* plums-”

Aizawa has dealt with plenty of people who have some form of mental instability, but something seems to make his skin *crawl* with Shinsou Ui. He pulls his phone out of his pocket, and lays it on the table. The first picture that Hizashi sent him of Shinsou, the first day that Shinsou was at UA. He cropped it so that Eri can’t be seen, and he was amused at first that Naomasa insisted that the cat filter could be more effective here. “He hates plums?”

Shinsou Ui stares, going even more still. It’s disturbing, to see this odd fascination with a son that she *sold*. “He’s....”

“He’s an amazing kid,” Aizawa says, and it turns his stomach to let her see the picture, but he forces himself to go on. To earn a bid for Shinsou’s safety in pressuring this woman to the break. To see what she’s *done*, so that they can find those that did the rest. “He knows a few French words, but he had no idea how. It was a surprise to him that you probably taught him.”

Shinsou Ui curls forward with a hitched breath, almost a sob. If she sees the scars there, the scars plain on Shinsou’s face around that awkward smile that Aizawa has found more fearful and unsure as he sees more honest ones from Shinsou, Aizawa has more reason to flip to the next picture. Shinsou fast asleep on the couch, a picture that Hizashi insisted on taking despite the anxiety they

had at the time, on the eve of Shinsou meeting with Chisaki. His face is relaxed there, the angle where his head is braced on the armrest only shows how deep the scars on his cheek dig in.

“He wants to see you,” Aizawa says, and Naomasa breaks script again by looking at him. He didn’t tell Naomasa that purposefully, even if he knows that Naomasa knows it from the keylogger, from that *horrifying* essay that Shinsou wrote. “He wants to know what his mother looks like. He wants answers.”

Shinsou Ui curls deeper into herself, but straightens when it seems she loses sight of the phone. Her lips tighten, but tremble, and tears start filling her eyes, but with her hands cuffed, she won’t be able to wipe them away if they fall.

“He knows that you sold him,” Aizawa says, and it is a true *fight* to keep from sounding accusatory, but he’s almost sickened that he does it well. “And he still wants to see you. To see his mother, when he doesn’t remember anything about you. He wants a connection.”

“He *can’t*,” Shinsou Ui mutters, a broken voice that gasps and nearly sobs. She shakes her head, finally looking away, looking around the room like there’s some escape to be found despite her trapped hands. “No, no, *no!* Th... *monster.*”

Her voice drops to a growl this time, he sees her teeth bared and her fingers curled like claws. He stands up, numb, feels himself towering over her but feels like it’s *not enough*. “A monster?”

Naomasa looks up at him, and Aizawa is at risk for going off script. He ignores it, he ignores his fingers curling at his sides, how his chest feels like it’s too full and shaking. Shinsou being described as a *monster*.

“You have no *goddamn* clue who your son is,” Aizawa growls, as he steps forward and lays a hand on that table, close but not close enough to Shinsou Ui’s trapped hands. “Because he’s seen monsters. *Real, cruel* monsters. Monsters that you gave him to, *sold* him to.”

There’s a tremble that wracks through her frame, and it’s still *not enough*.

“But he didn’t break,” Aizawa says, more and more amazed by it. “Tortured, beaten, starved. He went through all of that, all of his life, and every opportunity he’s ever been given to do the right thing, he *does it*. He protected a little girl and saved her life too many times to count, he was willing to *die* to save her. And you think your son, your *child*, is a monster. *You?*”

This terrified, sobbing woman cowering in front of him can look weak, look afraid. *She* was the real monster here, and Aizawa couldn’t forget that. “His *quirk-*”

“Eraserhead,” Naomasa calls, his head tipped towards the door. Aizawa feels fingernails digging into his palms, feels a coldness completely unlike calm while he follows Naomasa out of the room. He follows too easily, too rattled at the edges.

Frightened, by what he wanted to do if he were left in there a moment longer.

Naomasa tips his head back after he closes the door, looking at the ceiling for too long. His eyes are too full of honest concern, and Aizawa wants to look away from it, knowing it’s deserved. “We have tomorrow. We have the reviews. Take a breath-”

“She was close,” Aizawa says, his arms shifting across his chest and he ignores it. The statement isn’t a rebuke for Naomasa’s interruption. It’s for himself. She was close, and he let her distract him.

“So were you,” Naomasa says, too quietly. Too disturbed, and it stings worse because it’s true. Unprofessional, irrational. He’s never been that close to the line, even if he didn’t cross it. “This is too personal - and that’s not a bad thing!”

Naomasa probably felt the need to add that, another step towards illogical and unprofessional crossing Aizawa’s mind with another snap of something too hot racing through his veins. He knows he needs to calm down, take a breath. He knows what this feels like on too active, too long patrols. Adrenaline becomes something that a hero shouldn’t have - bloodlust, almost.

Naomasa’s half-cocked smile, too fond and too familiar from other cases they’ve worked together, reminds him that the detective doesn’t deserve any of this from him. “I’ve never taken it as an insult, you know. I wanted Shinsou to have someone in his corner like you, who would protect him in more ways than the obvious ones. When someone else might look away.”

Aizawa struggles to find something better than disbelief in that. “You wanted to put him in that room with her. To use ‘Hitoshi.’”

Aizawa finds it harder in an illogical way to forgive Naomasa for something he logically knows isn’t a slight, but feels like one. “You saw it yourself. She’s complete nonsense, she’s wired up too much and it’s been that way since the beginning, before we even started questioning her. But when she sees him, she calms down.” Naomasa looks away, his frown becoming firm. “Shinsou isn’t the only one who wants a connection.”

Aizawa forces his hands in his pockets, mirroring Naomasa’s hands, and forces himself to trust that Naomasa has seen enough. That he’s seen that essay, he’s seen what Shinsou *wrote*. Shinsou laid out every reason not to let this happen, and Naomasa can’t be that cruel to ignore it.

And he’s not. “If you have any other pictures, I can use them. I’ll still throw everything we have at the wall to see if anything can stick. I don’t want her to get away with this.”

Aizawa breathes, but only after Naomasa looks at him again, too much honesty that he can barely handle at this point.

“You take care of Shinsou. And yourself, Eraserhead. We can handle the rest.”

Naomasa is giving him an out, one that he’s wanted for too long. Too selfishly. He shouldn’t take it, because he knows that he has a responsibility to Shinsou not to.

Hizashi was chosen as a designated hero because of his hearing loss, but Naomasa wanted Aizawa involved because he walks the line in his hero work, closer to police work than other heroes. He’s supposed to walk both sides, but he can’t anymore. Not with this.

Not when it’s becoming too personal.

Aizawa is done with the investigation.

*

When Shinsou wakes up, he frowns and turns his face into Eri’s pillow, because he didn’t plan on falling asleep. He knew Eri probably needed to since she didn’t sleep well last night, and when he tried to lay her down on her bed, she kept stirring and shifting, frowning like she might wake up and be upset that he was trying to leave. So he just laid down with her, intending to get up once she was a bit deeper asleep.

And fell asleep with her.

He still feels groggy, feels like sleeping was more of a mistake than it was. It wasn't as bad as it should have felt before he slept, when he was just talking with Yamada and hardly noticing that the hours had flown by, that daylight was breaking through the window into the living room. It was nice, to talk. To trust that he didn't have to say anything specific, he didn't have to make sure to guard his words. Yamada just wanted to talk to him.

But it wasn't *talking*, so it was safe. Just signing. Just continuing to be mute. Just.

Lying to Yamada.

Eri pulls her head closer to his chest, her horn dragging along his chin as she does. She's not usually this clingy, but they usually don't sleep like this. His legs are curled up, one arm slung over her and the other still trapped beneath her, so deadened that he can barely move his fingers. She missed him, and he missed her. He feels a tug of guilt, but somehow, it doesn't shake him as much as it used to, when he had to leave so that they would have books to read, so that he could steal soap for her to use.

He wonders if she'd be upset, if she knew that he could talk to anyone now. If she would be angrier or even more upset than she was when they pretended that he couldn't talk to her at all. She will always be more unfathomably close to him than anyone else, but he imagines that she likes that she has that tangible piece that makes her more special. He doesn't want to hurt her to take that away from her.

But somehow, he feels like he should tell Yamada.

He knows it could end badly, and he knows all the ways it could. His quirk is his voice, and they can't trust that he wouldn't use it. *No one* has ever trusted that. He's never forgotten that he was the only Number who had to wear something to restrain his quirk. Even 127 for all his oddities and near-treacheries never had to wear something to make sure he couldn't use his invisibility to escape.

Chisaki locked his mask every night, and both he and Hari had the remote to shut it whenever they wanted. They probably knew that he would never act out except for Eri's sake, and he wouldn't risk her safety, but they still had that.

He's proven that he *can't* be trusted, because he used his quirk on Midoriya and threatened to kill him with it. He used his quirk on Eri, and he even showed Yamada how it worked, how he could use her Rewind and he knows all too well how dangerous that could be. He shouldn't even blame them if they gave him another mask, a real one.

27 runs his hand over his cheek, tracing the scars there. Even if it was padded, even if it was only locked when they had a reason to fear his quirk, it would hurt. It hardly makes sense, but he likes that he's the one with that decision. He can hide his face, and no one else can.

He's the one choosing not to speak to anyone now, instead of being mute.

Even if it's reckless, even if it's selfish, maybe it would be okay if he wasn't. Yamada might be happy, genuinely happy. Eri might not be upset. Things could go on as normal, but somehow, easier.

He could be more normal.

He hears Eri sigh, and tries to look down but her horn has his jaw pinned against the pillow. He knew she was probably awake before he felt her hands pulling at the bottom of his shirt, but he

finds himself fighting a laugh when he feels her pulling it up. “What....are you doing?”

It seems to work if he takes a long pause, but any other time he asks questions, he feels a ticklish cough that he can't fight. He doesn't know if Izuku is right, if he has Quirk Activation Phobia. If he traded mutism for something else that's strange.

He gets a sleepy growl in reply, before Eri shuffles and squirms, and tries to crawl inside his shirt. He straightens out his legs so she has room, and wonders why that's the first thing that came to mind as soon as she woke up. He curls one arm around her once she settles, the fabric of his shirt stretching out. Her hair and her soft breaths, her warmth feels odd against his skin like this.

“Twenny,” Eri grumbles, looking up at him through his stretched out collar with barely opened eyes. “Mommies have babies in their tummies.”

She lays her head back down, eyes closed, and seems satisfied with that explanation. 27 is not. “You learned about that last night, from the hero students.”

Eri's yawn fans hot across his chest, and she nods. “Mhm, Ko-Ko and Momo told me. ‘S an experiment.”

Eri seems to fall back to sleep quickly enough, her breathing still tickling across the center of his chest. She's not ready to wake up yet, and seems oddly comfortable with this.

27 is not.

He works his hand and elbow to suffer through static shocks over the arm that Eri had been laying on, trying to work the feeling through it to be able to move it properly. His hand is still staticy and weak when he pulls his phone from his pocket, and pulls up the group chat for the hero students.

To get *answers*.

Kairi Baskin Ate Her Husband With Her Tiger Quirk: @Midoriya this is life or death situation does All Might dye his hair???

Mini Mic Jr. : @Amazon and @CreatureCommander this is your life or death what the fuck did you tell Eri about pregnancy

Crepe Squad Goals: ...shinny its not what u think

Mighty Boi Jr. : No he doesn't and WHAT??? @Yaoyorozu and @Koda i think WHAT HAPPENED????

Mini Mic Jr. : Correct and the clock is ticking. I will get answers.

Mall rat boi: DEKU DONT FUCKING START ACTING LIKE SHITSOU WITH THAT FREAKY FUCKING PROTECTIVE SHIT. SO WHAT IF ERI KNOWS ABOUT BIRDS AND BEES AND SHIT SHES FUCKING FIVE.

Science Momma: We didn't tell Eri anything inappropriate! After testing liquid viscosity in zero gravity, we went to Koda's room for a biology lesson an

Sledgehammer Plans:AND?

Not at the bookstore nope not me not sus: Half of us are at the mall where is YaoMomo and WHO CAN PROTECT KODA YAOMOMO HAS BEEN S N I P E D

Proud Grandmother: YaoMomo is studying with Class B, maybe her phone died? And it's not what you think, Shinsou! My crickets are expecting!

Clearance rack here I come: Eri saw the eggs and yaomomo just told her about how human moms have babies she didnt even talk about a dad being involved!!!

Mini Mic Jr. : Fine. Never say anything else about that. Ever.

We Want ur Little Sister: ...Shinsou, I might regret this, but how did this come up?

Not at the bookstore nope not me not sus:Shinsou.

Kairi Baskin Ate Her Husband With Her Tiger Quirk: ...CLOCK'S TICKING. TICK TICK TICK

Mall rat boi: WE SURE DID ANSWER A FUCKING QUESTION YOU YAKUZA RAT BASTARD.

Mini Mic Jr. : Eri is inside my shirt. Because mothers have babies in their tummies.

Not at the bookstore nope not me not sus:

Sledgehammer Plans:

Mighty Boi Jr. : Hey shinsou?

Mini Mic Jr. : what

Mighty Boi Jr. : can you check the chat with me?

Mini Mic Jr. : Fine.

It had been a little amusing to ignore Izuku's repeated demands for him to check this chat, but it's not as amusing anymore. It might be something useful, especially because Izuku is closer to Todo and Todo was supposed to gather information about him to feed back to Endeavor.

The chat destroys itself three times before it doesn't, and 27 flicks through pages of Izuku asking him if he was there repeatedly, something he didn't think to check when Izuku was giving him articles about Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome for his essay, before he gives up and scrolls to the bottom. For some reason, Izuku wanted to keep whatever information he had secret until he was sure that 27 would be reading it, yet didn't want to say it that night.

Brainwashio: What.

Deku: Okay, this is really important and I really need you to listen and I'm sorry that it's kind of personal but this is REALLY important

Deku: Do you know anything about your dad?

Brainwashio: No.

27 had never thought about it, but he didn't know anything about his father. He doesn't remember him, he doesn't remember if he was ever there. He only remembers his mother, but he had to have a father. A father who was never in his life, who might not know anything about him.

Deku: Okay. I know this might be really weird, but if you can ask Mic-sensei or Aizawa-sensei about him and maybe tell me, it's kind of important. And I know that's really weird, but I don't think they would tell me, but it's important. Really REALLY important.

Brainwashio: Why? It's not important to me.

Deku: I can't really tell you. I'm sorry, it's kind of like a really big secret, but it's really dangerous, and I think you kind of know what I mean by that. You could get hurt if you know.

Deku: And don't tell anyone that you kind of know, okay? That's really important. I'm really hoping you can trust me.

27 doesn't care about whatever 'secret' Izuku had, he knew it couldn't be that dangerous. It couldn't put his life any more at risk than being a Number who wasn't under the control of The Miasma.

But he imagines that Izuku just wants information and doesn't want to trade for it. He wants to keep his secrets and get what he needs anyway, and 27 envies that. He knows that even if things are nice now, even if Yamada and Aizawa don't expect him to tell them what he hasn't about The Miasma, he probably would have never come to UA if he didn't have secrets that they wanted. He would have never had this, never left that interrogation room at the police station.

Eri seems to be dead asleep, and 27 tries to close his eyes, tries to remedy the ache behind his eyes by sleeping a little longer. But he finds he can't ignore it, that question that Izuku put in his head. He barely wants to ask and definitely doesn't want to ask now, but he wonders.

He's known about his mother, what she thinks of him and what she feels about him. She hates him, and he doesn't know if he deserves it, but she wanted to get rid of him long before she did, and she's never regretted it. He doesn't know if his father knows a thing about him, if he would want to change that. If his father could answer some of the questions 27 has. If he could make the ground that 27 could stand on with that, to know where he began so he could stop questioning it.

27 pulls his arms around Eri, still tucked inside his shirt, and tries to sit up to see if she'll wake up. She whines, but when he leans back so that she's resting on his chest, bracing her back with his arms, she seems to settle. He stands up and walks slowly, and tries to ignore how weird this is.

Yamada looks up from his grading, coffee mug half raised and his eyes a bit too wide. 27 wonders if he could ask Yamada to get him a cup, since he feels like he needs it, and he can't make his own because that would mean letting Eri fall.

27 sits at the table in a chair close to Yamada, and he knows there's a way to make this easier. He could make sure that Eri is comfortable and still talk to Yamada, not have to pull away his arms. But before he even opens his mouth, he knows that will lead to a lot of questions. A lot of questions that he doesn't want to answer, not with this. Not right now.

It might be easier to sign it than say it, anyway.

Yamada stares, and looks away to act like he's not staring. Maybe this is weird, but it's what Eri wants, so 27 is going to have to put up with it. "Eri's... feeling a little cuddly?"

27 shakes his head. *'Hero students taught her mothers have babies in stomach. Wanted to try. I think.'*

He's not sure if Eri wanted to see what it would be like to be an unborn child, or if that was just a

half-formed thought that she took inspiration from in her groggy state. 27 doesn't mind it, it's comfortable like this. He knows it would have been bad if it happened at the 8 Precepts, if he was seen like this, but thinking about Chisaki repeatedly killing him and bringing him back to life for it makes Yamada's clear discomfort a bit easier to ignore. "Ah, a little bean is a little curious about the facts of life. She probably doesn't know a whole lot about that."

27 shakes his head, and almost wants to forbid her from *ever* learning about it. But while he can threaten the hero students according to that want, he knows he can't with Yamada. '*Nothing. Just this.*'

Yamada hums, and glances at the coffee machine. 27 thought it would be easier to ask for a cup, but now it seems too selfish. It seems like a harder question to ask than this one.

'*Do you know my father?*' 27 signs, even if he can only glance at Yamada while he does. Byte Sound's teasing still rings in his head, and even if he knows it's ridiculous, he wonders if Yamada takes any offense to that question. If Yamada thought anything like Byte Sound somehow does, that Yamada taking care of him means that Yamada *is* his father, but differently. Not biologically, but still a father. But he's not.

Yamada raises his eyebrows, and folds both hands around his coffee mug before he clears his throat. "Well, no. I don't know him personally. He... passed away when you were three years old. Do you remember him, or...."

27 shakes his head. '*Just curious.*' Izuku probably wouldn't want Yamada to know that he wanted to know. 27 didn't really want to know either, he was just curious. It doesn't really matter to him.

"So, on the topic of parents and all, and being curious," Yamada says, glancing at Eri where she's sleeping soundly on his chest. There's a spot that feels warmer next to her mouth, and he can't tell whether it's just her breath or a bit of drool. "Shou and I talked about meeting your mom and all, and... it's not going to happen."

27 feels himself going numb, like he's suddenly drenched in cold water. He looks at Yamada, watching his mouth move in an unsure frown that he covers with a hand when he glances away again.

"You weren't really honest with me, and... I understand why, but that's more of a sign that this wouldn't be a good thing for you," Yamada says, repeating that stupid phrase.

'Not good for you,' 27 has no idea what that *means*. How he could possibly say it with a straight face, when it's just looking at his mother. 27 has been through so many things that weren't 'good' for him, even if Yamada doesn't know half of those things, he has to know that 27 isn't so *weak* that he'd suffer from looking at his own *mother*.

"I know that's upsetting, and I know that I said we were going to do that. And I know that you still want to have some questions answered and feel like you have closure on that, but we're going to try to work out a different way to get that, where you don't have to see her," Yamada says, and his eyes are too honest. Too earnest. Too green, and 27 can't stand to look at it, or look at him.

'*Lied,*' 27 signs, clenching his hands into fists afterwards to silence himself. He didn't want to sign that, but it slipped too easily, for a moment felt like he had to make his feelings known. Yamada *lied* to him, lied to him about this. He promised, then took back his word, on a whim and just as he wanted to. Like he didn't care what 27 would feel about it, like 27 shouldn't have feelings about it. Like 27 was just a *Number*, just needed to be told what would happen to him.

“I changed my mind,” Yamada argues, still speaking too quietly. There’s something unnatural in his voice, something that makes him seem like he’s uncomfortable with this discussion. “And I wouldn’t have agreed in the first place if I knew that... your mother sold you.”

27 turns to look at Yamada, who refuses to look at him. Like Yamada is ashamed, as though he doesn’t want to look at him anymore. He knew that he was sold, and he probably knows the price. Yamada probably finds him cheap, he probably finds that price accurate. Or generous.

But 27 didn’t tell him. 27 didn’t tell *anyone*, so how could he know? Has he known this entire time? Has all of this - *all of it* - just been a *test*?

Everything about last night, all the times Yamada laughed or made him laugh, every time that Yamada went quiet and just watched him sign with that odd, fond look in his eyes. It was all just building up to this test.

“I know it’s confusing,” Yamada mutters, too quietly. Still not *looking* at him. “I can’t really tell you what to feel about it, but... this woman isn’t your mother. A mother wouldn’t do that, would *never* think of doing something that *horrible*. This woman said her goodbyes, and she’s not going to give you what you deserve from her, and that absolutely *sucks*, I know. But you don’t need her for anything, not closure or answers or-”

‘*How?*’ 27 signs, his hands falling to the table afterwards too loudly, and the anger from that sound resonates in his ears. He thinks Yamada’s hesitation might be fear, and maybe it’s deserved. Maybe it’s better that Yamada fears him now, with this, instead of the fear that he expects will come if they ever find out he could just *ask* that question.

“I don’t know that yet,” Yamada says, not answering the question that 27 asked, offering another senseless non-answer, proving how useless he is. “If you’re asking how I know... Shou told me. And Ashido told him.”

Ashi.

27 doesn’t know how long Aizawa has known, if Ashido reported that immediately after that night. She never told him, she probably didn’t know that this would happen. Ashido doesn’t know his price, and that’s one mercy, but now that they know, they’ve probably asked his mother.

She probably told them that she would have settled for less.

“I know that you’re upset-”

‘*Stop,*’ 27 signs, another test. *His* test, one that he hopes Yamada passes with this clench in his jaw, something coiled in his arms that he wants to loosen. Yamada *lied*, Yamada *knew*, he thought that he knew Yamada better but he was a fucking *idiot*. Yamada *isn’t* different.

He hears Yamada lean back in his chair, and he doesn’t hear anything but silence answering him. Passing that test, but it’s not what he wanted.

27 stands up and walks to his room, holding Eri in his arms, and just wants to be *alone*.

He feels it like something squirming under his skin, he wants to rip it out because he knows it won’t happen. He still has Eri sleeping in his arms, too close to his chest, right on his skin and he wants to get away from it. He feels like they’re all too close to him, even in this room, he can practically *feel* Yamada breathing on him.

He wants to go back to when he was alone. Alone in his cell, alone in the hallways of the

compound, alone on his jobs until he had to bear the client and Bug's expectations of him. He wants to feel the mask, he wants to feel like the mask is a part of him again. He wants it to be simple and make *sense* again.

He remembers when it didn't matter. It didn't matter what anyone said to him, it didn't matter how they looked at him. He knew he only needed to look out for himself, he knew the way to do that. He knew not to take risks, not to ask for more-

27 reaches out and takes Mocha into his hands, squeezing the plush grey fur too tight. He asked, stole really. He snuck out of his room and thought he could have something else, something that he wanted. He wanted something, and he lost, stole a muffin from the kitchen and had to burn Mocha with his own hands. How could he be stupid enough to forget that?

He shouldn't want. He shouldn't be stupid enough to *ask*, to *trust* someone like that. He shouldn't want in the first place. He'll only lose for it.

He feels Eri's small hands on his chest, and he looks down to see her looking up at him. She looks too awake, and he doesn't know how he missed her waking up. If she's been awake this entire time, how much she's heard. How much she knows about him now, things he *didn't* want her to know.

She shouldn't know how much he was sold for, that he was sold. Chisaki mentioned it a few times, but he hopes she didn't understand what he meant by 'investment.' There was a time that he felt proud of that price, but now it only brings shame. Now that he's sure he's the only person at UA that has a price like that.

"Twenny," Eri says, pulling herself to kneel and stretching the neck of his shirt too tight to wrap her arms around his neck. "Don't be mad at Yama."

27 folds his arms around her, giving her that at least. He feels like something is shaking out of his chest, like this shaky way that he has to force himself to breathe is *stupid*. He's not hurt, he doesn't care, he *knew* this would happen, and he's not going to *cry* about it. "He lied."

27 clenches his jaw, his words were supposed to come out more evenly. He shouldn't care, he shouldn't *care*. He wants to blame the hitch in his breath for Eri holding him tighter, and he can't. "You don't need a mom, Twenny. I got you, and you got me, and we don't need moms."

He knows that made sense at one point. It even felt nice. Eri is his family, and he shouldn't need any others. He shouldn't want anyone else.

He just wanted Yamada to understand.

27 closes his eyes and forces himself to settle, forces his breaths to even out. Eri doesn't need to know, he doesn't *want* her to know. He forces himself into calm by lying to himself, convincing himself that she does know this aching rend in his chest and that's why she's hugging him. She's upset about it. He pulls away a hand to wipe at the corner of his eye, useless and pointless tears still making his vision blurry. "We don't. I'm sorry."

Eri pulls away enough to look at him, pressing her hands to his cheeks. He doesn't want her to see his watering eyes, afraid that she'll still see this pointless hurt. It's *pointless* to feel it, there's nothing he can do about it. Yamada knows he was sold now, and that will become his new normal. Yamada knows he was sold by his *mother*, and that will change everything here.

27 doesn't want to be here anymore. He wants to run, he wants to be alone, and he can't. He can

only hide. “The heroes make you feel better, when you feel bad. Right?”

Eri nods, excitement she can’t quite hide in her eyes and pulling at the corners of her lips with a twitchy smile. “Mirio’s the best at it! And we can play games with him, like hide and seek and tag, like Mizzy showed me!”

27 finds himself smiling, even if he doesn’t feel it as he pulls out his phone. Hide and seek sounds fun.

But only if he can get out of this dorm, and hide for a while.

*

Aizawa enters his dorm and finds himself disturbed by the sight of the empty living room, by the silence that welcomes him. Eri and Shinsou shouldn’t be allowed to sleep all day, and he knows that his husband wouldn’t allow himself more than a few hours to nap given that they all need to sleep well to wake up in time for school tomorrow.

He hears music playing softly from the office once he gets close enough, finding the door open and Hizashi hunched over a notepad, several legal documents pulled up on the laptop in front of him. As Aizawa walks closer, he can see the name on the death and marriage certificates, and wonders what piqued Hizashi’s interest. “Shinsou Kita?”

Hizashi looks up as though he hadn’t noticed Aizawa’s entrance, then pauses the music he was listening to, spinning around in his chair to sigh. Hizashi looks too weary, too worn, and Aizawa suspects that he’s already spoken to Shinsou. “Has Shinsou Ui ever talked about her husband?”

Aizawa shakes his head. He’s looked through what little Naomasa has gathered in transcripts of interviews, mostly questions that were asked and answered by either silence or nonsense. They’ve never gathered anything concrete, and a few test questions about Shinsou Kita just to see if Shinsou Ui would be forthright about *anything* were met with silence. “Why?”

Hizashi runs a hand through his hair, shaking his head when he glances at the laptop. “I didn’t think about it until Shinsou asked, but.... Things don’t line up here.”

Aizawa never put much thought towards the man that died before he could have much effect on Shinsou’s life, the father that died a year before he was put into the hands of Miasma. He doubts that Naomasa would have either, not when Shinsou Kita is such a minor part of a much broader investigation.

“Shinsou Kita was Shinsou Ui’s second cousin, born three years before she was. He lived in Kyoto, went to an electrician trade school instead of high school, but right after he married Shinsou Ui, he started working as a car salesman and was promoted to management in a year. This is his signature for his journeyman electrician certificate,” Hizashi says, pulling up another document, and Aizawa takes note of the loose and lazy scrawl. “And this is his signature on the marriage certificate.”

Sharp points to each stroke of the pen, each character is pressed close to each other. It’s different in every single way. “You think that someone stole Shinsou Kita’s identity?”

Yamada tilts his head, not willing to say yes, but clearly considering that despite what shaky evidence a signature change is. “I think it’s weird. Nothing against trade schools, but they don’t really churn out great salesmen.”

Aizawa listens for any sign that the wards are in their rooms, but he knows that Hizashi would

have closed the office door if they were still here. “Did you talk to Shinsou?”

Hizashi drops his head, all the proof that Aizawa needed that this sudden interest could be a distraction. “He’s pissed. He is absolutely *pissed* off at me. Called me a liar, and then invited Mirio to come by to take him and Eri out on a playdate, just to get away from me.”

Aizawa takes that for what it is - Shinsou pulling away from Hizashi after being disappointed in the choices made to protect him. They’ll both probably be uncomfortable by the resentment from that decision - Shinsou struggling to grasp that there are authority figures in his life who can know more than he does and take action to protect him, and Hizashi being disheartened that his ward would sulk like a disappointed teenager. “He’s removing himself from a situation that he feels uncomfortable in, of his own free will. That’s a good thing.”

Hizashi looks up at him as though the situation is still *agonizing* for him, and it might be. But his husband owes it to his ward to continue to make responsible choices for him, for the teenager both too young and too unaware of the consequences of his choices to make good ones. “Yeah, and *I’m* the ‘uncomfortable situation’ now. He called me a *liar*, and he wouldn’t even *look* at me, Shou. If you had just told me, I never would have-”

“I know,” Aizawa says, settling into the other chair. He folds his hands and honestly doesn’t want to look at Hizashi either, knowing that any anger would be deserved. “I didn’t want you to know. To see him like that.”

A child not just abandoned, but sold. It was enough to look at the picture of Shinsou at four years old, to imagine the terror he felt when his world was torn from him and he was placed in Miasma’s hands. It becomes darker, knowing that there was money involved. That Shinsou Ui didn’t just let it happen, didn’t just hand her son off, but *profited* from it.

Her blank stare, her falling tears, that unnatural calm that fell over her before the break twists it further. Despite what a shattered person she was, there was something close to regret inside her. It would be easier if there wasn’t.

“It doesn’t change anything,” Hizashi argues, not the angry tone that Aizawa expected, but close to it. “Whether Shinsou Ui just... grabbed her son and handed him off, or if she sold him, if she or someone else was going to *die* if she didn’t, it doesn’t fucking matter. Shinsou is my ward, and he didn’t deserve any of it. And I have to know what happened to him to take care of him.”

‘You have to tell me’ is implied, but unsaid. Aizawa has withheld things before, and regretted it. He regrets it now, again. “She’s probably going back to France tomorrow night. This can all be over, then we can deal with what’s left.”

A day, and Shinsou Ui might already be aware that Naomasa can only hold her in custody for 72 hours. She’ll be harder to break as the hours tick by, as freedom looms closer. As the possibility for answers slips away.

Shinsou will be harder to convince, but he may eventually find closure in that. His mother will leave the country, and have no words or answers for him. No intentions to ever seek him out.

Shinsou may never forget that he was sold, but there should be a time where he finds it doesn’t matter to him. When he can stand on solid ground and take pride in the storms that he weathered that he shouldn’t have, and that his strength has nothing to do with anyone outside of himself. That his connections with others are honestly forged and not happenstance of birth or blood.

Shinsou never had, and will never have what he deserves in a mother from Shinsou Ui, but his

name is his own and his quirk has never harmed anyone. And Shinsou Ui will never give him what he wants.

Shinsou just has to trust that he and Hizashi know that better than he does, for now.

*

27 feels a tug, a feeling that this might be a huge mistake, and it only grows stronger as the hours pass.

He honestly had no intentions of playing games with Mirio, but he knows that Eri likes playing with Mirio more than anything, and it's the best distraction he could offer her. After a few rounds of hide and seek, he used his phone to tell Mirio that he was going back to the dorm, and made sure to insist that Eri wanted to keep playing. And said that he wanted to talk to Yamada without her there.

And, of course, he didn't.

Mirio messages him to ask if the 'talk' is over, since it's cold outside and Eri is starting to be affected by it. 27 tells him it is, and then messages Yamada to say that he's going to return a book to Ashido. He probably should return the book that he stole from her, but he doesn't have it right now. Yamada messaged him back to say that he needs to be back at the dorm by 10, and he would like to talk once he gets back.

27 doesn't want to talk, because there's nothing to talk about. He doesn't want to go back to that dorm, even if his hands and face are going numb from the cold. He would probably be warm if he waited inside the dorm, like Ashido seems to think he's doing, but then he might have to endure the other hero students' attention, and he doesn't want that.

It was a bit difficult to scale the balconies to get to Ashido's on the fourth floor, but he found a corner to sit where the wind doesn't affect him as much. It's freezing cold outside, and he's seen a few iced over puddles where something spilled on the ground. Mirio told him that there only needs to be a bit more humidity in the air, and what would be rain can turn into snow. Mirio might be as excited for Eri's first snowfall as 27 is.

27 stares at his dying phone, and hopes that Ashido comes back to her dorm soon. He needs to talk to her, as much as he needs to avoid freezing to death. Even when he notices that his fingers don't move the way they should, they feel stiff, he doesn't want to try to climb down and wait in the common room. He'd definitely have to talk to someone he doesn't want to talk to if he does.

Ashi: where r u???

He hears her door open from the balcony, and pulls himself to standing so that he can move in front of her parted curtain. He sees Ashido drop a few shopping bags on her bed and start to pull off her beanie before she sees him and screams, running forward to rip open the doors to her balcony. "SHINNY you're going to FREEZE to death!"

He's not, but she seems convinced of that. She pulls him into her room and starts throwing blankets at him, making him sit at her coffee table before she pulls off her scarf and wraps it around his neck. She throws off her coat too, tossing it over his head before she says she's going to make him some hot chocolate. Before he can even get a word out, he hears the door slam shut.

And now he's waiting again.

27 pulls the blankets around him properly, because he can't argue against this warmth. He starts

shivering again first, and it makes no sense. He waited long enough outside to stop shaking like this, he should be past it. He shouldn't be rattled like this, acting like this.

When Ashido runs back, she spills some of the hot chocolate on her table when she almost throws it down, and grabs the blanket to start rubbing it against his cheeks. "I thought you were waiting outside my door! You're like, *dying* of hypothermia! What if I didn't get back in time and you were just a little Shinny popsicle stuck to my window?! Jeez!"

27 endures this attempt to warm his face - barely - until Ashido decides to start pestering him into drinking the hot chocolate. There's a huge mountain of marshmallows on top, and it makes it harder to take a drink, but he feels that warm sweetness flowing down inside his chest, almost making him shiver more from it.

But he didn't come here for hot chocolate.

"You told Aizawa what my mother did," 27 says, and even if he doesn't look at Ashido, he can't make his words as sharp as they should be. "He told Yamada, and now they both know."

Ashi sits at the corner, close to him but not too close. She curls her arms around her legs folded in front of her, and he can't find what he wanted in her guilt. "They needed to know what she did, because they wouldn't have been able to extradite her if they didn't have something to charge her for. I know... you probably didn't want them to know. But they kind of need to."

Of course. Everyone needs to know everything about him, every single thing he's been through, and it doesn't matter if he wants to have secrets. They'll make him talk if he doesn't say it, they'll use a quirk to force the words from his mouth or they'll trick him into trusting them, into acting like a fool. They'll strip him bare, until he has nothing that's his own. Not even the names that they call him are his own - not Shinny and not Shinsou. They won't let him take them for his own either.

"I know you're kinda mad about that, but... I didn't do it to hurt you, you know? I just wanted to help," Ashi says, and he hates it. He hates that everyone keeps doing things to keep him from things that 'aren't good' for him, 'protecting' him from useless things regardless of what he wants. Caging him in with good intentions, probably, but even if he was mute, they could *ask* what he wanted. They could care what he has to say.

"Now I can't see her," 27 says, and he knows that's not enough, without even looking at her. Ashi didn't want him to see his mother, and she's probably happy about it. She doesn't *fucking* understand it, anyway.

He might as well tell her, since it doesn't matter. Nothing that he says or wants or *needs* matters, to anyone.

"The first thing they did was take me to a cell, with no lights on. It was dark, and cold. They took me out of it every few days, but they put me back in if I talked. If they called my name, and I didn't answer. If I didn't-" *Shh, no no no. You don't want me to put you back in there-* "27. That's my name."

That wasn't what he wanted to say, but when he looks out of the corner of his eye and sees Ashi biting her lip, he knows that's not what she wanted to hear. "It was your name," Ashi says, her voice too flat. Too desperate to try to sound strong. Her hand squeezes his, and it's too tight in the same way, with the same intentions. "And now it's Shinsou again."

"It's not," 27 argues, and he imagines that disappoints her. He imagines that it disappoints her

differently, different from the way Bug was disappointed every time he failed. “That’s still my name. I can’t-” *stop feeling like Bug will drag me back every time I try to make it fit.* “I can’t take it back like that. It’s not that simple. I can’t even....”

He almost wants to pull away from her hand, but hers is squeezing his too tightly. He feels her stare and he knows she wants to argue, argue for whatever she thinks is ‘best’ for him, but he just wants her to *listen*.

“I can’t have it back. *Any* of it. I can’t remember anything before that. I don’t even *know* what my mother was like, and you... You *have* a mother. *You* can have your parents,” 27 says, and he can’t help the bitterness, the anger. Everything he’ll never have. He could find a way to forget the years but he can’t forget that he’ll never have other things he missed out on. Things he’ll never get to have. “I’ll never be normal.”

“No one is normal,” Ashi says after a long pause, a small shrug rolling off her shoulders before she stretches her legs in front of herself. “You had to go through a lot of shitty things. A lot of people do. A lot of people go through different things-”

“I could be normal if I saw her,” 27 argues, because Ashi still won’t *understand*. He just wants to stop wondering, he just wants to *know*. He wants to know what he did, what she’s like. What happened before the dark swallowed everything before it, and left him with too many fractured things that don’t feel real.

“She’ll never be your mom,” Ashi whispers, and maybe that’s true. Maybe it hurts more because she says it. And means it. “She’s not going to realize that she did something wrong, and she’s not going to apologize. And... it’s just going to hurt worse, the more you want that. Because it won’t happen.”

Ashi leans against his arm, and it feels warm. Her hand feels too warm, and he squeezes it because she doesn’t squeeze his. He feels too warm, and it’s horrible, because he probably shouldn’t have said anything. He should have kept it to himself, so that this pain would just be his own, and not hers.

“I just want you to be happy, Shinny, and I don’t want you to get hurt,” Ashi says, and he knows it’s different for her. Because she wants a different impossible thing, something she’s closer to but still can’t control. If she wants that, if she really wants it, it probably hurts because he can’t give that to her. He can’t stop hurting, even if he wants to just for her sake, to stop taking away her smile. “And I really wish it could be easier.”

27 swallows, and almost swallows his words. He thinks it might still be a mistake, that it’s foolish. He shouldn’t ask, because the things he asks for aren’t given. No one thinks he should think for himself. “Tell me... about how it was. What you remember. Please.”

She squeezes his hand, moving it side to side. He looks to see a smile on her face, even if it’s shaky. He thinks it’s the closest that he’s ever been to making her happy. “I can do that. I can call my parents too, because they remember everything. I think my mom still has pictures from our wedding!”

27 finds himself trying to laugh, because he didn’t think it would be that easy. He didn’t think any of the pictures that Ashi shows him, or the stories she tells him would be enough to fill this void.

They aren’t. But they’re almost enough.

At least he has something back, that he can look at and call his own.

*

Toshinori walks back to the dorm with his young successor following him closely, still disturbed by the suspicions he tries to brush away. “I think that young Aizawa is right, that the connection was always there, but something about how young Shinsou’s quirk affected your brain allowed for the connection to fully form. I really doubt that... that something like that is the case.”

Toshinori wants to believe that, to convince himself of it. But he’s as full of doubt as his protege is. “But One For All was created by All For One, and that... that could have an effect on it too. If Shinsou was....”

If Shinsou was All For One’s son.

What Toshinori knows of Shinsou’s history is tragic enough, and he doesn’t want to consider that there’s more of it, even if he knows that to be the case. Detective Tsukauchi has told him a few heartbreaking things, and he knew about the connection to the Nomus before he even met the young man. He would have never considered that connection could be anything more than the horrifying possibility that Shinsou was nearly turned *into* one of those poor abominations, but the connection that Midoriya has made is almost a worse one.

He would have never thought that his nemesis would look for a successor himself. The man that wants all the power in the world would never want to pass it on, but Shigaraki’s appearance has proven that wrong. He certainly wouldn’t put it past All For One to discard his own son if that poor child didn’t live up to the expectations of his birth, and while Brainwashing was an undeniably useful quirk for criminal endeavors, it wouldn’t have been what All For One would have wanted.

More darkly, Toshinori knows that if that child had been born quirkless, All For One certainly wouldn’t have been opposed to ‘fixing’ that. Granting a quirk like Brainwashing to a child in the hopes of creating a perfect tool for his purposes.

Shinsou himself had described his time before the 8 Precepts of Death as ‘Villain School,’ and perhaps that means that he wasn’t discarded at all. He was being trained for those purposes, trained to lure those who had quirks that All For One would envy and desire into his clutches, made all the more easy by way of Brainwashing.

Perhaps the criminals that had held Shinsou captive had found there was a goodness in him that couldn’t be tainted, that he would never live up to those expectations, and fully abandoned him after that. Shinsou himself may never have known, as he imagines their first meeting and all successive interactions after that would be *very* different if he did.

Mrs. Shinsou, from what little Toshinori has heard of her from Detective Tsukauchi’s frustrated phone calls, would be the only one who would definitively put these concerns to rest. And Toshinori doubts that she would. That seems to only make Midoriya’s observations more concerning, because while Toshinori wants to believe in Aizawa’s hypothesis, there’s *doubt* that Toshinori now has.

It’s small, but there may be similarities. Things that Toshinori can’t quite recall clearly, given that he’s only met the man in battle, in fights that they both entered with the intent to kill. The shape of All For One’s eyes might be similar, but Toshinori isn’t sure whether he should believe that they are, or believe in that explanation for it. He doesn’t want to believe or consider it, and yet. “I’m sure you know that young Shinsou shouldn’t know anything about that-”

“Of course not!” Midoriya protests, waving his hands in front of himself. “I didn’t tell him anything about it, about- you know. I wouldn’t want him to get hurt, or involved with that.”

Toshinori nods, and desperately hopes that Shinsou isn't already. "I can speak to Detective Tsukauchi, but I'm sure that nothing will come about like that. But it is late, and--"

Toshinori's phone begins to ring, and Midoriya takes it as a reason to bid his farewell for the night. It's nearly curfew, and perhaps he shouldn't have taken the opportunity for a stroll with his successor when he should be watching over all of the students as was his duty tonight, but those concerns seemed ill-suited for the dorm where they may have been interrupted or overheard.

Toshinori sees that Present Mic is calling him, and answers with a "Hello?"

"*Hey Toshinori, is Shinsou still at the 1-A dorm?*" Present Mic asks, and Toshinori finds himself flustered because he honestly has no response at first.

"I didn't know he was here at all. I did step out for a bit--"

"*Eh?! Skipping dorm duty, abandoning your post? Naughty, naughty,*" Present Mic scolds, and perhaps it's deserved. Toshinori certainly doesn't want to explain *why* he had stepped out, knowing it would only earn more teasing about 'personal feelings' or 'unprofessional conduct' as Midoriya was involved. "*Don't worry, I'll be over to scold you in a hot minute, and my ward a bit too. Just... if he's not there, shoot me a text, alright? He's... Yeah, just text me.*"

"I'm sure there's no reason to worry," Toshinori reassures, finding the strain in Present Mic's voice difficult to hear. "Young Shinsou is a very responsible young man, I'm sure that he must have lost track of time if he was supposed to return before now. That's an easy thing to do with the company he keeps."

Present Mic gives him a hint to check Ashido's room, and Toshinori almost grins after he hangs up, and finds a notification from Nezu's surveillance system that there was a mixed-sex gathering in that very student's room past curfew. Toshinori enters the dorm and reminds Kaminari and Sero that the common room must be cleared out soon enough, even if they are in the midst of playing a video game with a 'cinematic cutscene' that can't be paused.

Toshinori knocks twice on Ashido's door, and is pleased that she answers on the third round. He of course has access to enter her room, but that seems terribly inappropriate, even in this instance. "Is young Shinsou here? It's quite late, and Present Mic seemed to expect him back before now."

Ashido looks a bit guilty, scratching the back of her head as she quietly explains that they lost track of time. When she turns, Toshinori sees that there's certainly a good explanation for Shinsou doing so, as he seems to be asleep, sitting on the floor but leaning against Ashido's bed. Toshinori's neck aches in sympathy for the angle that Shinsou's is resting in. "Wakey wakey, Shinny! We got a *little* bit busted."

Shinsou blinks blearily at Ashido's attempts to rouse him by poking at his cheek, rubbing a hand down his face then sighing when he sees Toshinori. "Present Mic is on his way, but I'm sure he'll understand, given the circumstances."

But that lingering concern in Present Mic's voice gives Toshinori a reason to escort Shinsou to the front door, even if he's sure it's nothing. Shinsou doesn't seem like the sort to be a 'rebellious' youth, but given that he's fallen under Toshinori's charge, it seems like the least he can do to make sure that nothing happens before Present Mic can retrieve him.

"It is quite cold outside," Toshinori says, signing 'cold,' though he hasn't made as much progress as he hoped that he would to learn some sign language. Shinsou's need for such a skill in those around him had given him the push that he needed, that he honestly needed long before now. Every

hero was taught a few gestures like 'help' or 'hurt' to aid those who were hard of hearing or otherwise reliant on the language, but noticing how isolated Shinsou seemed to be due to his difficulty to speak drove home that there were other reasons to learn. No one should feel alone on a campus as large as UA's.

Shinsou nods, then turns to sign something that Toshinori barely catches. He sees 'Y-A-M-A-D-A' fingerspelled out, but the other signs move rather quickly. Shinsou seems to catch Toshinori's fluster before he can explain it, and pulls out his phone only to find that it's dead.

Before Toshinori can reassure Shinsou that if he's worried about Present Mic being displeased, as he imagines is the case, Shinsou ducks his head and steps a bit further away, closer to the wall. "Y-yamada... is m-mad."

Toshinori finds himself staring, despite not wanting to startle this, or react poorly to it. Though trembling and afraid, Shinsou's voice was quite a rare thing to hear. "I'm sure that he's not, just a bit worried. He takes his duty to take care of you very seriously, you know."

It was a bit startling for Toshinori to see it, to be honest. Present Mic had such a jovial and playful demeanor for most of the year, quite fond of directing some lighthearted teasing towards him whenever the occasion arose. Toshinori had been worried that such a loud and boisterous personality may be a bit much for what he had seen of the fearful and timid Shinsou, but he would be blind not to notice the shift that comes when Shinsou is in the room.

Present Mic becomes a bit quieter and gentler when he speaks, and his eyes always seem to hover over his ward protectively, if not startlingly fondly. Toshinori is sure that Shinsou senses that as well, that he wouldn't have come so far from his shell if he didn't feel that protection, if he didn't feel truly safe at UA, and in Present Mic's care.

But Toshinori knows full well that he's not privy to the details of that relationship. It seems there may be a strain, or perhaps a touch of fear still lingering within Shinsou, as Toshinori watches him tuck his hands into his pockets, his shoulders too tense and his chin nearly hidden in his pink knitted scarf. "He doesn't... need to worry... so much."

Toshinori's recent conversation with Midoriya, and several that he probably shouldn't be privy to with Detective Tsukauchi still burn in the back of Toshinori's mind. He tries to brush it off, and worry with his fingers catching the chill of the night quite quickly, quite intensely given the current state of his body. "I might be overstepping, young Shinsou, but... I heard that a sensitive family matter has come up recently. If it seems like Present Mic is being a bit overbearing right now, I'm sure it's with your best interests at heart. To protect your 'heart,' and all."

Shinsou turns his head towards him, eyes a bit wider, and perhaps Toshinori shouldn't have mentioned that he knew. But seeing the young man so troubled, perhaps offering an objective point of view could straighten out any misunderstandings between another hero and his charge.

"Present Mic wouldn't want you to struggle alone in your feelings, if something was bothering you. Maybe talking to him about that, and being open about what you feel would be the best way to reassure him," Toshinori says, as he was sure that Shinsou must struggle to do that, quite understandably given how new his situation was. Though the gap between them was always closing, he's sure that Shinsou still feels unsure at times with Present Mic, and perhaps a moment of courage could reassure him that nothing would ever go wrong, that he could never say or do something so heinous as to be rejected from Present Mic.

But he sees Shinsou's eyes narrow and turn away, and worries that something akin to that had happened recently. "I did. He didn't listen. He thinks I'm weak or I'm stupid, but I just..." Shinsou

clenches his jaw, and Toshinori has seen that frustration in many of his students, something heartfelt and strong and almost too great for their young but capable shoulders to bear alone. Something that feels too great to impart on those around them that would help. "I wish he would trust me. When I say that I want to see my mother."

While Toshinori knows that he can't truly relate to what Shinsou is dealing with, there's an ever-present ache in the side of his body that knows the silent frustration he feels.

He knows what it feels like to be seen as less capable than he is, and perhaps that helps him relate to his adolescent charges more keenly. While it's nice to be supported, to be cared for when it's needed, Toshinori is no stranger for a helping hand that's insisted upon when it *isn't* needed. And while he knows at its heart that it's not insulting, it can feel like the greatest insult of them all.

Toshinori has become a fragment of his former self, in some ways willingly, and in many ways not. He knows that he's looked down upon for that, and he understands there are some ways that he has to get used to it. His body will never recover to what it was, and he will only ever slide downhill if he lives long enough to see it. But there's a fire still smoldering inside of himself that wants to be shown, that wants to prove that it's *not* over for him. That *he's* not weak, even as Toshinori Yagi instead of All Might.

The cold air catches in his lungs, and he knows that the late night walk in such cold weather was a strain on his health that he has to be aware of. He knows he has limits, but he only knows them when he tests them. When he proves that he can walk to the edge, and at times, cross over them to find new ones.

"You feel that you're ready for that? And you've told Present Mic?" Toshinori asks, and he feels another pang over an old scar, a memory of medical equipment digging in to preserve his life at the cost of his comfort too sharply when Shinsou only nods, disheartened by that. He remembers too keenly that after that fight, after he barely recovered with his life but left half of his torso behind in that hospital, that everyone around him had better ideas about his future and capabilities than he did. Well-intended plans were made known to him at an astonishing pace, without a bit of apprehension in any of their eyes. As though they no longer saw 'All Might.'

Sir Nighteye, his trusted sidekick, begged him to retire. Principal Nezu, a trusted friend, urged him to find a successor. While both were right, and both had sound judgements at the time, he wished that there *could* have been a question as to what All Might would have wanted. If his feelings could be considered for his fate, even if he's always known that his fate would never be his own after taking on the mantle to become the Symbol of Peace.

He knows it's not the same, it's almost worse because Shinsou has never had a choice in the matter. He's never felt powerful enough to decide any part of his fate, and it's disheartening that even those closest to him would deny him that. And Present Mic probably knows better than Toshinori how little agency Shinsou has ever had in his life. "Then, if Present Mic seems... misguided," Toshinori says, though he hates that he has to say such an ugly word. He's sure that Present Mic means well, but truth be told, the young Voice Hero has never seemed much like a 'listener' to him. "Maybe I could help you with that."

Shinsou looks again at him, and this time seems more shocked by the offer. It's almost heartbreaking, how clearly Toshinori can see that Shinsou wants this with all of his heart. He wants to see his *mother* of all things, a woman that Toshinori is sure means so much to Shinsou, who could begin to mend what he has gone through and offer peace and reassurance that he's past that. A mother that surely wants to see her son as much as any other.

"While going off campus without your guardian's approval is a *very* bad decision to make, in this

instance, I think it's reasonable, as long as it's done safely. We would just be going to a police station after all, and that isn't exactly the height of delinquency," Toshinori says with a chuckle. If Mrs. Shinsou wouldn't be departing to France tomorrow night, he would try to reason with Present Mic on Shinsou's behalf, but he's sure that their time would expire before he could get a second word out if Present Mic were so opposed to it. "I hate that we may have to take some delinquent measures, but if this is what you want to do, just meet me here tomorrow after school, and I'll take you to see your mother. And I'll take any responsibility from Present Mic if it comes to that. Asking forgiveness rather than permission, and all."

Toshinori knows that he will be asking for a great deal of forgiveness due to his meddling, and he's sure that he hasn't quite recovered any good will from his coworker after that unfortunate and ill-thought out plan to help Shinsou bond with the hero students through light sparring matches.

While Present Mic had made it perfectly clear then that Shinsou might not voice any apprehension if he were faced with something from his past, that he might have felt compelled to fight then because he had been forced to before, Toshinori suspects that Present Mic might not see that stepping forward like this is very different. Shinsou isn't simply going along with the flow, with what he thinks is expected of him, he *wants* something for himself despite even *Present Mic's* disagreement. And taking away that opportunity to think and act for himself sounds like poor judgement on Present Mic's part.

But Toshinori can see that it comes from a good place, when he sees Present Mic still wearing that fond expression, even if it comes with some odd nervousness. "It's like I thought, young Shinsou's phone died while he was visiting young Ashido. I should have been at the dorm to make you aware-"

"It's fine," Present Mic waves off with a weary sigh, but quickly forms a teasing pout. "Jeez, but standing out here like this is starting to make me think there's some *reason* you think Shinsou's gonna bolt out of here. You don't think my ward is some delinquent, do ya?"

While Toshinori finds himself sputtering a bit more to find some defense, given how very *close* those words were to making him think that this little plot had already been found out, he finds himself too reassured by Present Mic's laugh.

"I'm just kidding! You should get inside though, it's bone chilling weather out here and you don't have a lot of meat to protect those bones and all," Present Mic says, something kind and well-intentioned. Something no less mocking, because Toshinori knows his limits, and the man who was the Number 1 hero in Japan for decades doesn't need to be reminded that it's too *cold* for him now.

Shinsou steps away from the dorm, and doesn't duck away from Present Mic pulling an arm around his shoulders. It's a sight that Toshinori hopes he's not wrong about, that Present Mic being a bit overprotective was just a minor mishap in a warm and comfortable relationship, and for that, Toshinori is more than willing to be a scapegoat to overcome.

Shinsou turns around, and signs slower this time, using one of those signs that every hero is taught. '*Thank you.*'

Toshinori knows he hasn't done anything worthy of that gratitude, and yet, he feels like he has.

The Symbol of Peace allowed so many to live peaceful lives without a shadow of fear, but Toshinori knows now he can only give a young man an opportunity to step out of the shadow, and prove his own courage with it.

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It's cold. 27 hates that it's cold.

The arm around his shoulders, the air in the back of his throat where he *knows* he could speak. He could talk to Yamada.

But he won't. It's useless.

"I kind of get that... you probably don't want to talk about it yet," Yamada says, too quietly, and the hand fidgeting on 27's shoulder is cold. The part of this half-embrace that he thought was warm is almost oppressive now, and cold. "Probably don't want to head home yet either-"

'*It's fine*,' 27 signs, because it is now. It's fine, because All Might will take care of it. He doesn't need Yamada to know anything about it. It will *be* fine after tomorrow, after it's done.

"So, it's not," Yamada says, and his arm slides off 27's shoulders. 27 didn't invite in the first place, he doesn't miss it. He doesn't.

Yamada stops, and forces 27 to stop too. He can see the fog of his breath, how it almost obscures the nervousness written in the lines of his face. Almost, and it should. If Yamada didn't want this, *he* has the choice and power to change it.

"Shinsou, you know you can be angry at me, right? We can disagree on things, you can even call me a jerk right to my face-"

'*Jerk*,' 27 signs, even if he can't look at Yamada. Even if he was baited into this test, he's cold, he's completely *fucking* terrified, why the hell did he fall for that-

"See?" Yamada says, holding his arms out with a shrug, with a smile too exaggerated, too *fake*. "Disagreeing, being mad, it's not that bad. I can take it. *Trust me*, you've got a mean glare, but you've got a way to go before you can top Shou's mad face."

27 will have to work on that then. If he's allowed to be angry and show it to Yamada, then he deserves to make it hurt. It's the *least* he could do for someone who could decide to rip everything away from him in an instant, to at least let him *know* how much it infuriates him.

"So just," Yamada stops, looking at the ground like there's an interesting ice slick to wonder about, even if there isn't one. "Just don't pull too far away from me, yeah? You can leave, or you can stay, I don't want to make you uncomfortable. But I don't... I don't want you to feel like you *have* to leave, or that we can't talk when it's uncomfortable. Because there's nothing you can say to me to make me run away from you, or this. *Nothing*."

27 wants to run away from those words, that nonsense. Yamada is confusing, too confusing, *every fucking thing* about him is *confusing*. He wants him to leave, he wants him to stay. Yamada wants him to do what he wants him to, as he orders him to, but he tries to make it sound like there's no consequences. No punishments. There *has* to be.

27 knows there's a point that Yamada will leave. Yamada is a person. Not a Number, not a Dog, Yamada gets to decide what happens to him and he gets to decide what happens to 27. Yamada can always leave, and wash his hands of it.

Despite everything, despite how *confusing* and *infuriating* and *hurtful* it is, 27 never wants it to come to that. He wants to believe that Yamada will let him stay.

He knows even if there's risks, so many of them and 27 just made a few more of them loom closer by talking to All Might, especially by *talking*, but he wants to still believe it.

'Not running away,' 27 signs, clenching his jaw because he knows he still is. Even if he plans on coming back after tomorrow, he's running away because he's still too much of a coward to *say it*. *'Want to be with Ashi tomorrow. Mother leaving. Ashi. Remembers things.'*

Yamada smiles, and it almost seems genuine. It almost seems sad too. "Of course. You know, however you want to..."

It's not 'however,' and he knows it.

Yamada knows it, nodding his head when he looks away. "I think that's a better idea, Shinsou. I think that will make you a lot happier in the long run."

If there's one thing that isn't a lie about this entire conversation, it's that. Happiness isn't something that 27 is given, it's what he takes. It's what he makes for himself.

And 27 might not find happiness, but he will find answers for himself tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

1-A Groupchat Usernames:

Kairi Baskin Ate Her Husband With Her Tiger Quirk - Kaminari Denki
Mini Mic Jr. - Shinsou Hitoshi
Crepe Squad Goals - Ashido Mina
Mighty Boi Jr. - Midoriya Izuku
Mall rat boi - Bakugo Katsuki
Science Momma - Yaoyorozu Momo
Sledgehammer Plans - Jirou Kyouka
Not at the bookstore nope not me not sus - Sero Hanta
Proud Grandmother - Kouda Koji
Clearance rack here I come - Uraraka Ochako
We Want ur Little Sister - Shouji Mezo

Midoriya and Shinsou Groupchat:

Deku - Midoriya Izuku
Brainwashio - Shinsou Hitoshi

Mother

Chapter Summary

Shinsou attends the Meme Study Group, and it ends poorly for him. And when the time comes for him to make his decision, to go with All Might to see his mother or not, it ends poorly for him again.

Yamada finds himself as close to the line of committing murder as he ever has been.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Anxiety from mild trigger, Dissociation, Mention of Original Mocha's fate

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou saw a picture of his mother with white roots in her hair, and white hair is a symptom of Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, which Shinsou believes he may have given his mother by using his quirk on her. Shinsou doesn't have clear memories of his childhood before he was sold when he was 4, and before he was placed in a dark room until he answered to the name '27.' Shinsou was named 'Dog' at the 8 Precepts. Yamada took care of Shinsou when he was deathly feverish and sick, and feels more connected to him after that. Shinsou left the 1-A dorm the night before while still wearing Ashido's pink scarf. Ashido told Aizawa that before Shinsou was sold and when they went to school together, they were 'married.' Aizawa is 'done with the investigation,' meaning that he doesn't want to be involved in as many aspects as he had been, specifically about Shinsou Ui being in custody. Shinsou had a panic attack the first time he visited the lunch room instead of eating with Aizawa and Yamada, but he was afraid of being attacked by the students whose quirks he didn't know. Quirk Thief AKA Monoma has wanted to talk to Shinsou one on one for a while, but only sees him during Yamada's English class. Shinsou seemed clearly interested in the pork cutlet bowls Mrs. Midoriya made on her visit to the 1-A dorm, which Todoroki noticed. Jirou was part of a family band project called 'Seken Suns,' and after Yamada played the album in full, asked to destroy Yamada's radio studio with a sledgehammer. Shinsou thought that Todoroki and Midoriya were boyfriends, because Bakugo said that Midoriya 'sucked an icyhot dick' for an expensive All Might figure. Shinsou thinks that he is no longer selectively mute, but he wants to hide that, and it's already known to Bakugo that Shinsou can only speak to people he's used his quirk on, but Bakugo has also heard Shinsou talk when he's fighting, or dissociating. When Eri kicks both of her feet, it's a 'test kick,' to make sure that she's safe. Shinsou lived in an interrogation room at the police station for almost a month, and refused to eat or drink anything during that time. Aizawa recently learned that Bakugo knows about One for All, Todoroki's abusive father, and several other things he shouldn't know, which makes him suspicious about how Bakugo seems to know everything. Yamada knows that Shinsou was sold by his mother, but he doesn't know for how much, as no one does. All that Yamada knows about 'Shinsou Kita,' Shinsou's biological father, is that he might not be 'Shinsou Kita' as there are discrepancies between his signatures on legal documents, and that Shinsou's quirk is probably more like his father's.

It's more irritating, because 27 is sure there's not a point to this.

Eri pulls at another shirt and looks up at him, and seems to already know that he's not certain about it. Uncertainty feels more like refusal, it feels like that makes sense. It makes sense not to wear something he's uncertain about.

But he knows it doesn't make a difference, and that it's *stupid*. "Yeah, that's fine. Thanks."

27 knows that the brown leather jacket looks nice, because Yamada told him it does. He doesn't know if the black long sleeve shirt looks nice, but it should, and it matches with a plain black face mask. It shouldn't really matter, and he knows he's already making himself too suspicious by acting like this. He's lucky that Eri doesn't know, she won't have a *clue* if he's lucky, even after this.

He's going to meet his mother today, and he has no idea what she'll see when she looks at him.

27 is the biggest coward he knows, because even now, he wants to run away from it. He knows he can't yet, the decision will be made after school. If he doesn't go to the hero dorm to meet with All Might, then he won't go to see his mother. It's his decision. He decides, and he's sure that if he doesn't and just stays where he's supposed to be in this dorm, All Might won't be able to force him to go because Yamada and Aizawa are against it.

27 decides, and he has eight hours to take back that decision. But he knows he won't, no matter how badly it scares him.

He'll know what he did. Aizawa said that his mother has white hair naturally, that it isn't because he used his quirk on her so much that it drove her insane. But there are other symptoms he knows, that he's memorized, and his mother is the only person that can prove he can't do that with his quirk. He knows he used his quirk on her a lot, to the point that she might be insane, and at least if he knows that he did, he'll *know*. He'll know better than to ever use it again.

He can know why she did it. If she's not insane, then she's cruel. She sold him cheaply, sold him for the price of his phone. He could know what she bought with the money, what she wanted it for. What she wanted more than a child, because she'll surely brag about it.

He could know other things. He could know what it was like before The Miasma. He could know what it was like for him as a child, before the darkness, before 27, before *everything*. He could know if he should miss it, which pieces that he barely grasps are real. He wants to know if he cried so much, if he felt so alone, if he *was* alone so much. He wants to know if this is the best it's ever been for him, if he should feel more grateful for what he has and understand that he's barely meant for it.

He could drive that name under his skin. Once she looks at him, once she calls him 'Shinsou,' he'll be renamed again. All that happened to him - The Miasma, the 8 Precepts - all of that can be peeled back to the beginning. He'll have a *name*, a human name. Not a Number, not Dog, not 27. Shinsou Hitoshi.

He wants the solid ground beneath his feet before he can move forward, to know himself and know the things that his mind forgot, that his body was there for.

He'll take that for himself.

*

Yamada has always been aware that he can kill people quite easily. There's a certain decibel that he can hit that will rupture internal organs, and that sound isn't particularly picky about whether it's ripping open lungs or slightly less consequential kidneys. Brain hemorrhaging is also something he could whip up on the fly, if he had good cause for it. But Yamada has never hit those notes beyond safely testing whether he *could*, because he's a hero and a good person.

But Yamada thinks he might just cross that line if he ever saw Shinsou Ui, and he's starting to doubt whether he's really that good of a person because the reason for it is selfish.

Things had been going *amazingly* well with Shinsou. Ever since that little sick, the wall he had been climbing seemed to be getting shorter. Yamada knew he had a way to go, but he felt like he was getting to a comfortable place with Shinsou. A place where Shinsou felt like he trusted him, and maybe even *liked* being around him sometimes. A place where all those pleadings for '*Stay. After investigation. Stay*' could mean so much more than just '*stay*,' it could be so much *bigger* than that.

And now it feels like Yamada is back to square one.

Shinsou seems distracted, when he's not intent on distracting himself from his surroundings. He barely picked at his breakfast, only took a sip of coffee when Yamada had to nudge him. During both English classes, Shinsou had his head tucked into his personal lectures and workbooks, and even the little herolets had picked up on the fact that Shinsou was *not* interested in anything or anyone around him. Anytime someone tries to make an attempt to draw him out, to just get a little sign or a little chat, it's met with a twitchy scowl and quick dismissal.

Even with Yamada.

It's the nervousness that really gets to him. It's like they're back to day one, but *worse* because Yamada has seen such a difference in day 2 through 30. Yamada *wants* to see anger if he can't get anything else, if Shinsou wants to avoid him because he's pissed off that Yamada won't take him to see his mother, then at *least* he could give him a big blow out to deserve this timidity.

But Yamada knows that Shinsou has probably already said his peace, and it will only take longer for this icy spell to blow over because of it. Shinsou is going to avoid him as much as he can, and he can't do that terribly well because they live together, and whenever Shinsou feels like he might miss Yamada a bit, he'll start to see the ice thaw out.

But given that Shinsou can be *incredibly* stubborn at times, Yamada won't be surprised if this drags out until the end of Shinsou's wardship, and there are few things more terrifying than that.

Shinsou looks up at the door to the teacher's lounge for about the 30th time, and probably wishes for an excuse to bolt out of it. He pushed his chair a bit further away from Yamada's when they started eating lunch together, which *stung*, but Yamada thinks those frequent looks at the door sting a bit deeper. He can practically *feel* how uncomfortable and trapped Shinsou is right now, and it's making him uncomfortable too because he absolutely *hates* it.

Yamada is close to his breaking point, watching Shinsou pick at his lunch and hardly eat any of it, knowing that the kid *needs* to eat even if it's away from him, when the door opens and it seems Shinsou's savior has been found in one Todoroki Shouto.

Todoroki stands in the doorway, hand resting on the doorknob, and seems to take an oddly long time to take in the sight of two teachers and two wards eating lunch together before he speaks.

“Kaminari wants to talk to Shinsou about something of grave importance in the lunchroom. I’m here to escort him. And I have pictures of Soba as a bribe.”

Yamada doesn’t think there’s a single thing that Kaminari has to say to Shinsou that’s *important*, and Shinsou has made his opinions about Todoroki’s ‘secret’ cat pretty clear. But while Yamada isn’t surprised that Shinsou is practically jumping to his feet for the chance to escape, his stomach flipping inside out seems to be. “Oh? Ditching us that quick?”

Shinsou doesn’t even look at him after shrugging on his backpack, but turns just enough so that his signing can be seen. ‘*Cat. And need to give scarf to Ashi. Borrowed it.*’

Flimsy, *awful* lies. Yamada plasters on a smile like he doesn’t see it at all. “Of course! And you can head back anytime you want, or pick up something from Lunch Rush. On the house and all.”

Eri quickly decides that regaling Shouta with what she learned about weather patterns from her science workbook is absolutely *boring* compared to the chance to hang out with the hero students for lunch. “Todo, does Lunch Rush have cinnamon rolls? Or apple overs?”

Or, perhaps she has other intentions. Todoroki nods a bit more seriously than the question calls for, and gives her a thumbs up. “He only gives one serving per student, but we can band together and get 20.”

Yamada spies a withering look come over Shouta’s face when he starts to do the math on that, but it seems to relax when he realizes that the tail end of the sugar rush with all its cranky and irritable glory wouldn’t kick in until Yamada’s free period. To which Yamada has to put in his two cents. “*Or*, we could follow some nutritional guidelines, yeah? Let’s limit our scheming to five little apple overs, that way we don’t get sick and miserable at school.”

Luckily, Shinsou seems the most agreeable to that, and takes Eri’s hand after nodding, not quite at Yamada but Yamada didn’t expect him to. Maybe he should just be grateful that even though his ward practically hates his guts, he’ll keep Eri safe from gorging herself on apple pastries.

Shouta raises an eyebrow at the quiet that falls over the teacher’s lounge when the kids head out, and Yamada puts down his chopsticks with a sigh because he *didn’t* want to get into it. “Cool, great, awesome. The kids are *fleeing* from us with every opportunity they get, I *love* that.”

Shouta has the misfortune of finding something funny about that and snorts, and Yamada turns to look at him to know what the *hell* is so funny. “A five year old wants desserts and a teenager has discovered how to be a *teenager*. This isn’t the end of the world, Hizashi.”

Yamada rolls his eyes, then his neck to try to help this devastating situation. *Shouta* was telling him to loosen up and stop worrying about the kids, so maybe he does need to look at it from a different perspective. “...What’s with this ‘Ashi’ thing, anyway? I know that, you know, they had a thing but I thought Shinsou was best friends with Bakugo.”

Shouta takes a bit too long to swallow, and doesn’t give him the dignity of looking up from his next bite. “They were married, and never divorced.”

Yamada finds himself torn between wanting to know how *exactly* that came about, and how long his husband has been keeping yet another secret about Shinsou from him. “Shou... we have not had *any* kind of talk with Shinsou about that. Any of that. Any of that, at *all*. What if Ashido-”

“Hizashi,” Shouta interrupts, coming to the defense of his student who better *not* have taken advantage of his ward in *any* way with that. “They’re friends. And Ashido is a... better influence

than Bakugo. Beyond that, I think that Shinsou is doing what he said he would. He's getting the answers and closure that he needs from reconnecting with Ashido."

Yamada doesn't like the reminder that Shinsou already asked to go over to the 1-A dorm after school. He went to his room as soon as he got back last night, he seemed to take longer to get ready this morning so he wouldn't have to spend too much time not eating breakfast, and finds every escape possible to avoid Yamada during school. And while there's likely an end to Shinsou Ui being in the country tonight, Yamada isn't so hopeful that things will return to normal tomorrow morning. "So... Do you have plans to pop by the station tonight, or..."

Shouta shakes his head, still looking a bit too interested in his lunch. "Naomasa will tell me."

Yamada doesn't have a lot of hope that things will turn out differently than expected. Shinsou Ui will get away with what she's done, because Ashido's statement repeating Shinsou's words isn't enough evidence, and short of finding Miasma and any evidence or confession from them, only Shinsou Ui's own words could convict her. A kidnapping case that *wasn't* will still seem that way.

And even if Shinsou Ui's conviction isn't the closure that Shinsou wants now, it's something he still deserves to have when he realizes that's the closest to closure he'll ever get.

*

27 nearly collapsed with relief when he left the teacher's lounge, these quiet halls a welcome respite. There's just something about Yamada that's *terrifying* now, even though 27 has had worse plans and worse people to hide them from. He has to keep reminding himself that Yamada isn't Chisaki, and he's definitely not *Bug*. Yamada would be mad, he'd be disappointed, but he wouldn't *hurt* him.

He'd just be upset. Disappointed. Hurt, probably.

That shouldn't feel worse than Cherry and Blossom writhing under his skin, but it *does*.

27 knows to be prepared for the loud lunchroom, the loud people. The loud quirks, even if they're not quite as loud this time. He sees familiar faces when he looks for them, either hero students from 1-A or 1-B, and watching the Joint Training Exam allowed him to know how they fight and what quirks they have.

He sees Quirk Thief look at him and nearly jolt in his seat, and he can practically see the moment that he realizes how unexpected 27's visit to this place is, and how he could take advantage of that to escape the guard detail that the Heavy Handed Leader enforces on him. But that Redheaded Bug is observant too, and 27 breathes easier when she catches Quirk Thief on the back of his shirt to keep him in place.

Todo remembers that Eri has one desire, and one desire only from this venture, and guides them to a window in the wall staffed by some kind of robot. "An order of apple turnovers for all three of us, and a carton of milk," Todo orders, then looks at 27 like he's supposed to add to that.

He could. Maybe he should. But he shakes his head, because it's not worth it, and he still doesn't feel hungry yet. He probably won't until after he sees his mother, and another hunger is filled.

"And a pork cutlet bowl," Todo adds, and 27 remembers that dish seemed to be Izuku's favorite, since his mother made it for every hero student when she visited. It's a good study meal, but the hero students don't have any difficult tests that 27 is aware of.

The robot wearing white clothes disappears from the window's view for a few seconds, then comes

out with Todo's order. The way he says 'Enjoy your lunch' is odd, and muffled like a human is wearing that weird tubed mask. That kind of echo is familiar, but 27 swallows and concentrates on the feeling of Eri's small hand holding his. The way that voice is muffled is familiar, like Hari's and Chisaki's and others, but this is different.

27 almost wishes it wasn't when he follows Todo to a table where Bakugo, Ashi, Seken Sledgehammer, Kirimson Shark, Adhesive Strips, and Pikachu are sitting. Pikachu grins and looks like he almost glows, and the way his lip curls like some overconfident mafia thug makes it all the more likely that he *is* glowing with his electricity quirk activating. "Got him with the cat pictures! Now you can't escape, Shinsou!"

This is an escape, but 27 quickly realizes it's a terrible one when Zappy pulls out a thick binder that *definitely* isn't from his studies. Sledgehammer Girl and Bakugo look the most unamused, and 27 briefly considers whether he can annoy Bakugo into giving him a better escape. But Eri taking an empty seat next to Kirimson Shark to ask him to open her milk carton seals his fate.

He knows they would give her more desserts than she can handle if he doesn't keep a close eye on them, so he has to stay. "So, memes move fast, and we're going to get you caught up on some current ones later, but I've devised this study plan to be perfectly tailored to your tastes. We'll start out with a little blast from the past - Can Haz Cheeseburger Cats."

The pictures seem self-explanatory, to a degree. Shinsou doesn't know *why* the cats want cheeseburgers, but it certainly looks like they do. Todo puts the pork cutlet bowl down in front of 27 for some reason, and 27 isn't sure whether he should move it closer to Todo or wait for him to take it back. If this is another odd game he doesn't know how to play.

"So," Sparky says, pulling some glasses out of his pocket before he hands the binder off to Cellophane to hold it upright. "Cats are notoriously bad spellers--"

"False," Todo cuts in, folding his hands on top of the table. "But Kaminari can be wrong, so it's pointless to argue with him."

Zappy winces like that was a long argument that he didn't want to remember, his eyebrow almost twitching. Bakugo looks at the table that Izuku usually sits at with a sneer, and maybe he honestly doesn't know that Todo and Izuku aren't boyfriends. 27 didn't know it himself until they told them so.

This is apparently the 'Meme Study Group' that was so important for 27 to attend. It looks like studying, and Sparky tries to make it sound like studying as he goes on about 'history' and 'application,' and 27 was honestly surprised that he knew half of those words. The concepts are simple, different images that are the same in concept, unified by the exact same words plastered over them. It can be a different cat, but they all want cheeseburgers, and it's funny because....

27 never gets an explanation for how it's funny, because Zappy goes off into several tangents and makes this 'study session' into what feels like a hundred lectures going on at once. The others don't make it easier, because they also have opinions. They also use words that are the names of 'memes,' and somehow, just invoking those names is funny sometimes.

27 feels like he wants to leave long before Bakugo really makes that 'urge to leave intensify.' "Oi, if you're not gonna eat that shit, get something else. Or make Halfies fuck off and get it, since he's responsible for you and shit."

27 looks down at the pork cutlet bowl, the breading is probably soggy and the entire dish is probably half cold. It's probably more suited to Todo's tastes because of that, so he nudges it

towards him with the back of his hand. “Not hungry.”

And thanks to Bakugo, that simple statement earns too much attention. Any scraps from the hero students’ plates are offered up to him, and even Eri tries to hand him her last bite. He feels like one of those cat meme pictures, the one who looks smug when he’s surrounded by knives. Each piece of food feels like something that dangerous.

‘*Not hungry*,’ 27 signs, crossing his arms afterwards, and he knows this was a mistake. He wants to leave, and he knows it’s almost the end of this lunch period, so it’s useless to invite more attention to do that.

Do they really think that he wants that? Their scraps, their attention, their eyes boring into him and shifting into something uncomfortable? It’s worse because they don’t know when to stop, even when he states it clearly, even when he *tells* them. It’s worse than the clients who would seem to assume that he’s stupid just because he was small, who would lean down and talk slower, tell him what he already knew from the paper that Bug gave him. *You keep your eye out for any trouble, and you tell us if you see anyone snooping. That means anyone who isn’t here, and if you mess that up-*

27 sees the hand reaching for him and tries to throw it against the table on instinct, but it seems to catch before it makes contact. Todo stares at him, his wrist still in 27’s grip, and slowly moves his hand to pat the back of 27’s hand.

It’s. Just. *Weird*. “Do you want a cheeseburger?”

27 only wants to know one thing. Just *one* thing. He just *wants* to know if Todo is really that stupid, or if he’s just *fucking* with him. “No.”

27 gets a reminder he needed *before* he opened his stupid *fucking* mouth when Blasty kicks his chair away from the table and stands up, stalking around the table to his side. Blasty knows. Blasty *knows* when he can speak and when he can’t, he can’t speak to IcyHot, he never used his quirk on IcyHot, Blasty *knows now*. “Oi, Shitsou’s coming with me. You want to stay here or go back?” Blasty asks Eri, and 27 almost feels like *laughing*.

He’s going with Blasty. *Eri* gets a choice. “‘M coming!” Eri answers, finishing her last apple turnover, and Kirishima stacks her plates on top of his to dispose of them.

Blasty makes the right choice in grabbing his jacket from the middle of his back to pull him up, because 27 had been anticipating the opportunity to grab his wrist and make use of it if Blasty aimed for his shoulder or hair. 27 goes limp and forces Blasty to drag him to standing, and it should be more difficult for Blasty than it seems to be.

It’s just that much more *annoying*.

Blasty only growls half a complaint disguised as an order for 27 to stand by himself before Ashi jumps up and thinks this is a game. She beams and grabs his feet, and if it were anyone else, he’d kick them in the face, but he just tugs his legs back under himself and wrenches himself out of Blasty’s grip, straightening his clothes. This is supposed to be a *nice* outfit.

There’s no point in arguing whether he’s leaving, because he is. There’s no point in answering Blasty’s frustrated growls or glares, there’s no *point* to it. Things happen to 27, people do whatever they want to his body. It’s not even his, he’s been sold or rented so many times at this point that they don’t even need to do that anymore.

For some reason, Ashi stays quiet until the lunchroom doors close behind them. “Hey, I can run to the vending machine and get some strawberry milk real quick! You should at least drink something-”

“Great, go do that,” Blasty snarls, jutting his chin at Eri, and if Blast thinks he can call the shots and order *Eri* around, he’s made a mistake.

“I’m not hungry, I don’t want milk, just *fuck* off,” 27 growls, taking Eri’s hand in his and tugging her to walk faster, away from them. Just away from them, away from all of them, all of this *cold*, this stinging, this trembling. It’s cold in his chest but too warm on his skin, he *hates* it. It’s disorienting and it almost makes him laugh.

“Shinny-”

“Why the hell won’t you l-listen to me?!” 27 yells, but it’s not him. Somehow it’s not him, somehow he’s being controlled. It’s too cold. It’s too *cold*, too nothing, freezing, he can’t feel anything but words bubbling in his throat, shaking. It sounds like laughter, but it’s not.

“Twenny.” Eri’s scared. He scared her, yelled, he did that, she’s scared of him, he’s *pathetic*, he took that for himself but it’s not his, he can’t do that. He can’t *don’t do that*.

...shi, don’t. Cold. Why does it feel cold? Don’t say that. Be quiet. Today’s a good day, don’t do that. Ignore it. Don’t scratch-

27 stares at the back of Momo’s head, her ponytail flaring out in spikes. There’s words in his ears, a familiar voice. He pulls at the odd sensation in his ear and pulls out half of it, he was wearing the headphones.

It’s homeroom.

27 feels the fog at the corners of his mind, feels how muggy and dense it is and how it swells, but he barely remembers how to make it recede. He presses his feet harder against the ground, tries to make the sounds in the other ear turn back into words. “...an action that drew the Warring States period to a close.”

He doesn’t remember learning about the Warring States period.

He looks down, because he remembers this part at least. He’s wearing the same clothes, it’s not like that time. He didn’t get lost for too long, but he got lost. Dissociated. That’s the word. Sometimes it’s different.

He looks at Eri, and he sees it in her eyes. That she saw it. She kicks both of her feet out from under her desk with a wavering smile, one she doesn’t use as much anymore. She’s supposed to smile fully, not like this.

27 smiles back, but barely. It dies when he looks up at Aizawa and wonders if anyone else knew, or saw. If Yamada saw it, what will happen to him now. What’s going to happen to him after school, if they have a reason to keep him from going to Ashi and bothering her if he’s acting up like this.

27 tugs the pink scarf around his neck, just to reassure himself that it’s there. It’s an excuse, an argument he could use, even if he’s not sure if it will be effective. He’s not supposed to act like that, lose himself like that, he hasn’t done it in *so long*.

He keeps feeling the fog at the edges, runs through every hack that he knows to keep it at bay. It

flares when he looks at the clock, when he looks at the door. The hesitation to pack his things after the bell dismisses the hero students feels like a flicker of it, but he tells himself that it's not. He's fine. He has to be fine, he has to see his mother today.

He has to stop *doing this*.

Yamada comes into this classroom instead of waiting in his, and that's a bad sign. While they're walking back to the dorm, Yamada turns and smiles at him. "Hey, still down for that little hang out sesh? If you're not, I was thinking we could come up with a rousing game of scrabble and make some muffins from scratch! Found a neat recipe I wanted to try."

It's a test. It's more of a test when Aizawa looks back at Yamada and looks irritated by it, like it was the wrong time or wrong place to test him. It's the *worst* test because he still doesn't know if they know, because sometimes they know. Even if they don't know, they know what his body was doing after lunch until this point and he *doesn't*.

It's just cruel, that it's like this.

'*Forgot scarf*,' 27 signs, looking at the ground ahead of him while he tugs the stolen scarf around his neck. It's the best answer he has, because it's neither admitting that he's weak and he lost himself, nor asking them to ignore that it happened if they know.

He's still asking for what he wants, in the safest way possible. Yamada seems to see that, and almost looks disappointed that he answered so well. "Of course, don't want Ashido to go without her scarf and all. Make sure to get another one for the way back, it's gonna be really cold tonight."

That almost seems stupid, to carry an extra scarf so that he will be a little more warm for a walk that takes 10 minutes. As if that could be dangerous for 27, as if that would hurt him. Just his neck and his ears being a bit colder, not even to the point that he would still feel it when he gets back inside. He wouldn't freeze from that.

But 27 does it. When he gets back to his room, he gathers another scarf in his hands, knowing that it might be colder if he stays out later than he's supposed to. He has no idea how long he'll be able to talk to her, how long he really has *to* talk to her. How much it will take until he's satisfied.

27 looks at the picture of 50 on his desk, and almost opens his mouth to tell her. He doesn't know what she would think of his mother, even though Yamada and Aizawa both seem to hate her. He wishes that he knew, so he could wrap her voice around the words she would say. *Kiddo, it's going to be alright.*

27 takes a deep breath, and decides those are the words he wants to hear from 50. Not that his mother is horrible, not that he's too weak to see her, not that his name is complicated and he has no way of fixing it. Just that it's going to be okay, however this turns out, however angry Yamada is or what he does when he's angry. It's going to be alright.

27 nods when Yamada asks if his phone is charged, and doesn't miss how he doesn't tell him when to come back to the dorm, almost finding himself waiting for it. But Yamada just smiles, taking off his jacket and speakers, stripping away from Present Mic and back into Yamada. There's a tug that feels like this hesitation has a different reason, wondering if Yamada is going to pull his hair back into a braid or a ponytail, or if he's still going to make muffins just for Eri.

But 27 closes the door behind himself, and feels cold.

Naomasa was struggling to find a reason to leave his office when Toshinori knocked on the door.

He knew he should try, he should keep trying. He owed that to so many people, from the captives still at Miasma that could be freed in a sting investigation, to the victims of the violent crimes Miasma lent muscle to, to the dead Numbers and Nomus created by Miasma's involvement.

But Shinsou Ui wasn't going to crack. Not when she was already clearly shattered.

Naomasa has interrogated a lot of people who weren't 'all there,' but there's something *different* about Shinsou Ui. He's called Hanajima in multiple times, and she can't put her finger on it either. It's *like* Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, from the white hair, the shaking in her hands and feet, how quickly she'll flip the switch on a conversation out of nowhere, but it's *not*. It's rare that Hanajima offers any solid opinion without the clarification that she needs far more time and trust with anyone she evaluates, but she was sure that Mental Quirk Abuse was not at play here. Naomasa couldn't entirely follow it, but something about the degree to which Shinsou Ui changes, and the way that she reacts to Hanajima's mental emitter quirk is the most damning evidence.

Naomasa was wavering between making another attempt to talk to Shinsou Ui or checking up on whether The Commission of Wardship Affairs still had Shinsou Hitoshi's DNA samples for a paternity test, when he heard the knock and opened the door, and felt like a ton of bricks were crashing down on him.

"Detective Tsukauchi, can we have a word with you?" Toshinori asked, and Naomasa nodded, still trying to unravel why Shinsou was here with Toshinori. Why he hadn't heard anything about a police escort being requested, and while he doesn't think that would stop Present Mic or Eraserhead from taking Shinsou to the station, that lends to a suspicion that they don't know where Shinsou is right now.

That's already an incredibly concerning matter, but so is Toshinori trying to convince him that he should let Shinsou speak to his mother.

Toshinori gives a sheepish look in response to Naomasa asking whether Eraserhead or Present Mic agreed to this, probably due to not wanting to put the truth to words, not entirely because Naomasa's quirk would find that truth immediately. Naomasa knows that the conversation with Eraserhead to tell him where his ward was and what Toshinori was trying to do wouldn't be pleasant, but something else makes him hesitate to make that call.

Shinsou seems like he wants to do this.

Naomasa knows well enough that Toshinori wouldn't force the kid to come along, and Naomasa knows some of the reasons that Shinsou wants to meet with his mother. He read the essay from the keylogger, and he knows very well that a lot of the reasons Shinsou has aren't good ones. But Toshinori explains a suspicion that he sees reflected in Shinsou's steady gaze, one that gives him pause.

Shinsou says he wants to do this, and Present Mic was overruling him. While Naomasa suspects that Toshinori doesn't know the full story, he doesn't know about the essay or why exactly Shinsou Ui was extradited after the second request, Naomasa finds himself considering the possibility. The young man staring at him, meeting his eyes even though he's silent, is far different from the young man that was forced to live at the station.

When Naomasa first met Shinsou, he met a child constantly curling into himself, who wouldn't look up from the table in front of him if he dared look up from the ground. Who would almost shake sometimes just by someone entering the room, who couldn't be convinced to eat or drink or

trust them that much, and who now had too many reasons to want to avoid the police station or fear being here. But Shinsou was here, because he wanted to be, regardless.

“Toshinori, do you mind stepping out for a minute?” Naomasa asks, because while he’s sure Toshinori isn’t privy to everything and that he shouldn’t be, he’s almost certain that being alone with him will rattle Shinsou. Not as much as seeing his mother, but it’s a necessary test because of that.

Shinsou watches Toshinori leave, but turns back to look at Naomasa, hands folded in his lap, gaze steady. It’s promising, and Naomasa isn’t entirely sure if that’s a good thing. It definitely complicates the situation.

“Shinsou, I’m glad you’re doing well. I really, truly am,” Naomasa says, still shocked that he is. He’s seen how the kid’s eyes will glaze over, no matter how gently he speaks, how sometimes it seemed that terror stripped away everything that was human about the kid when they were forced into desperate measures. The many times that an officer who had been supervising the force feeding had stayed too close after the restraints were loosened and suffered the consequences of that when the kid reacted violently. “But, I work very closely with Eraserhead, and I know the reasons you gave him to see your mother. There’s actually a few that I wanted to clear up, because your mother doesn’t have Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome. We’ve verified it with a professional psychologist.”

Naomasa tries to hand Shinsou that report, and while Shinsou looks, he doesn’t take it. He clearly wants something else.

Naomasa folds his hands over his desk, and wonders how heartless it is that he asks him when he knows Shinsou can’t answer verbally. “Do you feel like you’re ready to see your mother?”

Naomasa’s Lie Detector quirk works on gestures, as Shinsou already knows. When he was first trying to get any information out of the kid, Naomasa told him that he would know whether he was telling the truth if he shook or nodded his head.

Shinsou could nod or shake his head here, but he doesn’t.

“Yes,” Shinsou says, that word too steady and surprising, almost enough to make Naomasa overlook how his quirk makes him feel.

Lie Detector is a bit nuanced, more than most people think. While direct questions work best, things that aren’t up for interpretation, there’s a difference in whether someone truly believes something or whether there’s doubt. Naomasa doesn’t feel the full pinch in his arm, but he feels a small tug, something that feels like doubt. Shinsou isn’t entirely lying, but he’s not entirely confident either.

And while that makes his position more difficult, it’s also a bit more promising. He would be truly worried about the kid if he didn’t have doubts.

“You probably don’t remember her, given that you were so young the last time you saw her,” Naomasa says, and while that should make it easier, it doesn’t. If Shinsou Ui was directly abusive to her son while she still had him in her care, Shinsou had at least forgotten it, but that might not take away the impression that kind of care would have left on him. Not that it would be the strongest one. “But you know what she did. And you still want to see her?”

Shinsou does look away, towards his hands, and when his eyes raise they fall on Naomasa’s desk. There are a few files that he made sure to cover up before letting Toshinori and Shinsou inside,

some that aren't related to Shinsou but no less confidential, and some that are tangentially involved. But even if Shinsou doesn't meet his gaze, his focus is steady, and Naomasa knows to read into that as much as his words and how his quirk feels when he hears them. "I know what she's done. I don't know... what to feel about it. I want to know that for myself. Even... if that's difficult."

There's still a tug, but it's lighter, because Shinsou's own words admit doubt. Naomasa knows on its face, that's a reason to pick up the phone and call Eraserhead. But the fact that Shinsou is still *talking* of all things, in this very police station, makes him pause. "But you still want to do it? Even if this could be overwhelming, and you might find yourself regretting that choice?"

Shinsou nods, and that sings true. His doubts have been cleared up, it seems, when he's faced with that metaphorical precipice. He wants to do this, even if he's not sure that he's ready. Naomasa won't say his own doubts have dissipated, but Shinsou makes a good argument when he offers a bit more strategy to it.

Naomasa tries to call Hanajima, because while it's a toss of a coin whether her quirk was truly ineffective with Shinsou or if they tried to use her Safety quirk when he was too keyed up for it, it's protocol to have a mental health professional weigh in before these kinds of meetings. But Hanajima was visiting her sister who had just given birth a few days ago, and her voice mail reminded him of that. So Naomasa had to toss his own coin instead.

But he thinks with Shinsou as he is, and with his plan, that coin is a bit more weighted in his favor.

*

27 feels it when he steps forward to open the door. He freezes.

He was trained not to do that. Bug would hit him harder, and she wouldn't stop until he thawed out enough to try to break away. Hesitation is a failure, it's a death sentence, and he's learned to just *act*.

This isn't anything like that, but it's harder to convince himself that he can take the time that the detective told him he could.

He gets to decide. He can stop anytime he wants. He's in control here, he's *in control*. He can't control his mother, definitely not now. But he knows that he has to.

The detective said that his mother didn't have Mental Quirk Abuse, even if it's clear in her white hair that she must have covered up the same way Yamada covered his bleached hair. Maybe even with the same hair dye. It's clear with the hands he could see shaking on the table when he looked through the window before he came to the door.

But if the detective was wrong, 27 could prove it. The articles that Izuku sent him told him about it, how specific quirks being used to the point that they cause that kind of illness cause a unique reaction after that point. He's never seen it in Eri.

But he has enough questions for his mother. He can make the effort to word at least one of them the right way, and hope she still answers.

27 turns the knob, but feels like he's watching his hand turn it. He watches his mother turn to look at him, and feels like Eri must have felt this way. When he saw her for the first time after the raid, when he knew she was safe and alive, he's sure she felt so much apprehension standing in this same threshold, overwhelmed by the fact that he was still alive too.

He's not going to run into his mother's arms like Eri did, and he can't when he can't decide what his mother looks like. Her face goes slack, and everything stills, but he has no idea what that means for her. What she feels looking at him, when he doesn't know what he feels either.

He has to look away, look at the ground so he knows where to walk when he walks to the chair. When he sits and has to look at her, he looks at her hands. They aren't shaking anymore. They're odd hands, a bit too thin, a bit too boney. A bit too much like his, when he looks down at his own, folded in his lap because he's sure she doesn't want them too close to her.

"Hitoshi." His mother's voice sounds strange, and it's almost like he's made a mistake. They all have, that voice is so unfamiliar. It's almost like she's not his mother, just a very unfortunate stranger who's been forced into this mess, mistaken as her. Her eyes hardly match what he remembers from the rearview mirror of the car, his clearest memory of his mother. This isn't her.

He looks up, and her face is still slack, but her eyes are watering. She pulls one of her hands away and tries to wipe at the tears, before she smiles at him. Her smile has too much teeth, it seems too strained. It's not an honest smile, it's a lie, it's a mask that tries to convince him that this is fine.

"You're..." Her voice is stranger, thicker. She laughs at it under her breath, not the way she should laugh at this. Not laughing at him for trying to see her, to get answers. "You've grown."

He had to grow in 12 years. That's not the biggest difference since the last time they saw each other. "Had to," 27 says, even if it's a whisper. Even if it's not at all what he wants to say.

She nods, and clears her throat. She puts down her hand firmly against the table, even if her tears are still falling. He wants to know if she's looking at him, but he still can't look up. "You have... a lot of questions. You probably want to know... a lot."

27 wonders why she won't answer them before he asks if she knows. If she sounds that nervous because she's afraid he'll ask her a *question*. Like he could force her to answer, force her under his quirk. She's probably still afraid of him.

He wishes he had something that simple to fear from her.

"The money," 27 says, and he wishes he could say it louder. When she doesn't answer, when he thinks she might have *forgotten* what he means by that, he feels something in his throat that raises his voice. "I want to know what you did with the money."

He looks up, and sees nothing but his own eyes set in her face. Purple irises and white pupils, and utter blankness answers him. He just wishes he knew what that *means*.

He wants to know why he still doesn't feel like 'Hitoshi.'

*

Yamada is trying his best to accommodate Shinsou's need for 'space.' He knows he should be proud of him, that Shinsou would feel safe enough to pull away from him, to explore this friendship with Ashido, to get away from someone who makes him feel uncomfortable.

But Yamada doesn't *like* being the person that Shinsou is uncomfortable around.

Sure, Shinsou is a teenager, and Yamada is no stranger to that very teenage impulse of thinking anyone over the age of 22 is an *idiot* who just doesn't *get them*. Shinsou acting like a teenager is a good thing, a *great* thing, an *amazing thing*. And Yamada still *hates* it.

He knows that Shinsou needs the space, and he needs the space to process some very heavy stuff. And Yamada wants to give him all the space he needs in this difficult time, and *definitely* doesn't want to step over any boundaries.

But he's also sure that Toshinori would love a little impromptu chat about American cuisine, and that's absolutely the only reason he's walking over to the 1-A dorms.

He's not going to pop into Ashido's room, he knows how to keep his little visit on the down-low. He just wants to make sure that things are going swimmingly, that Shinsou isn't devolving into a wreck and suddenly or violently overwhelmed with the urge to come home. If things are fine, Yamada can finally put his worries to rest, only make Toshinori aware that if anything comes up on the surveillance cameras that he contacts Yamada *immediately*, and wait at home for Shinsou to come through the door and hopefully be in a good enough mood to have a chat.

Ashido might help him take a trip down memory lane, she might have the photos and the stories that Shinsou thinks he needs. But Yamada hopes that this sourness about not taking him to visit his mother won't stop Shinsou from reaching out to someone who's a little more capable of talking him through these big emotions.

But when he gets to the dorm and sees Ashido and a few others lounging in the common room watching some classic Vine compilations, with no ward in sight, Yamada feels some pretty big and pretty *overwhelming* emotions. "Hey guys! Where's the hero on staff at? Any All Might sightings recently? Or Shinsou sightings?"

Ashido is the first to look confused, but Bakugo stopping with a handful of popcorn halfway to his mouth is worrying, because Shouta has a weird and slightly paranoid little theory that particular little combustion herolet knows practically everything.

"All Might had to leave campus for an urgent matter, but rest assured, we are sworn to behave like upstanding heroes in training in the meantime," Iida answers, and that explains why he's supervising the Vine fans while sitting too straight in that reciner. But that really doesn't answer the questions Yamada *really* wants answered.

Midoriya's wide eyed panic gives only the slightest warning to Bakugo's popcorn explosion, before the explosive teen jolts up to standing. "Corpse face must've brainwashed him, I swear to fuck, if he's talking to his shitty mom right now--"

"What are you talking about?" Uraraka demands, jumping up to Shinsou's defense, and Yamada admires that and *hopes* it isn't warranted.

"Shitsou was trying to--"

"THANKS for the intel, you guys just sit tight," Yamada cuts off, feeling a panic he can't play off and can't hide behind a hero persona, if Shinsou really did this he'll- "Watch some memes, don't break anything. *Don't* wait up for All Might."

Yamada turns on his heel and barely holds himself back from sprinting to his car, the thought of calling Shouta to tell him that his students are unattended at the dorm keeps circling his mind but he can't bring himself to pull his phone out of his pocket.

When Yamada finally does, he calls Toshinori from the driver's seat of his car, and gets his voice mail. The next 10 minutes are fuzzy, but when he looks at the clock, he only vaguely remembers running a few stop signs and that the drive to the police station usually takes 20 minutes.

He does run when he gets out of his car, when he can't even feel the stares from off duty or desk duty officers while he makes his way to the interrogation rooms, knowing that's exactly where he'll find answers. He wants to see Shinsou Ui sitting alone, maybe with Naomasa continuing his work on her. Maybe Naomasa standing outside the door waiting to go in, but that's *not* what he sees.

Yamada knows exactly what his throat feels like when he's about to use his quirk, and seeing Toshinori standing beside Naomasa, looking through the window into an interrogation room, makes it very difficult to swallow that feeling so that his voice comes out normal. "What the *fuck* are you doing?"

Yamada's voice comes out almost too small, too strained, because *Naomasa* knows better. With Toshinori, he can imagine what kind of things Shinsou would say, the heartstrings he could pluck to play a goddamn *symphony* with. Toshinori has already proven no match for Shinsou when Shinsou wants to throw himself headfirst into danger, but *Naomasa* doesn't have that excuse.

And he thinks that Naomasa is very right in asking him to 'Stop,' but picking up some JSL won't save him right now. "I know that you don't approve—"

"*Ho, you're goddamn right,*" Yamada says, feeling a laugh that is *not* a laugh bubbling out of his throat. "Tsukauchi, if you don't want me to blow that wall, and you, into the next block, you will give me one good reason why I shouldn't, *right now.*"

Yamada plays a *very* convincing villain in the student's training exercises, and while this is barely a performance and entirely a threat, Naomasa takes it with the bravest face he's seen. "Shinsou told me that before you said no to this, you set up a system for him to sign 'Stop' when he wanted out. We're still doing that."

Despite himself, despite knowing exactly how his quirk works and what it needs, the breath is nearly knocked out of Yamada at those words. Even when Shinsou was running away from him, refusing to take his denial of this meeting seriously and pulling that classic 'Oh, I'm just going to a friend's house' stunt on him, he was still listening to him and taking heed of that advice.

Naomasa must have seen that, because he steps away to clear up a space to look in on this meeting. Yamada doesn't want to take it, because a step inside that room to look in on the interrogation room is a step away from the door to yank his ward out of it. A step forward is a step closer to seeing Shinsou Ui with his own eyes, to see Shinsou seeing her. And Yamada knows well enough what he'll feel if he lays eyes on that woman.

But it's tearing him apart to wonder what Shinsou sees when he looks at her.

"It's just started," Naomasa mutters under his breath, and maybe that's reassurance that Yamada hasn't missed anything devastating happening to Shinsou while he wasn't there. Maybe it's an explanation Naomasa thinks is needed for why Shinsou looks too stiff while he's sitting in that chair, barely looking at the woman who is wiping away tears.

"*You're...*" Shinsou Ui laughs, nervously, and Yamada doesn't miss how Shinsou barely reacts to that. The tension stringing up his ward is impossible to miss, Shinsou just looks so *uncomfortable* that it's hard not to keep himself from pulling him out for that reason alone. "*You've grown.*"

That's such a bullshit thing to say that Yamada wants to pull *her* outside. Of course Shinsou has grown, Shinsou is 12 years older than the last time she saw him, and he's been forced to change in *horrible* ways. If she can look at the scars on Shinsou's face and have the balls to *laugh*, to say anything but 'I'm sorry,' then she *deserves* what's coming to her.

And she doesn't deserve what she gets.

"Had to."

Shinsou is talking to her.

Even if Shinsou's voice is small, there's not a flinch or a hesitation, not a single shred of doubt that he *could* talk to her. This woman hasn't seen Shinsou in 12 years, she's *not* his mother and even Shinsou can't possibly see her like that. But Shinsou is *talking* to her.

"You have... a lot of questions. You probably want to know... a lot." Shinsou Ui sits up straighter, tries to look more composed, more like it's down to business. But there's a sickening softness in her eyes that looks like she thinks this is what it's not, it's not Shinsou getting answers and moving past that and into any kind of *reconnection*. Not when Shinsou still won't look her in the eye.

"The money."

Yamada knows the exact moment his heart stops, the moment Naomasa shifts on his feet because he sees this as a moment to collect important testimony. The moment where it becomes all too real for Yamada to know that Shinsou knew he was sold, because while he heard it from Shouta that he did, hearing Shinsou *say that* makes it too much.

"I want to know what you did with the money." Shinsou looks up, but he seems to wince after he does. Yamada knows he doesn't really want to know, Shinsou *thinks* he can handle knowing but he can't. There's no answer to that question that will make it any better, make any of that pain go away.

And there's an answer to a question that Yamada never wanted to think about, that makes the entire thing *worse*.

"112 thousand yen... It's cheap," Shinsou says, and Yamada wants him to say anything else. He scrambles for any other answer than the obvious one for what Shinsou is talking about. Shinsou takes that away from him, tilting his head a bit to look down. *"I was... cheap."*

Shinsou Ui exhales, almost a laugh and that almost makes Yamada want to kill her, but she shakes her head while staring at the table with too-wide eyes. *"The money. That's what you want to know about?"*

Yamada decides that manslaughter is definitely still on the table because *how fucking dare she?* The way she looks like she can't believe it, like she's *insulted* that the son she *sold* isn't asking about how she's been or what she's been up to after all these years. Like Shinsou should have any interest in her when her interest in his life clearly ended at the point of *sale*. *"Cellphone."*

Shinsou mutters that word, and it doesn't make sense until it *does*. The way Shinsou treats his phone, how careful he is with it and how Shouta said he nearly had a panic attack when it ran out of battery that first time makes too much *sense*.

It's been right under Yamada's nose this entire time, but he didn't want to believe it. Shinsou really, truly thought that he was worth as much as...*a cell phone*.

Shinsou Ui shakes her head, wiping away her tears again. She folds her hands in front of her chin, leaning on the table with her elbows before she clears her throat. She looks angry for a moment, before it collapses into too much calm. *"Probably rent. Maybe wine, I don't really remember. I didn't keep track, I was just..."*

She shakes her head, whatever she wanted out of this conversation, she's realized that she's not getting it, and she doesn't deserve it anyway. Shinsou doesn't look like he realizes that he won't get what he wants either yet, just staring and watching her.

"It was better for you. They said you'd have to pay it back, so I wouldn't... What they told me, the police officers, I didn't know! They were supposed to take care of you, when you got older you could...." Shinsou Ui sputters over fragments, pieces are the only things they have to work with. 'You'd have to pay it back, so I wouldn't,' she sold her son *cheaply* so he wouldn't be forced to commit *as many* crimes to pay back his captors and earn his freedom.

Yamada already knows that's a lie, but it seems to be one that Shinsou Ui believes, judging by Naomasa's hastily written notes. There's no freedom for members of Miasma, because they would have found someone who got free before this point. Shinsou Ui sold her son, and she didn't have a *clue* who she was selling him to.

That's enough for Yamada, enough to know that Shinsou Ui doesn't have anything else to offer. She doesn't know enough to tell them what they need to know about Miasma, and there's not a *damn* thing she can say to make Shinsou feel like he knows enough about his past or his parents.

But before Yamada gathers enough of himself to move to the door to stop this, he hears her voice break and change to something smaller.

"Your cat. Smokey, the little stuffed cat." Yamada turns to look at Shinsou Ui, how she's smiling so fondly at Shinsou, covering her mouth with one of her hands. Shinsou actually looks disturbed now. Yamada is disturbed because he thinks that Shinsou sees this as a *connection*. *"Do you... still have him? You loved Smokey, you really wouldn't go anywhere without him. When you saw him, you just had to have him-"*

"Dead," Shinsou says, too high and too strained, and when he glances at the door Yamada wants him to either run to it or sign for this to be over. But he doesn't. *"I had to burn him. B... Bug made me."*

Shinsou keeping that stuffed cat on his bed, and his reaction to it the first night, makes too much sense. Yamada wondered at the time if it was part of Shinsou's past, that first fragment of something painful that Yamada thought was something mundane like a childhood pet he had to be parted from. But they made him *burn* his stuffed animal.

Yamada hopes he meets that 'Bug' person face to face during the raid that he knows he'll be part of, on that Miasma compound.

Shinsou Ui looks at him horrified, as though she hadn't seen what she's done before now. As if it's not written on Shinsou's face, on his hands, in his *scars* that she hurt him by what she did. *"You really loved him. I'm... I'm sorry, it wasn't supposed to... You couldn't stay, if you did, I would have.... I would have burned you."*

There's a cold numbness crawling up Yamada's spine, absolutely chilled when he sees out of the corner of his eye that Naomasa writes that down. As a *truth*.

Shinsou Ui would have hurt her son, burned him, possibly *killed him*. And she said that to *Shinsou's face*.

Shinsou doesn't look surprised at all, and that's the most disturbing part of this. *"You hated my quirk.... Didn't you?"*

Yamada wants to know and he *doesn't*, he knows there's no reason that Shinsou could hear to make this right and Shinsou Ui has proven thus far that she's *fucked up* enough not to need a reason. It's a haze in the back of his mind that makes him lunge for the door, reminding him how Shinsou's quirk works and how he *can't* try to use it on Shinsou Ui.

"*You're not going to answer me because you hate it,*" Shinsou says, and Yamada looks up to see that shaking tone matched with a teenager who looks like he's shaking in anger, glaring at his mother. "*I couldn't ask you questions. You wanted to get rid of me-*"

"*Everything else,*" Shinsou Ui says, meeting Shinsou's anger with her own, and it's never been more ill-placed. "*Everything else was me. Your hair, your eyes, your name. Everything. But your quirk...*"

Yamada wraps his hand around the doorknob, even when he feels Naomasa's hand curling around his shoulder to try to stop him. He doesn't want to know the answer, and he knows Shinsou doesn't either.

"*You had your father's quirk,*" Shinsou Ui says, before she gasps, burying her face in her hands. "*I missed him! I couldn't... I couldn't....*"

That... was not what Yamada expected to hear.

"*I couldn't deal with it anymore! I couldn't keep missing him like that! Everytime, with your quirk, it was him but with your voice,*" Shinsou Ui sobs, but Shinsou just stares, completely unmoved by it. "*It was him, but it was wrong, and I never... I never....*"

Shinsou Ui looks up at Shinsou, still shaking with every gasping breath.

"*I never bonded- I don't remember giving birth to you. That's why you're like this,*" Shinsou Ui says, an eerie calm falling over her, and this time Shinsou seems to finally see it, to see that this woman who was related to him by blood was so clearly unhinged that he shouldn't think about her for a second longer once he got out of that room. That he should call the end to this meeting and be done with it. "*You're only like this because I never loved you.*"

Shinsou doesn't call it, but Yamada does.

Yamada shoves Naomasa away and opens the door, seeing Shinsou sitting there like a puppet with the strings cut, with too much of him leaving his body again. Too blank in his eyes, too slow in his breathing, and this woman.

He's never wanted to use his quirk against someone the wrong way as much as he does when he steps foot in this room and lays eyes on *that woman*.

"I wanted to love you, I wanted to mean it! You were my son, you were *my son*, I couldn't-" Shinsou Ui turns and stands up, her eyes too wide and she steps too close to Shinsou. "*He's my son-*"

"Like HELL he is!" Yamada slips and he doesn't feel it, he feels something that he knows how to avoid slipping over him, but he forces it back when he forces himself to look at Shinsou. Shinsou shouldn't see him like this, he doesn't *need* him like this, and Shinsou sure as hell needs him. "Shinsou."

Yamada just wants to grab him and pull him out, but he knows that doesn't always work well. Shinsou can come out of a dissociative spell and lash out violently at anyone touching him, or anyone standing too close to him, especially in this room. Yamada knows that, but can't stop

himself from crouching next to him and resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Shinsou, we’re leaving,” Yamada says, because he can’t be in the same room as this woman, and if Shinsou wakes up and decides Yamada is a threat to him, he’ll take any broken bones or blood because if Shinsou Ui keeps *staring* at him like that, she’ll be the one needing a hospital.

Yamada pulls Shinsou up by his shoulder to stand, and has to wrap an arm around his shoulders. Has to pull him into his side and shield him from as much of Shinsou Ui as he can while he walks him out, but something she utters under her breath almost stops him. “Present Mic... you were his favorite hero.”

Yamada grits his teeth and knows he won’t believe a *damn* word she says, that it doesn’t matter at all. He doesn’t look at her, doesn’t stop, but he still hears it before the door closes.

“Please... Please take care of my son-”

Toshinori looks shellshocked, and hilariously, looks close to tears. Naomasa looks grave, and Yamada decides he can’t tolerate looking at either of them for another second. He keeps walking Shinsou out, almost dragging him out of the station.

Once they get outside, once Yamada feels the freezing cold on his face, he has to stop to make sure Shinsou has his scarf on properly. It’s cold, he might be cold in there, wherever he is, wherever Shinsou Ui put him when she told her *son* she never *loved him*.

“M...Mocha,” Shinsou whispers, and Yamada stops staring at the pink scarf between his fingers, looks up at Shinsou’s shell-shocked face and knows his own expression needs to look more reassuring and less murderous. “She didn’t... remember his name.”

It breaks Yamada because he knew she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t give Shinsou what he was looking for, even if she *could*. In the back of Yamada’s mind, he knows there’s a possibility that Shinsou Ui isn’t evil, just *disturbed*. Just needed help in horrible ways, ways that she didn’t get help for and because of that, she couldn’t be the mother that Shinsou needed.

The one he was looking for.

Yamada doesn’t know if he moves first or if Shinsou does, but he pulls his ward tight against his chest and holds him. He knows it doesn’t do anything, a hug can’t take back the last twenty minutes or those ugly truths, but he *wants* it to. He finds himself saying the words that Shinsou Ui should have said, because *someone* needs to say them for Shinsou. “Shinsou, I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have heard that, she shouldn’t have... It *doesn’t* mean anything, you don’t *have* a damn price tag. You’re *you*, you’re Shinsou Hitoshi despite all of that.”

He hears and feels Shinsou gasp against his chest, he feels his fingers curling and clenching and digging into his back. *God*, the kid deserves to cry it out, to *really* cry this time. Yamada doesn’t care if he starts wailing too, he’s never had the opportunity to face his own biological parents and hear that ugly truth. *‘I never loved you.’*

What a *shitty* thing to say, to anyone, to a *child* most of all. A child who needed love as much as care, who already missed out on so much of that. Yamada already knew whatever happened before Miasma wasn’t pretty, it wasn’t something that Shinsou should remember. “Shinsou.”

Yamada can’t take any of it back, but he wants to. If he could have been there before he was, if he could have known what would happen on that horrible day in August, even if he was only 20 years old, he would have been there. He would have stopped all of it, he would have taken Shinsou away

from all of it, saved him from it.

Yamada tightens his arms around Shinsou and already feels cold from what he says, when the words can't help but leave him. "I love you."

He knows those words don't come out right, too quiet, and they come 12 years too late. He knows he shouldn't have those words trapped in his chest because the only thing he can truly offer Shinsou right now, the only promise he can really keep is that he'll protect him from Miasma until Miasma has been taken down. But there are so many more promises he wants to keep, he wants to keep *Shinsou*. He wants to give the kid absolutely everything he's never had, and maybe it starts with this.

He'd be lying to himself if he hasn't felt this way for a while. The kid trembling in his arms has been family for a while, even if that's not what the wardship papers say. Even if those papers never change, even if Shinsou *would* be better off with a clean slate and a new home and so much distance from everything shitty that happened to him at UA, he'd still love him. This kid will still feel like a son to him.

He doesn't expect Shinsou to answer to that. He honestly doesn't expect Shinsou to cry any differently, even with this. Shinsou still cries too quietly, white knuckles holding too much inside, but when Shinsou presses his face a bit closer and another silent cry breaks out, Yamada can't help but feel warmer.

He has to be warm, because he's the only thing sheltering Shinsou from the cold right now. His arms are around the kid to protect him in every way he can.

And a hero's arms just don't feel strong enough.

*

The detective keeps staring at her. Ui keeps staring at the door. She hears the detective talking, hears his voice at least, but it's as though Japanese isn't her native tongue, and those words are just the buzz before her quirk reveals the meaning.

"The cloud. He had a cloud." *Dammit.*

She folds her hands together again, she tries to remember the process. She had to leave half of her medication behind in the Ukraine, it wasn't exactly feasible to get a refill while she was on the run. The seizures will be starting up again soon enough, and she knows if she forces it, she might trigger one.

But she forces her knuckles to grind against each other, imagining each little syllable that needs to come from her mouth. "Laptop."

The detective looks confused, and she almost wants to *cry*. She almost does, and maybe that convinces him. "You need a laptop?"

She nods, she finds herself nodding too much, still flooded with relief and fear in equal measure. *God*, she's really going to do it.

She's sure the clock is about to run out, maybe even in a matter of hours. She knows she should get to the point of it, to lay her neck out on the guillotine she's been running from for the past 12 years. She's considered laying it out long before now, but was always terrified out of it.

Shinsou Ui knows she's a weak person, with a weak heart. That's practically how it's been for her

entire life.

Maybe things would have been different, if she never met Hiroto. If she never took that temp job, never looked up at him while they were stocking the aisle of that grocery store. Never saw that crooked grin that he would wear, or heard that enamoring voice. *What's a pretty thing like you doing on aisle six?*

Hiroto would say those lame lines that she's heard a thousand times, but it was different because she could almost feel how earnest he was. He was always unafraid to be lame, to say something cheesy, and to always mean it. *I'll buy a house, and a car for both of us. The fence doesn't have to be white, and I'm not sure how we'll end up with half of a kid to go with the other two.*

She had a weak heart, and that heart tumbled over itself for Hiroto. Despite every red flag that her parents couldn't help but to point out, every flag that just waved in the wind and never amounted to anything more than a few complications that he sorted out himself. Those six years with Hiroto were the best years of her life.

Some, admittedly, better than others.

Ui was terrified to become a mother. Hitoshi wasn't planned, he was a surprise and a very good reason for a very quick wedding, but she just didn't feel *ready*. She would try, she would read all the books and try all those tips, she *sang* to a swollen belly whenever she was alone because she was just too embarrassed to do it whenever Hiroto was around. Everyone said it was different once you held them, once you really *realized* you were a mother.

Ui probably messed that up, because she was weak. Everything hurt, there was pain lacing up her spine and through her hips and the nurses kept telling her to get ready for the *worst*. She was *weak*, she was *weak*, and she *begged* Hiroto to do it. He didn't want to, he didn't want to use his quirk like that, but she *begged* him to.

He put his hands around her face, holding her, whispered *It's going to be okay*, and then it was. Almost. She had something warm and fresh from her body lying on her chest, wrinkled and disturbingly silent. She ran her fingers lightly over the sparse hair that she thought was Hiroto's black hair, that turned out to be her purple shade. She kept nudging the red and wrinkled thing in her arms, trying to get him to open his eyes so she could see them. Her eyes too.

She named him 'Hitoshi,' because that was the name for a boy that Hiroto decided on. She mostly hoped that it would make her... feel something.

It didn't.

She took care of Hitoshi. She breastfed him because the books said that was better, it was better for *bonding*. She changed him, she sang to him, she smiled and played and kept track of all of those important little milestones. He didn't babble very much, but his first word was 'At.' Hiroto tried to write that off as more babbling, still hoping for 'Dada' in a competition she honestly had to pretend to care about, but she pointed out that he would point to the neighborhood stray whenever he said it. 'At' meant 'Cat,' and that was supposed to be something she should be overjoyed with.

It was fine. Hitoshi just came at the wrong time, it was just stressful for them financially for her to stop working, it put their plans for the future on hold. But it would get easier with time, when Hitoshi could go to school, when they could move forward. Hiroto talked about the next kid almost incessantly, almost as much as he talked about Hitoshi, and she would almost slip up when she reminded him that it *couldn't* be now.

She almost said that she *couldn't* do it again.

Ui never thought about not being a good mother, or about not being a mother at all. It was just how it was supposed to go, it was supposed to work out. Maybe she was just more sensitive to the demands of infancy, the terrible two's. Some books said that children don't really have a personality until they're 6 years old, and maybe then she would find something enamoring with Hitoshi. Something so that he would never have to know that these years were terrible for her.

She tried to teach him her favorite language, French, because the books she read said that Hitoshi was more malleable to learning different languages at this stage, it would benefit him later on. She mostly just wanted to find something enamoring in the way he would say those words, to find something to connect to, to make her feel that impossible *something* that motherhood is. All she ever heard was fumbled babble, even if she saw Hitoshi's earnest attempts in his eyes.

But on that terrible day in August, Ui's head nearly exploded. She had a migraine like none other, and it came on in an instant. In the haze of the pain similar to a freight train trying to burst through her skull, she worried that she was having an aneurysm, that she would collapse on the floor and no one would be able to free Hitoshi from his crib until Hiroto came home from work in nine hours. No one would make Hitoshi lunch, or let him out to use the bathroom.

The migraine faded, her seemingly near-brush with death faded into a throbbing ache that was more familiar, but not worth dragging Hitoshi to the hospital for. She tried to pull through it, act like nothing was wrong. Trying to drag Hitoshi into waking even despite the pain that flared with his every grumpy and loud whine. It was just hard to wake Hitoshi up in the morning, and her migraines could be pretty bad. She wasn't really considering shaking him out of it.

Then there was a knock on the door, and those awful words from that police officer. *Mrs. Shinsou, I'm very sorry. Your husband was killed in a traffic accident.*

Oh, but when is he coming home? That's when Ui knew it was all a mistake.

Some people feel a pain in their chest, and a horrible premonition when their loved one passes from this world. Ui had worse, and it never got better.

She tried. She *honestly* tried. She ground her teeth whenever Hitoshi asked when his father was coming home, she gave up on the books and milestones and family videos, but decided she would get back to them when she was better. She just had a lot on her plate now, a single mother who had to work, who had to pay the landlady a decent amount to watch Hitoshi until he could be enrolled in public school that would cost minimally less money.

She knew it wouldn't last, that she'd stop thinking of Hitoshi like a financial burden, and nothing more. Even if Hitoshi looked everything like her, she'd start to find pieces of Hiroto to love when he developed a personality. When this pain in her chest and this wailing into his pillow could stop.

Hitoshi developed something else. His *quirk*.

It was a disaster.

Even his quirk wasn't enough like his father's, it was *wrong*, it was still so much like *her*. She just couldn't stand it, and she couldn't really *blame* him. Hitoshi needed to talk, to ask questions, even if he didn't have a quirk that relied on that. But she just *couldn't* because it made *everything* worse.

There were things she was able to hide with white knuckled restraint. When she forgot to pay the landlady three times in a row, when she got a note from his school about paying for his lunch fees

or actually *packing* something in his little lunchbox to send him off with. When she got notes about his excessive absences, because she left for work in the morning and *forgot* she had a son to wake up for school. When she felt that sickening white dizziness start to hit her at work, quickly excused herself to the bathroom, and laid on the floor until her body had trembled and shook froth out of her mouth, when she could come back into her mind and slowly regain control of it.

Everything was worse with Hitoshi's quirk. It was a flip of the coin whether she would have to curl her hands into fists so she wouldn't try to *kill* her own son in that unfathomably dark rage, or if she would have a brutal seizure. Either way, she would have to excuse herself to her bedroom, lock the door and ignore his crying, and try to go on when it passed. Try to beg her son to *stop* so she could *handle this*.

But she couldn't. It was becoming clear that this wouldn't pass, Hitoshi *wouldn't* stop, and the worst would be coming. When she held another note in her hand that was packed in Hitoshi's backpack, a handwritten note from his teacher that kindly requested a home-visit but wordlessly threatened greater action, she went cold. And decided this farce needed to end.

She wasn't meant to be a mother, but she tried to force herself to be one. Every single action against her, everything she tried to ignore or force through, it didn't matter. It won now. She couldn't be a mother, so she knew what to do.

She called social services. She told them that she was neglectful, she was awful, she couldn't raise her son and they needed to take him away from her. The woman on the phone kept asking questions, she couldn't understand why and sometimes asked what the *hell* Ui was saying. It was a fair question, Ui knew she could mix her words sometimes, she could get a bit more volatile than the situation called for, and she got volatile again when she screamed that she couldn't deal with Hitoshi's quirk.

That was right, she couldn't deal with it. But the way she said it wasn't right at all.

The investigator that came to the apartment seemed to know what she was doing. She didn't look through the pantry, didn't look through much of the apartment at all. She asked if Ui had a report from a quirk specialist, asking more questions about Hitoshi's quirk. Ui handed it over, answered those questions as best she could. When the woman said they were interested in taking in her son, in making it all go away, she felt nothing but *relief*.

5 million yen. The woman said that number like it was nothing, but for Ui, she went completely cold.

I don't... have that much. Ui had a pitiful savings account, and absolutely *no one* would loan her money to do this. No one would believe it would be in Hitoshi's best interests to get away from her. To have a normal childhood with someone who could take care of him, who could love him.

The woman looked a bit confused, a familiar sight that only became more familiar to Ui after that, then laughed. *No, we would like to offer that much. So you don't have any reason to ask any questions once it's done*.

They wanted to... pay her? That didn't make sense, but Ui was sure that she would have to pay some sort of fee or fine for bringing a child into this world and not being able to take care of it. The woman went on, trying to explain, and at the end of it, Ui understood.

She understood *too much*.

Hiroto had a past, and sometimes that past wasn't so distant. He did things for terrible people,

dangerous people, and there were times that he refused to walk down certain streets because he was sure he saw a familiar face. A face that would do horrible things if they knew where they both lived.

This woman wasn't from social services, and she should have realized that she didn't have a badge before that point. But Ui knew that she knew where she *lived*, where she and Hitoshi lived, and that they *wanted* Hitoshi.

Ui is a weak woman, and she just wanted an out. *112 thousand. Please.*

That was all that was in her savings account, and once again her mouth decided it was independent from her mind. Maybe it made sense to her mouth, her mouth still thought that this was just a fine to be paid to social services, but in Ui's mind, she felt trapped.

She knew 'they' weren't good people, and the woman explained how very powerful they were. There would be a police officer who would come to her door, who would 'investigate' her son's disappearance after she reported that he was kidnapped the next day. The police officer would *help* her, there were *many* police officers who would make this easier for her.

The woman gave her directions and a time, and thanked her for her business.

Ui sat on the couch until she realized that her son had come home from school already. And that she had to pack.

She kept imagining what would happen, when she drove away. Hitoshi would still escape her, still be free of her. He would be so much like his father, and with his father's quirk, that was all but given. It wouldn't be for long, he would have to pay a debt, but it's almost like boarding school. He would graduate at some point. He would... he would be fine.

Ui knew he was scared. She watched him fidget so much before he worked up the nerve to ask where they were going, and seeing his fear too clearly made it too easy to answer him. *We're going to meet Mommy's friends.*

That's what Hiroto would call them, 'friends.' Even if they weren't.

She wasn't sure if it would be too bad if Hitoshi took control of her after she answered, and her unresponsive body drove them both into a ditch.

She was relieved when he fell asleep, his eyes closed and his eyelashes somehow longer for it, his chubby cheeks pressed to that cat plushie he loves so much. He sighed heavily in his sleep, and she felt the ghost of his breath on her chest like she had so many times when he was an infant sleeping in her arms, but it was different. She found the pull of a smile before she realized how deeply that feeling tugged in her chest. She tried to look at the road, to wipe away the tears coming to her eyes. She couldn't begin to feel this way about Hitoshi *now*, now that it was over. That there was no other way.

Ui knew when she parked the car, that she could still run away. She could put the car in reverse, drive away from those frightening people standing on the side of the road. She could try to do what was best for Hitoshi, even if it put her life at risk. That's what a mother would do.

She stepped out of the car instead.

They made her sign a document, something that looked like a receipt at first, but when she squinted in the dim light, she could make the words out better. It was a confession of sorts, to say that she willingly did this. She willingly gave up her son to this Miasma's care, in exchange for 112

thousand yen, because she disliked his quirk.

Much like when she talks, some words are right, but some are completely *wrong*.

She heard his voice calling for her while she walked back to the car, when she buckled in and started the engine. She refused to look, and she almost didn't. But when she was driving away, almost out of sight, she looked in her rearview mirror and saw Hitoshi so *afraid*, pulling out of that terrifying woman's grasp, *screaming* for her even if she couldn't hear his words.

She doesn't remember what the road that led back to her apartment looked like. All she saw was her terrified son's face.

That face didn't fade from her memory.

She spent hours sobbing, before she made the call, numbly. She still stumbled over her words too much, and it took too long, almost long enough for her to take them back and give up the truth. The police officer came to her apartment, just as promised. He said that things would work out, he would make sure it was easy for her. Just as long as she remembered the story.

It was hard to know who needed to hear the story, or who knew the real one. It was terrifying, and as much as she missed Hiroto, *she* never wanted to be this close to him, to feel the same terror he must have felt, these invisible eyes staring at her. What had she *done*?

She would scream herself into waking some nights, still haunted by her son's face. Still haunted by the clothes she didn't pack, the things left in his room. The terror that she couldn't make herself believe was gone by now, she tried to hold onto the hope that he was fine. He was in the care of some powerful criminals, criminals who would make him do criminal things. But he was young, they would wait until he was older. They would take care of him. He might be happier now.

She would drink, a lot. A worrying amount. Something that the people around her, the kind people who had sympathy to give, company to offer to a woman who so *tragically* lost her son and became a mess, would ignore or politely try to stop. When the nearly-constant dizziness in her head had a real reason to exist, to deepen, and lull her into a place where she almost didn't exist, it could turn out blissful or painful on the turn of the coin. Sometimes, she could forget what she had done, forget what day it was, and walk into Hitoshi's room expecting to find Hiroto and her son. To think that Hitoshi was using his quirk on her to explain the light-headed feeling yet still believe that he was still a baby, sleeping so quietly in her husband's arms.

Other nights, she would get drunk and scream, try to scream back at that small and terrified face she can't forget, and tell him that she was *sorry*.

There was a day that came, that she decided she needed to leave. She couldn't help the sinking feeling in her gut that none of this would have happened if she left earlier, if *they* left earlier. If Hiroto didn't laugh off her suggestion that they could move to France, the place she'd always wanted to live ever since she was a child. *Ui, that's so expensive! Sure, you know French. You could pick up any language just like that, but it's hard work for the rest of us.*

She kept thinking about it, like a record constantly playing in her mind. She saved aggressively, worked a second job, and that thought almost blurred into reality for her sometimes. When she stepped off of the plane, she looked through the crowd and tried to find her husband and son. She had just taken a trip back to Japan, to get the rest of their things, but they had been here all along, they had lived in France for years. *Je t'aime maman! Je vous ai manqué!*

Much like convincing her mouth, it took three hours to convince her to leave the airport. That she

still wouldn't find them there. That moment almost embarrasses her, now that she can look back and know exactly what it was.

Three months later, she had a seizure in a bar, and woke up in a hospital. She woke up with doctors who wanted to do tests, who worried over her, who asked too many questions. Her mouth finally gave up the incriminating truth that would add another smear to the reputation of a man who had been dead for ten years. The doctors almost seemed relieved to hear it.

That started the real testing, gave her more medications than she cared to think about. She had no reason to tell her employer, a kind woman who had always allowed her to use email for even the smallest communication. *Perhaps, this is due to your quirk? These things have give and take, and you are the most useful translator we have in our employ.*

It wasn't her quirk that did this, that turned her mouth and words into a separate being, that made her as clumsy in her body as she was with her words, that made her have those horrible seizures and feel too many wrong things. It was Hiroto's. It was still her fault, because she forced him to use it on her.

As much as she felt before the medication, it was worse when she was on it. When Hitoshi's terrified face came to her more clearly, and her daydreams about his better life without her turned into nightmares she couldn't escape. What she had done, *what had she done?* She couldn't take it back, and could hardly face it.

Then the knock came on her door. *Ms. Paro, we'd like to talk to you about your son, Shinsou Hitoshi.*

She ran, as soon as she could. Dark alleys she had to fumble through, *horrible* things she had to do or endure to get this far. She just wanted to run from it, from the awful truth, from the thing that was worse than the guilt she felt when someone asked if she had any children, and she said that she *did, once*. She was able to leave it at that, but not anymore.

She never intended to let it get this far. She had wondered if Interpol was in on it too. If the police officers talking to her were part of it. If those pictures they showed her were real, if this was just an awful test of some *loyalty* she promised when she signed that paper and handed over her son, if this was punishment for trying to escape them.

She tried, she tried to cling to the thought that those pictures were of someone else, not her son. Not her son, her son wouldn't look like that, wouldn't have those scars. He was 16 now, he probably had to do some unsavory things. But they said they would take care of him, he wouldn't get hurt like that.

Then that hero spoke to her, telling her about her son. What he did for a little girl, what she couldn't help but think was so *Hiroto*. Couldn't help but think of that same lazy grin, that earnest way he would shrug off any generous act he gave so easily to others. *It's the right thing to do.*

Born from two criminals, and despite everything that she has *done*, Hitoshi is a better person than she is. Than she ever imagined that little boy with his quirk would ever grow into. Born from such a weak mother, he was such a strong *son*.

What a *monster* that made her. Why she did it, why she said *anything* about his quirk when she made that call, that made sure everything would fall into this perfect ruin.

Then she saw him. She saw her son. With those scars.

She knew she owed him the chance to give that pain to her, to carve her face up like that to match so perfectly with his, when she deserved it all along. She was his *mother*, she brought him into this world. She brought him to this place, through those painful things, and she owed him so much to *try* to bargain for forgiveness and know she wouldn't earn it. To at least try to make things right.

To give him answers, at least, to those questions that she shouldn't fear so much when she knows *why* his quirk makes her feel that way.

But she couldn't. Her mouth still betrayed her, those clumsy words still came out *wrong*. She has to make it right, she has to *try* to make it right. The truth, at least, is what Hitoshi deserves. He deserves so much more, and she knows he'll have it now. She knows there are other things she can give him that she deserves, when she doesn't have the ability to give him enough for forgiveness.

There's a laptop with a white screen in front of her, perfect for communicating those answers. Perfect for finally bypassing her treacherous mouth, to cling to the one way she can still get her right words across.

But she's not running from it when she pulls up an internet browser first. There's something else she needs to get to Hitoshi first.

Ice

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of seeing his mother, Shinsou has a new worry he's never considered before. Even after making things right with Eri, the anxiety lingers, until Aizawa brings him answers. Yamada struggles to accept what he's learned, and only finds peace with Midnight's help.

Shinsou and Eri see their first snowfalls.

Chapter Notes

Triggers: Dissociation, 50 mention, Bug mention

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou dissociated during the meeting with his mother, after sneaking off campus with Toshinori's help to meet with her, and was taken back by Yamada. Yamada has asked Shinsou to sign 'Stop' when he's uncomfortable with something, to help him establish boundaries. Shinsou entered a dissociative fugue state for nearly a week after Chisaki destroyed his hand in front of Eri, and Eri died in front of him before being resuscitated, and though Shinsou has repressed that memory fully, Eri remembers it as the 'bad away.' Aizawa and Eri have a game where they 'look for missing cats,' where Aizawa shows Eri a picture and asks her where the cat might be, and pretends to text her answers to the police so they can find the 'missing' cat. Bug's quirk allows her to store maggots inside holes in her body. Earlier in Wards, Shinsou would want to trade for information and things he wanted, such as when he offered for Aizawa to keep his phone and would describe one Number for every hour that he was allowed to sit outside. Midoriya tried to explain Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome to Shinsou before, and gave him scholarly articles on the subject to prove that if Shinsou didn't give Eri MQAS, then he probably can't as the repeated quirk use and Eri's age made her the most susceptible, and Shinsou would have been less likely to do it to his mother as he was much younger the last time he saw her. Bakugo has taken it upon himself to be Shinsou's therapist, and was present when Shinsou dissociated the day before after lunch, which is the 'Zombie mode shit' he refers to in this chapter. Bakugo also noticed that Shinsou spoke to Todoroki at that lunch, and decided to make Shinsou leave the lunchroom after that, concerned that Shinsou was speaking out of severe distress. When Bakugo confronted Shinsou about his ability to talk to him and anyone else he brainwashed before, Shinsou said he wouldn't use his quirk on Bakugo and that he could wear a mask again, which Bakugo tried to insist wouldn't happen, and that it was fine for Shinsou to use his quirk. After the Jun interview, Yamada told Shinsou that when a blizzard comes to UA, they could all drink hot chocolate and sit under the kotatsu together.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Slip.

He's in the car now. Yamada is saying something. Something nice, but he's worried, he's probably asking how he is, whether he can go home right now-

Slip.

He's not here. He's barely here. He's dipping into reality with his eyes barely opened, he tries to move his hands but sees his hands already moving-

Slip.

The light of the street lamps catch in his eyes, he looks up at them, maybe if he hurts his eyes he can stay, but his foot slides from under him, Yamada says something and there's pressure on his shoulder-

Slip.

It's disorienting. It's *terrifying*. He tries to stay, he *wants* to stay, he doesn't know what's happening or what he's coming up from, and he knows Yamada doesn't see it because he's looking at the front door now.

He *can't* slip.

He holds his breath, and holds the words inside his chest. He's wrong, he's broken, he's too old for those words but Eri *isn't*. She has to hear them, she has to know, she has to know that she's loved so she won't grow up to be as broken as he is.

Children are supposed to be loved. People are loved, somehow. That word is odd, it's unfamiliar. Love is enjoyment, love is an almost obsessive glee over having it. His mother said he loved Mocha, even if she didn't remember his name. Bug would say that Memory loves doing paperwork, Bug would *love* when someone did something wrong and she could correct that, but those two loves were sarcastic, they were either odd for it or not love at all.

In the videos that Ashi showed him, of when they were kids, she would say that she loved him. It seemed possessive, love seemed to be a word that would make him stop what he was doing and hug her. *Shinny, I love you*, that younger Ashi would gush while she was tugging at his hair, and in those videos he would turn around from the toys he was playing with and hug her.

Maybe 'love' was a way to make him hug her. Maybe 'love' was another word for hugs.

But Yamada said that he loves him, and he was already hugging him at the time. The way he said it was almost afraid, like love is a powerful thing, almost too powerful to speak it. Love is powerful, and children need it.

Children need it to thrive, and he's never said that to Eri. He's never given her that.

27 tries to make himself real. He tries to hold himself just enough. He feels it slipping, he feels the haze when he thinks of how much he wants to not slip away, how terrified he is that he *will*, and forces his hands to curl, only to be too terrified when he makes them do something else. '*Stop.*'

Maybe this fear is keeping him here, maybe it's how terrified he is when Yamada pulls his arm away. He's too terrified to look at him, he's *that* much of a coward. He doesn't know how to say it, and he doesn't know if he can. "We're stopped," Yamada says softly, it should be confused, it should be angry, but it's just soft. It's just quiet enough.

'*Can't. Away. I don't.*' He signs so much like his mother speaks, and maybe he should just talk

instead.

Yamada's hand reaches out for him, but it falls, and out of the corner of his eye, he sees Yamada looking around. "Do you think that... cats are okay? Right now?"

He nods, even if he doesn't know what that means. He just feels himself slipping, and he wants whatever Yamada thinks would work to work. He just doesn't want to *slip*.

He does.

He's in a dimly lit room, but it's familiar. It isn't until he sees how messy it is, how much furniture is stuffed into this living room that it's Witching Hour's dorm. There's pressure on his knee, and he looks down to see the tabby cat that seems too thin, every vertebrae on his spine seemed too prominent the last time he petted him.

He pulls his hands away to pet Sushi, and realizes he was signing at the time. When he realizes that, he doesn't want to look at Yamada, even when he sees him out of the corner of his eye. Sushi sniffs his hand, and seems to find him friendly, enough to butt his head against his hand and start begging for affection, which he eagerly gives. "Always a good time for a Sushi date."

Yamada is trying to sound like this is normal, but it's not. He might realize that all the angry words that have probably been said, all the scolding he deserves for sneaking away, need to be repeated. There's a flash of his mother's tone that he feels in a way that doesn't make sense, that makes him wish that Yamada doesn't decide this is a good time to repeat himself.

"Nothing like hanging around a happy kitty like Sushi. Or Socks. Shou and I actually got adopted by a little kitty a few years ago, our little Sock-er-ina," Yamada trails off, and there's probably a reason that he's never seen Socks. Probably a normal one, an inevitable one. One he doesn't want to think about. "As much as Shou loves cats, he's so *weird* about the whole 'consider the responsibility' and all. Cats are pretty independent, they *like* having people around, but I don't think Socks was crying herself to sleep while we were at work."

Aizawa 'loves' cats. He thought he knew what that meant, but he doesn't. There's another meaning to that word, and it's complicated. Aizawa could love cats, he could be obsessive about them and want them, but decide not to have any. To keep them. For their own good. *I would have burned you.*

His mother didn't love him. That's not why she didn't keep him. It wasn't out of love, but lack of love. She just didn't love him, and she probably would have killed him.

He couldn't have been normal. She couldn't have been a warm mother. He didn't have a normal childhood, ever, so that's fine. That's the ground he can stand on, to know himself and know where his body has been in that way. To make it his in a way.

Sushi presses his paw into his chest, his whiskers tickling his chin. He watches Sushi's nose flare in and out as he sniffs, as he seems oddly curious. He is too, but he's not sure if he should ask. If asking is going to be risky. '*L-O-V-E. Children need.*'

Children need love, and he doesn't *understand* it. He's broken, he's beyond those words, but Eri isn't. He has to say that he loves her the right way, he has to say it enough and hope that it fills the void. He has to hope she can still be normal, that she can forget when she didn't get those words that she needed from him. She won't remember these years if she grows up normally, and maybe the lacking care he gave her will all be swept away.

Yamada takes a long time to answer that, and he feels like pulling Sushi closer to hide his face in his fur, treating Sushi too much like Mocha.

“Kids... do need love. They need loving parents, or loving guardians. And... I’m sorry that you didn’t get that,” Yamada says, quietly. Yamada seems upset that he’s broken, but he had to have known it this entire time. “But, love comes around in a lot of ways. Like 50. I’m sure that she really loved you too.”

50, feeling possessive or happy about being near him. 50 filling a void that he needed. That does make sense, at least the last part. He’s sure that she never felt as happy or safe or warm with him as he did with her, but there had to be some unfathomable reason that she kept coming to his room to spend time with him, kept insisting to Bug that she could train him.

He doesn’t know how old he was when he met 50, or when she died. He thinks he was older than Eri, but he’s not sure. He can’t remember if love is something that’s required at a certain stage of child development, if that’s just something so common that the authors of those books didn’t think to mention. That it should have started at birth.

When his mother didn’t remember giving birth to him, and couldn’t love him then.

“Shinsou.” He *hates* that name. It’s not his, because now he knows it’s *hers*. It’s the bond they both hate, that they both have to reject now. A family name, and they’re not family. “It’s fine, really. I know it doesn’t feel like it, and maybe this whole thing feels like the reason that you were looking for. But it’s not.”

He doesn’t know what it is, then. His mother sold him because she didn’t love him, because he’s unlovable, and he’s broken because she didn’t love him. He doesn’t know what he looked like when he was born, but it must have been monstrous.

“I...didn’t get a whole lot of love when I was growing up either, at first,” Yamada says, and he looks to see Yamada staring at the couch cushion beside him, like there’s someone else sitting there that he’d rather be talking to. “Foster care, institutions. Not a lot of people were willing to put up with the whole ‘deaf kid has no idea how loud he’s talking’ thing, so I didn’t get a lot of people who were willing to help me out with that. Not until I was placed with my moms.”

Most people have one mom, and a father. Yamada has talked about his biological mother and father, but they didn’t raise him, and sometimes it seems like he’s angry or bitter about that. Maybe he feels hurt, and feels like they didn’t love him either, when he was born.

“It’s hard to sit with that, with counting up all the things that could have gone differently, all the people who could have been kinder to you. It’s easy to think it’s your fault, but it’s not. Sometimes there really isn’t a reason for it,” Yamada says, but it would just make *sense* if there was. It feels worse if there isn’t, if this is what he was supposed to turn into. If there really was no way to change his path. “But there was a point for me, where I stopped wondering about it and realized that I was happy where I was. I felt loved, I felt complete, and I’m not saying that I was ever happy to go through that. But I was... satisfied, that things turned out like this. That I could be this person that I am, and stop wondering about an imaginary person. Because the person I am turns out to be an amazing person. If not a *little* too good at annoying my favorite listener.”

Yamada kicks his foot from side to side, like he thinks about kicking out at his feet. He doesn’t feel like Yamada is annoying, most of the time, and finds himself smiling because it’s stupid. ‘*Not favorite.*’

Yamada can’t mean that he’s his favorite listener. He’s married to Aizawa, and Aizawa listens to

his show. *Eri* listens to his show too, and thinking that *Eri* isn't someone's favorite *anything* is so wrong that he refuses to believe it. "Nah, you're my favorite. Don't tell any of my regular callers, or anyone who has those limited edition autograph cards, but you're definitely my favorite. Can't even tell you why, I just...*feel* it. You know?"

He knows he can tell that Yamada's smiling, without even looking at his face, just by the way his voice sounds. He knows that feels nice, to know that Yamada is smiling.

He knows that feelings are complicated, that sometimes words can't hope to describe them. It feels like drawing a picture instead of looking at the scene, or taking a picture of *Eri* that never comes close to looking like she looks, because *Eri* is breathing and living and *real* outside of that phone screen.

He knows that he only hates the Present Mic persona because it feels like that, like the picture instead of the person. He just doesn't know if it's a good thing that he feels that way, if it would hurt worse if Yamada becomes too much like 50. If he remembers this feeling even more, because he's older now, and these memories wouldn't fade.

"So, I know things are going to be a little rough for a while. But just reach out whenever you need me, and we can take a break. Just keep things moving at your pace," Yamada says, and maybe he should be irritated by that. Maybe it's late, and he didn't want to stay at Witching Hour's place this long. Maybe he's still irritated about what he did, but doesn't want to say it, because he made things 'rough' for himself. "But, I just want you to know... I meant what I said. I love you like you're family to me, and however that turns out, it's still true. If that's... something you feel like you're okay with hearing, you know."

He heard it, but he still doesn't understand it. Even when he tries to slide it into place, tries to imagine Yamada being there when he was younger. Being a part of his family.

It's terrifying, every time that Yamada says it, but it's somehow different. It's somehow odd, like the heat that comes when his fingers are frostbitten. It's wrong, because his fingers are cold and they feel warm, and it's wrong because Yamada shouldn't love him at all. He's not a person who can be loved.

But he can't stop from tilting his head down, almost a nod. Almost agreeing, because he doesn't want Yamada to feel obligated and go over the top with it. He doesn't want to feel like Yamada is trying to fill an unfillable void for him, just because he's kind. But in a selfish way, he wants to still feel that impossible warmth.

Sushi falls over onto his side, trying to invite him into rubbing his belly, but he knows well enough that's not a good idea. He still admires this cat's wickedness, how Sushi knows he'll get away with it. Sushi will get anything he wants, anything he deserves. It's not even spoiling, because he deserves it. "Sushi is definitely enjoying hanging out with you, Shinsou."

Slip.

*

Eri knows when Twenny's away.

Twenny goes away sometimes, and she hates it. It used to be really scary, and lonely, because Twenny would be there but he wouldn't talk to her. He wouldn't move, even when she pulled on his hands. Even when Twenny talked after that, he would talk weird, like he was really tired but a little different from that. But Twenny would always come back.

The worst time was when Twenny was away, but different. Twenny would wake up, and he would help her get ready in the morning, and he would comb her hair. But he wouldn't talk to her.

Eri knows something really bad happened when Twenny was hanging out with Ashido, because he almost never gets that bad away, but he did when he came back. Twenny wouldn't talk to her, but he would talk with his hands. Yama said Twenny was just really tired, but Eri knew that wasn't true. She knew Zawa was worried about it too, because he talked to her quiet while they looked for missing cats, and sometimes forgot to talk like he was going the bad away too.

Zawa read her a book so she could sleep in her own room, but after Eri pretended to fall asleep, she went to Twenny's room. She knows the bad away takes a long time, but Eri doesn't want Twenny to be the bad away now that they live with the heroes. She knows that she'll miss him a whole lot, and she doesn't like missing Twenny at all.

Twenny was sleeping, but she made sure he was warm and comfortable, and even gave him her Hello Kitty blanket. She forgot to bring her stuffed animals, but Twenny has a Grenny and his cat Mocha, and she made sure they were really close to him. She knows if Twenny remembers that they're safe, then he'll remember he doesn't have to be away, and he doesn't have to be scared.

Twenny makes a face in his sleep, and she remembers what that means. She curls up really close to Twenny and holds him really tight, and tries to hum to him like he used to when she had bad dreams. It would always help when she would wake up and he was already holding her, and she could hear his humming and know she was safe.

Twenny wakes up and tries to sit up, and tries to push her away but he remembers who she is, and looks at her before he holds her really close. Twenny is really scared, and Eri doesn't know how, but she really wants to hurt Ashido and make her go away for whatever bad thing she did. She shouldn't be a hero if she made Twenny so scared.

"Eri, it's okay," Twenny says, and Eri feels bad because she's not helping Twenny feel better if she can't stop crying, but she feels so bad because Ashido is so *mean*. "I'm sorry."

Eri shakes her head, because she doesn't *want* Twenny to feel sorry, or feel bad, or feel scared anymore. She tries to hum, but she really can't, because she's still crying. Twenny sits up and keeps holding her, and she wishes she was bigger so she could hold Twenny and make him feel better instead.

"Eri," Twenny says, and he doesn't say anything else. Eri looks up to see if Twenny looks like he's away again, but Twenny is biting his lips, and he looks really sad. He pulls his hands away from her back and holds them up to talk to her. '*I you.*'

Eri uses her hands to say the same thing, even if she doesn't know what the third sign means. Twenny smiles, and says it again with his hands, and she says it back because she wants Twenny to feel better.

'*You're family. I you,*' Twenny says with his hands, before his smile gets really shaky, and it looks like he might cry. "I love you, Eri."

That makes Eri feel like she's really warm, especially on her face. Twenny never told her that, but she knows that people love each other when they're family. And she is really family for Twenny. "I love you too, Twenny!"

Eri hugs Twenny really tight, because she knows Twenny really does love her, and it makes a lot of sense. Not a lot of people say they love each other, but people who do are family, and saying that

they love each other means they're super special to each other. And Twenny is really super duper special to her.

But, she's a little worried, because being in love means something special, and she's not sure if they can be in love.

"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you earlier," Twenny says, and he sounds really sad about that. "But I've always meant it, even if I didn't tell you. You've always been loved."

That makes Eri's face feel even hotter, and her toes feel really curly, but she's glad that even though Twenny sounds sad when he talks, he smiles at her when she looks at him. "Did Ashido make you feel bad about not telling me?"

Eri would have been really mad at Ashido if she did, but Twenny makes a confused face, and shakes his head, before he looks down like he doesn't want to look at her. "No, I... met my mother. She... told me about that."

Eri holds Twenny's face with her hands, because she doesn't like Twenny's mom. She knows Twenny's mom is kind of like her real mom, because her real mom gave her away and Twenny's mom did too. She doesn't want to meet her mom, and she doesn't know why Twenny met his mom either, but she wishes he didn't. "I don't like your mom, Twenny. We promised we didn't need moms, so don't let her make you sad, okay?"

Twenny smiles with only half of his mouth, and he looks like he wants to laugh. "I thought I was your mom. You still need me, right?"

Eri nods, but it doesn't make sense if Twenny is her mom now that they love each other. "You're my family, Twenny, but you don't have to be my mom. Moms are bad, and you're not bad. You can be my older brother, kind of like Shozo, or just Twenny. Or you can be my husband, too."

Twenny laughs, and shakes his head. "You *really* don't have to think about marrying anyone right now, especially me. Or ever." Twenny gets kind of quiet, and his hands get kind of fidgety on her back. "You have two dads now, so you don't need me as a mom. I can...just be Twenny."

Eri gets to fall asleep with Twenny holding her really close, and she gets to hold his favorite cat Mocha. She makes sure to hold him really tight so Mocha doesn't fall off the bed, and when she wakes up when Yama comes, she almost wants to take Mocha to get ready, but she doesn't want Mocha to tell Twenny what she needs to talk to Yama about.

"Yama," Eri says, while Yama is braiding her hair in a long braid like she picked today. "When do people get married?"

Yama hums and makes a thinking face at her head when she looks at him in her mirror. "Well, people get married when they're adults, and they're in love with each other. Or at least, when they think they're in love. Me and Shou made sure to live with each other for a year before we got married, because even though we knew each other for a long time, we wanted to make sure that we really loved each other and that we'd be a good fit for each other too."

Eri knows she's not an adult, but she's not sure how long it's going to be until she is one. Mirio is almost an adult, but he's still in school, so he's probably not really an adult. But Eri lived with Twenny for a long time, so at least they know they're a 'good fit,' and that probably won't change even when they're older.

"Has someone caught my little bean's eye to make her think about her nuptials?" Yama asks, and

his voice gets kinda wavy like he's teasing or singing, and Eri has to shake her head, because Twenny didn't do anything to her eyes.

"Twenny said he loves me, so we gotta get married, 'cause only married people say they love each other," Eri says, and Yama looks really weird in the mirror, at first like he kind of wants to cry or that she's really cute, but then he looks kind of serious.

"Well, that is true that married people tell each other that they love each other, and you probably heard that from me and Shou," Yama says, but he starts looking kind of sad at her hair while he's braiding it, before he tilts his head to the side. "But, love can come in a lot of ways. You can love your friends, or love your family, or love a romantic partner. And I think Shinsou was trying to say that he loves you like family."

"And that's different?" Eri asks, because she has to be sure. She doesn't want to get it wrong and hurt Twenny's feelings, because even though he said they're family, if it made him happy to marry her, then she thinks it would make her happy too. Twenny could cook like Yama cooks for Zawa, and she can take a whole lot of naps like Zawa does. But Twenny would probably be better at making her play-mad like Zawa does for Yama, because Twenny never gets mad at her ever, so it sounds like Twenny would be doing all the work in their relationship.

"It's *pretty* different, but I can see how it's a little confusing," Yama says, and he smiles at her when she turns around, even if it's a little sad. "It doesn't really change a whole lot, because I'm pretty sure that Shinsou has loved you like you're family to him for a long time. Doing things like taking care of you, or making sure you're happy, those are ways of saying that he loves you too. But it's nice to also say it, you know?"

Eri nods, even if her face gets really red and her toes get curly when Twenny says it to her. She's pretty sure that if she got really really cold, she wouldn't have to use his kotatsu head, because he could just tell her that he loves her and she'd feel warm all over. "I'm glad I don't have to marry Twenny though. I wanna live with him forever and ever, but I don't want him to cook all the time, 'cause he's not as good at it as you, Yama."

Yama puts his hand over his chest and makes a funny face at the ceiling. "Eri, I'm so glad *someone* appreciates my cooking. But Shinsou is getting better at it, right? We'll get him there!" Yama looks at her kind of like he looks at Zawa when he wants to make him play-mad by poking him a lot, then asks, "Is there anyone my little bean might want to marry someday, though?"

Eri tilts her head to think better, and hums because she knows a whole lot of people now. "If I marry Mirio, then we could play a lot of games all the time and have fun, but Momo is a lot of fun too, and Kami said she's gonna be someone's perfect wife when she grows up, but I think he was talking to Jirou when he said that."

Yama nods kind of serious. "That is true. You might not want to get involved with a woman who might already be involved with someone else. It might turn out to be pretty messy." But Yama smiles, and makes sure all of her hairs are in her braid before he pokes her horn and her nose. "But luckily, those romantic plans are pretty far in the future! 12 years at least, even though I'm pretty sure Shou would prefer 40."

Eri would have to be *really* old if she waited until Zawa said it was okay for her to marry anyone, so maybe getting married isn't a good thing. But that's okay, because Eri doesn't have to get married like Sailor Moon did, and she can be like all the other Sailor Scouts who didn't really get married at all, even though they had a lot of crushes.

"And you know," Yama says, and he gets a kind of serious look on his face, but somehow his eyes

are happy instead of sad. "I love you too, little bean. I love you like you're family to me too."

That still makes Eri's face feel hot, and Yama laughs a little, which makes her a little mad. "I love you too," Eri says, because she kind of wants to see if Yama's face will get red too, and maybe she won't feel mad if she can laugh at him too, and his face really does get red.

But Zawa's face gets a whole lot redder when she wakes him up to tell him that she loves him.

*

He had been on the edge of sleep, but felt too stretched out in place as he stared at his closet, knowing that if he did fall back to sleep, Eri would just wake him up to get ready. He feels the haze of that ability to drowse and fall back asleep, but even when he moves his arms and legs, curling his arms closer around Mocha, he still feels it. And he knows it's different.

He still feels like seeing his mother was a mistake, that he didn't find the ground he was searching for. He found *ice*, ice he keeps slipping on. He feels like there's part of him that was ripped out and left in that interrogation room, and he hasn't felt completely whole since. He can't get her voice out of his head. He feels like he's even more broken-

"...school," Aizawa mumbles, and he seems half-asleep. 27 isn't, because he feels himself cracking like glass under pressure, and he doesn't know if Aizawa sees that. If they're ever going to *blame* him for this, for being stupid and broken.

He sits up, tucking Mocha between two of his pillows and feels like holding him in his arms this entire time was a mistake. He feels like he's completely unprepared to pretend like he hadn't just slipped away from every word that would have allowed him to play that off. Aizawa is in his room, which is weird, and he was talking about school. And he has no idea what response he's supposed to give to any of that.

And more stupidly, he wishes he could just curl himself around Mocha and pretend that none of this was happening. Aizawa might see that, even when he's half-asleep his eyes seem to hold too much power, because he looks at him and 27 is convinced that he *knows*. "Toshinori offered to cover my classes if you wanted to stay home today."

That's probably the gist of what he said the first time, but he repeated it with different words. He doesn't know when the end to this odd stalemate will come, when he can find out whether they just have so much pity for him that they can't find a reason to mock him, or if they're just biding their time until he does something too stupid for him to come back from. Or if they're just waiting until the end of the investigation, so they can get rid of him. Their patience comes because there's an end in sight, despite what Yamada says, because Aizawa clearly doesn't feel the same way. '*Stay.*'

He knows it's the wrong choice. He knows that he just wants to stay in bed, with Mocha in his arms, and pretend like none of this ever happened. Pretend that he'd never heard those words, *I would have burned you.*

He wants to forget what he knows for a fact now. Her shaking hands, her whitened hair, the clumsy fractured words she said. He knows he drove her crazy, to the point where she would have killed him if she didn't sell him. At least he knows why he was cheap.

But he wishes that he could feel guilty for that, like he should, instead of blaming her. Wishing it could have been different.

Aizawa isn't there, and he must have slipped again. Eri walks into the room, and he knows he

needs to stay. “I’m gonna miss you at school, Twenny! But Zawa said you’re not feeling good, so it’s okay if you don’t miss me this time ‘cause I don’t want you to feel bad.”

He wishes she could command him like that, could make this any easier, just by saying he’s not allowed to miss her. But he tries to smile for her. “It’s just today, I’ll be better by the time you get home. I promise.”

She offers a smile that’s probably as shaky as his, and curls a pinkie finger around his before he can make his hands move to accept it. “I love you.”

He loves this. If love is an obsessive flood of warmth in his chest, something that almost feels crazy and complete, then he loves this. It’s a warmth that floods him, and finally makes him feel real enough to smile fully for her.

He just wishes that feeling, or any feeling, would stay when Eri and Yamada leave.

*

Aizawa finds himself drinking a second cup of coffee, standing alone in the kitchen, completely at a loss.

He knew Hizashi would have rather taken the day off, but when Hizashi received that offer from Toshinori, Aizawa had mumbled that he could stay home instead, still barely awake with only the hazy idea that he should. As much as he knows that Shinsou is probably overwhelmed right now, with a sight and experience they tried to keep him from, he knows his husband feels the same strain keenly. He knew it by the way Hizashi muttered about that ‘Steady Shou routine’ that he thought it would be useful, offering neutrality for Shinsou to ground himself into where Hizashi might make overtures that would be more emotionally overwhelming.

He knows Hizashi has crossed the line, that he thinks of Shinsou less of a ward and more of something that would be reckless for them both. This situation only seems to prove further how ill-suited they would be to take care of Shinsou long-term, when once again they have failed to keep him safe.

He just wishes it could be easier. That they could just keep Shinsou safe from Miasma, an easy thing to do on UA’s fortified campus, instead of trying to keep him safe from painful memories that seem to be a near-constant in his life, from the moment that he was born. It seems like every name he was given, even his birth name, has been a curse for the kid and a promise of misery.

He can’t get the number out of his head.

He didn’t want to know. Somehow, it was easier to see the 28 million that Chisaki had paid, to see that receipt before he ever truly met Shinsou. Aizawa knew it would be worse, to know what Shinsou’s own *mother* had sold him for, and even if no number could be easier to stomach, the one that Hizashi had choked out with gritted teeth was one of the worst.

112 thousand yen.

Aizawa has had bounties for criminals worth more than that. Two months rent at his first efficiency apartment was worth more than that. There wasn’t a single number that could measure Shinsou’s worth, that would be worth trading a child for, and even if Aizawa believes Shinsou Ui’s story that she sold him cheaply *intentionally* so Shinsou wouldn’t have a greater debt to pay back, he can’t imagine it. A small amount of cash in exchange for a priceless child, and how much that cost Shinsou in the long run.

Aizawa didn't want to answer the phone call when he finally hears the ringtone, but he still found himself doing so, casting a wary look down the hall towards Shinsou's room. "Present Mic should be your first point of contact."

Naomasa makes a tired huff of acknowledgement to that, and Aizawa can hear the ancient coffee machine at the station rattling to life in the background. *"I'll make a note of that from now on, just wanted to see if I could catch you before.... Isn't it a school day?"*

There are very few times where Aizawa has seen Naomasa work himself to this point, where the detective seems to forget time and space and surroundings after doggedly chasing that lead. Given what he heard from Hizashi, and the reason Naomasa would be calling, he hopes he's caught it. "I'm skipping, but I don't have time for anything that could have been an email."

He hears snatches of conversations quickly pass in the silence from Naomasa that follows, before he hears a door shut. Naomasa retreating to his office, which indicates that it *is* important. *"I don't know what Present Mic told you about that meeting, but... Shinsou Ui isn't insane. She's only incoherent when she talks because she has a very... specific brain tumor."*

Aizawa doesn't blame the early hour or lack of coffee for his inability to feel pity upon receiving that news. "So, she was able to be more coherent in order to tell you that."

"Wrote out a full confession on a laptop. When she speaks, it's - you know, but writing things down seems to work for her. She even explained how she was planning on hiding that until the clock ran out," Naomasa explains, then sighs. *"In terms of the investigation, it's not a lot. Confirmation that they have some connection to Social Services, but she didn't remember the name of the woman who answered her call when she reported herself as a neglectful mother. She described three people, a man who matches the picture of 'Boss' that Chisaki laid out, and a woman who matches the poisoner 'Memory,' who was also the one who visited Shinsou Ui's home under the guise of a Social Services investigator. The other person there was a blonde woman, heavily scarred, with one singular black eye."*

Aizawa remembers that mystery very well, even if he won't bring himself to describe it for Naomasa right now. "From the hospital."

He hears Naomasa hum. *"The woman who pretended to be a nurse in order to make the first attempt on Shinsou's life."*

Someone that Shinsou clearly knows, and has never mentioned. Given that 'Boss' and 'Memory' weren't identified with numbers, that seemed to imply a hierarchy, and that 'Memory' was part of that administration. Perhaps this blonde woman was part of it as well. "Everything I've heard so far could have been an email."

He hears Naomasa huff, before his voice drops lower, becoming more serious. *"It's more about what Shinsou heard during that meeting. Shinsou Ui told him that she 'would have burned him.' What she meant was that she would have killed him, probably through neglect or accident. Due to the tumors that have been making her less and less capable of coherent speech, she tried to put him in foster care because she was also having severe lapses in her memory at the time, violent mood swings, seizures. She's gotten some form of treatment in France, but she was honestly convinced at the time that Miasma was a form of specialized foster care when she sold him. She couldn't have taken care of him without help. And she felt like she hadn't established a maternal bond with Shinsou, that she 'didn't love him,' because she was under the influence of Shinsou's father's quirk when she was giving birth to him."*

Yet, 'Shinsou Kita,' the man married to Shinsou Ui on paper, was quirkless. "Is his father alive?"

Aizawa asks, now that it's become a reasonable question.

"No, he did die in that traffic accident. Sato Hiroto stole Shinsou Kita's identity to cover up his criminal history, when he tried to get a clean start to make a family with Shinsou Ui," Naomasa explains, and while that's an answer to more questions than Aizawa asked, there was one he truly didn't want to.

They knew that Shinsou's father's quirk probably held a stronger resemblance to Shinsou's, given that his mother's Polyglot quirk didn't seem to resemble Brainwashing at all, but there were implications with that. Sato Hiroto having a criminal past was certainly not a surprise, but the knowledge that there might have been a happy family home in Shinsou's distant past is one.

"Shinsou Ui still doesn't... always seem to understand the gravity of what she's done. There are a few emails I've sent to you and Present Mic that she wanted her son to have. Family videos," Naomasa says, and he says that with the same uncertainty that Aizawa does when he thinks about showing those to Shinsou. Shinsou wanted to know, wanted to have that reconnection with his early childhood, but even innocent and happier times would be bittersweet with the knowledge that it changes nothing. *"With the confession, she's being charged, but I expect a light sentence. Plenty of evidence for her insanity defense."*

"Who would be the point of contact for that?" Aizawa asks, even if he barely should.

Shinsou Ui 'not understanding' may mean that she would still attempt to be part of Shinsou's life, she would still try to make decisions for his care once those parental rights are made available to her. While Aizawa imagines that her court case would take place in the future, postponed until the entirety of Miasma's existence could be made known to the world, the timing and handling of that might be crucial.

While Eri's mother had voluntarily waived any right to control her daughter's future, Shinsou Ui could still decide whether Shinsou *could* be placed in foster care or not, or if he would be placed in a childcare institution to wait until the end of his legal minority or until Shinsou Ui had served her time. Until Shinsou Ui could be evaluated as a 'fit caretaker' for the son that she *sold*.

That would all hinge on whether she would be deemed unfit due to the insanity defence that she *might* plead, a defence that would place *her* in an institution until she was deemed fit to return to society. While neither option is the best for either Shinsou, Aizawa is far more interested in his ward's best interests. *"I'll keep my eyes on it, of course. Investigating detective, and, you know. Someone who wants what's best for Shinsou."*

Aizawa finds himself going a bit cold from relief that Naomasa was making this call, knowing that Sansa would have some playful teasing about adoption procedures if he were the one to deliver the update. A concern that has clearly gone past teasing in his husband's case.

"That's why I called, you know. The kid got some wrong answers, and he deserves the right ones," Naomasa says, and that seems to explain the state that he was in when he first called. Naomasa probably stayed up all night or at least late into it to find those answers for Shinsou, something that might settle the kid back into his skin after the shock of meeting his mother like that.

But that leaves Aizawa with the question of whether it would.

Aizawa takes another sip of coffee after he ends the call with Naomasa, refusing to look at the clock and imagine what kind of questioning Toshinori is weathering through with his homeroom class. Bakugo at least has some idea of what happened last night, and will loudly demand answers. Aizawa instead tries to pull forward the facts of his present situation.

Shinsou dissociated clearly in the meeting with his mother, but Hizashi said he also indicated that he was feeling disconnected in a similar way when they first attempted to return to the dorm. It would be rational that Shinsou would retreat from his current situation, discovering from his mother's own mouth that he could have been killed by her hands, that she never felt a maternal bond with him, and that alone isn't the whole of the horror. Aizawa knows for himself that Shinsou Ui *seems* like she has Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, even if she doesn't, and he knows that Shinsou seems almost obsessive over his worry that he could cause that.

Shinsou opened Pandora's box, despite their efforts to keep him from it when they knew he wasn't ready, and that no one would be ready in a situation like that. There is no way to hide those horrors, and Aizawa knows very well they can't properly help Shinsou cope with them. But something catches in his mind when he wonders why Shinsou had so doggedly pursued this issue, what he *really* wanted from his mother.

I don't know. I want to know.

Shinsou signed those words when Aizawa refused to let him meet his mother the second time, after he had laid out his exact and disturbing reasons to see his mother in that essay. At the time, Aizawa thought he was seeking proof to be verified with his own eyes that he did or did not give his mother Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, but the more that Aizawa thinks beyond that situation, he sees something more beneath the surface.

When Hizashi first started his scrapbook-making hobby, he had a pained wince when he admitted he had no 'real' pictures of himself before he was nine years old. Apart from portraits with white backgrounds, pictures taken by foster care institutions or caseworkers to coldly document what Hizashi looked like that year, possibly only needed if he went missing, Hizashi's first 'real' picture of himself was taken when he was first fostered with his mothers. It was a collection of snapshots, Hizashi playing on a swingset and smiling at a family restaurant. To Hizashi, those pictures served a purpose beyond knowing what he looked like, it was a way of remembering where he had been, what he had been doing when those memories faded with the passage of time.

A way of knowing who he was, even when he was no longer that young boy with a crooked grin and ill-fitting glasses.

Aizawa doesn't see his own childhood the same way. He's glad to forget, and he looks forward to the day that all those memories are gone, when he can only clearly remember his first taste of freedom with high school and UA, when his life *truly* began. But Shinsou probably feels differently.

Even if Shinsou has more reasons to forget, he has more reasons to want to remember. He's never held ownership over himself, and more than the possibility that he wanted to imagine a happier time in his life now forgotten and lost to him, he probably wanted to know what he had been through from the beginning. To at least claim ownership over himself by knowing where his body had been, even if he has completely changed as a person.

He stops by the office, taking the time to review the files that Naomasa sent. It feels prying, it feels *incredibly* invasive, but he can't show these things to Shinsou blindly. What he sees there confirms his suspicions, that Shinsou Ui was a drastically different person before her husband's accident. The woman who would smile and hold Shinsou in her arms, who would laugh and smile at her husband who barely exists in these videos either, is completely different to the Shinsou Ui that he met.

He finds a video that he almost wants to send to Hizashi immediately, but knowing that Hizashi wouldn't be able to handle viewing it when he still needed to be present for his classes and for Eri,

he doesn't. But he wonders what Shinsou will think upon seeing it, if he wants to.

When he knocks on the open door, it takes a while for the answering clap to allow him to enter. Shinsou is sitting at his desk, his history workbook open but nothing written, his laptop open as though he's still searching for answers. Aizawa hasn't checked the keylogger on his phone, and he wishes that he didn't need it. That he and Shinsou could simply talk about these painful things.

Aizawa sets a cup of coffee on the desk beside Shinsou, before he sits on the nearest corner of the bed. Shinsou's gaze lingers over the coffee, slowly turning to look at Aizawa, and Aizawa notices the stuffed cat still tucked in the bend of Shinsou's arm.

'Mocha,' a piece of Shinsou's childhood that they accidentally stumbled upon early on. A stuffed animal that Hizashi said Shinsou had to burn at Miasma, his anger when he recounted that part of the meeting so present that Aizawa wonders if that was intentional on Miasma's part. To force Shinsou to give up every ounce of childhood innocence he had left in such a brutal way, to become the tool they envisioned. A tool that Shinsou didn't become, instead becoming the teenager sitting and staring at Aizawa with both fear and loss that Aizawa has no way to truly ease for him.

"You have a lot to think about, after meeting your mother," Aizawa says, painful answers and worse implications that are a cause to grieve. "It takes time to sit with that, and accept it. That you can be failed by people that society deems are infallible."

Hizashi himself slips up, forgetting that Aizawa's mother is physically alive, but dead to him. His father was never there enough to be remembered, not enough to matter. The man never had any intentions of playing that paternal role, but Aizawa respects him for that more given how often his mother's attempts to do so turned sour.

"Your mother doesn't have to matter to you," Aizawa says, because he's done that himself. He's grieved with every trip from his grandfather's home to his mother's, every quick return back. When he stepped foot in his first efficiency apartment at the age of 14, turning the lights on and realizing that he was completely free now, and completely *alone*. It was nearly enough to make him collapse.

He wanted to wail against how wrong that was, a feeling that festered when he saw parents meeting their children outside of UA's gates with every holiday break or big event. When he drove himself to the limit during his first Sports Festival, when he kept pushing after that because the top of the podium meant hope, it meant *meaning*, it meant things that he would never find if he went back to that empty apartment without that gold medal.

He knows that Shinsou hasn't reached that point, that it's only a possibility that he's standing in the threshold of that empty apartment, and hasn't even turned the lights on. He *knows*, but he doesn't have the ability to *feel* it yet, to know the full gravity of that situation. Shinsou didn't seem to know what family names *were* when he asked why Aizawa would call Iida Tenya 'Tenya' in a conversation about both brothers, he couldn't possibly know the horrible weight of every honest question about his family situation that he hasn't encountered yet, but will still have to answer to. That Shinsou will never have a family connection like most people do.

Shinsou proves how little he seems to understand family dynamics when he looks back at the mug of coffee, then signs. '*Don't want name. Not S-H-I-N-S-O-U.*' Shinsou hesitates, and Aizawa knows he knows his request won't be granted before he even signs it, but he pulls an almost invisible wince beforehand. '27.'

"That isn't your name," Aizawa says, *refusing* it with his entire being. He *would not* refer to his ward like that, to use a name that was given to him, another price that this child paid after Shinsou

Ui sold him. “If you feel like giving up your family name would help you, that’s fine. But that name wasn’t given to you to be yours either.”

‘27’ was a name given to a child, meant to be a label on a *product*. The teenager under his care is *not* a product, he’s not a *thing* that can be sold or bought for *112 thousand yen*. He is a person, and he deserves his own identity.

“We know that Eri’s family name is Hanabusa,” Aizawa says, and he sees his ward look at him as though that is news to him. While his ward was the one to confirm that Eri was related to the previous head of the 8 Precepts, he may not have known the specific name that would carry over to her. “We haven’t told her that, or that her mother terminated her parental rights to her voluntarily. Eri is her own person, apart from that.”

Aizawa considered it, taking Hizashi’s family name if only to absolve himself of the weight of his own, but he refused to. He made his name his own, separate from his family. The people closest to him don’t refer to him by that name anyway. ‘*H-I-T-O-S-H-I*.’

Aizawa meets his ward’s eyes after he sees that, sees that the teenager in front of him is unsure of that name as well. He might just be asking if that is his given name, the name that marks him as a separate member of the Shinsou family, the name that was given to promise him a sense of identity. “Hitoshi.”

The weight of that name settles easier than it should. Aizawa is still too aware of what that name can mean, what it can imply, and how it *shouldn’t* settle so well. He’s known Hitoshi for a month, and still feels like he barely knows him, that he can barely take care of him like he should. He knows how elated Hizashi would be elated if this name was insisted upon with him too.

He knows it probably settles so easily in a way that explains why he was irritated that Naomasa would use it so casually in that meeting with Shinsou Ui.

Hitoshi nods, the barest twitch of a smile at the corner of his mouth. ‘*Different*.’ Different seems to be a relief, an oddly important one, but Aizawa pieces it together the more he thinks about that word and that name. Shinsou Ui would have called him ‘Hitoshi,’ but from Aizawa’s mouth, it feels different, in a relieving way.

It’s dangerous for him to ignore the implications of that, but Aizawa does. “Hizashi told me about the ‘Stop’ system. I want to discuss something that might be overwhelming for you, and I want you to use that if you begin to feel overwhelmed.”

Hitoshi straightens, his face almost seems too guarded, too much of a reason to not offer this already, but his eyes seem more open and curious than Aizawa has ever seen before. Aizawa curls his hands around his coffee mug, and decides to risk it.

“Your mother doesn’t have Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome. She has a...unique brain tumor,” Aizawa says, ‘unique’ being a kinder term than ‘horrifying.’ “From your father’s quirk.”

There’s a twitch at the corner of Hitoshi’s jaw, but no request to stop this discussion. He likely knows nothing about his father, and has probably never wondered what his quirk would be.

“Your father’s quirk, Zombie, could control people much like your quirk, but he would create that control with small worms that would-”

‘*Stop*.’

Aizawa stops, as soon as he sees that shaky sign. Hitoshi stares at his folded hands, his breathing

coming too quick, but before Aizawa can call for his attention to guide that breathing back to normal, Hitoshi looks at him.

'Picture. Father. Please.' Aizawa nods and stands, wondering if somehow 'Sato Hiroto' wasn't as dead as he seemed, or if Hitoshi had meant some secret relation that had a similar quirk. What would inspire that panic to come on so quick, and so violently.

Hitoshi follows him to the office, and the laptop already had the necessary folder open. Aizawa finds one of the few pictures that doesn't have Shinsou Ui to show Hitoshi what his father looked like.

Hiroto honestly doesn't seem to look like Hitoshi at all, a lanky young man with black hair and brown eyes, and all that Aizawa knows about him for a fact is that he is dead and he had a criminal past. But there's an undeniable affection in his eyes when he looks at his son cradled in his arms.

The young Hitoshi in this picture is scarcely more than an infant, scarcely looks like the teenager at Aizawa's side, but the under eye-circles he always seems to have seemed to have started early with the light purple bruising under Hitoshi and Hiroto's eyes, that messy purple hair still wild. Purple eyes that seem so much wider, despite being so much smaller, with a blank faced innocence directed at the camera, and presumably at Shinsou Ui holding it.

Aizawa doesn't know what Hitoshi feels when he looks at this picture, but he looks out of the corner of his eye and sees Hitoshi slowly sitting down, eyes still locked on the screen. He imagines this stirs up more than he thought it would.

Aizawa tilts his head, wondering if it would be right to tell Hitoshi where this picture came from, that all of those videos and photos he had saved were rightfully Hitoshi's. If these things could be what Hitoshi was searching for all along, if there was any sweetness to be found in the bitterness that there was such a tragic end to what seems like familial bliss. "You can look through them."

Aizawa tilts the laptop towards Hitoshi. He puts everything that he can under Hitoshi's control, so that maybe he feels like he can control it. Even if everything else had been stripped away from Hitoshi at some point, from his name to his unscarred skin to even the purple shade of his hair, this is all that Aizawa can give, and he's not truly giving it as much as transferring it from Shinsou Ui to her son.

Hitoshi shakes his head, before it falls forward, that panic that had stilled so quickly when he saw that picture seemingly flooding into relief. That doesn't seem to last either, when Hitoshi brings his hands up to run through his hair, still not looking at Aizawa when they drop to sign.

'What. In exchange.' Despite Hitoshi being the one to offer it, there's another small shake of his head that already seems to sense that this is *given*. That Aizawa would ask *nothing* from this.

But he does. "Does it help to have this?" Aizawa asks, because he hopes it's more than what it is, he hopes it's *enough*.

In a way he's almost ashamed of, he hopes that Hitoshi simply doesn't understand the gravity of what was taken from him, and he can take these pictures and videos to be more meaningful than they are, to be *enough*. To give him that sense of knowing who he always was by seeing how it could have always been for him, to see that Shinsou Hitoshi that was cared for and brought into a world without the intentions to ever have his life turn out the way it did.

There's a clench in Hitoshi's jaw, an undeniable anger burning in his eyes, that tells Aizawa that it isn't enough, that it's an insultingly poor effort. Aizawa doesn't disagree with that. He knows

there's nothing that can be found in these memories, no explanations that can ever measure up to what was taken. 112 thousand yen cost *too much*.

And still, Aizawa has to try. To offer something.

"Your father used his quirk on your mother, and whether it was impossible to remove or not, the part of his quirk that controlled her died at the same time he did. Those foreign bodies in her brain caused her to have problems in caring for you," Aizawa says, even if he refuses to let himself imagine it. 'Lapses in memory, violent mood swings.' Hitoshi was three years old when his father died, a *toddler*. Completely reliant on Shinsou Ui's care. "She contacted Social Services to have you placed in a better situation. But Miasma had ties there."

Aizawa read the confession twice. The first time was to take it in, to know what happened, and the second to figure out what he could say to explain it more palatably. He already knows that Miasma has also turned police officers into double agents, that those who find themselves in Miasma's web will find themselves trapped. But Aizawa would have taken his chances with trying to run, and he imagines it's not just because he's a hero. He imagines there are many people who would have risked their lives for the chance that their child would escape that bleak future.

Shinsou Ui wasn't one of them. "It shouldn't have turned out like this. I'm sorry."

'*Hair. Fine,*' Hitoshi signs, his hands shaking and his glare fixed on the desk rather than the screen. Refusing to look at him either way. '*Hands. Fine. Did that. Didn't.*'

His mother didn't sell him because she had Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome. Hitoshi never caused that with his quirk, and probably can't. As much as that should have been a relief, it's not, because Hitoshi now finds himself with a truth less understandable than the one he's relied on until now. He had no control over the course of his life at 4 years old, he never had that control, and that his tragedy began in a series of failures, the root of which was Miasma's influence. "Your mother has never had Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome. She didn't...."

Aizawa can't even bring himself to say it.

He's known. He knew what Chisaki did when Hitoshi was only 12 years old. He knew when Hitoshi told him about his 'jobs,' and he suspected it before that. The child sitting next to him, nearly shaking in anger and still *far* too silent about it had been sold and rented, money exchanging hands in return for scars and pain and sorrow that he had no choice but to bear. Aizawa has *known that*.

And he can't even *say it*. '*What. In exchange,*' Hitoshi signs, his hands still shaking and his eyes still narrowed. Aizawa sees that stuffed cat pulled even tighter to Hitoshi where it's still tucked under his elbow. '*Why?*'

That's a question Aizawa can never answer. There's not a single answer that will ever be enough.

He imagines that the lights of that lonely efficiency apartment are on, and that Hitoshi is still standing at the threshold, still trapped and waiting for someone's voice to welcome him home. Even if he knows it won't come.

"You're not alone now," Aizawa says. He feels the silence answering him like he's never felt it before, as though *he's* the one talking to himself in that old efficiency, like he used to when it was too much. "You were alone, and you shouldn't have been. You were failed, and you shouldn't have been. There is nothing that will take that back."

If there was, Aizawa would take it back. He would pull everything back to that moment it began to spiral into ruin, he would take that awful question that Hitoshi can't even *say* to be meaningless. He would write a history that doesn't have a reason to be questioned, that would never bear the weight of that *horrible* 'Why.'

"You're here, and you're moving forward," Aizawa says, even if he can't see that future either. He knows the degree to which he can shape it, and he will make every effort to make sure that it's right. That Hitoshi won't look back after his wardship ends and his slate is cleaned, that everything painful here is severed and he can begin again. That he'll come to a day where that 'Why' doesn't matter, when the answer comes in the peace that follows. "It will never be like that for you again. It's over."

He wishes it were as simple as saying so, that those horrible feelings would follow logic, that they wouldn't linger.

But Aizawa knows well enough that it's not.

'Not. Mistake. Away,' Hitoshi signs, the shaking gone but the stillness almost brittle, still fearful and somehow guilty when Hitoshi looks at him. *'Not here.'*

Hitoshi feels disconnected, because there is no connection to be made. There's nothing that can truly pull him out of that dark misery in knowing that there's no answer, that healing from that pain will not come in looking backwards. "You're here. And it's fine if it doesn't feel like you are."

Hitoshi looks confused, a pull between his eyebrows that smoothes out, that wants a better answer. Aizawa doesn't have one, but he knows what that feels like.

There were spaces in time where it was easier to fall into that un-reality, rather than feel the full weight of his mother's stare. To feel the couch or the chair he was sitting on fall away from him, to feel every sensation muting or shrinking deeper into himself. Oddly enough, the best solution that he had found came long after those experiences. "It's fine if this doesn't work for you, but you can try using this."

Aizawa stands and walks to the closet where Hizashi keeps most of his spare hero costumes, and where Aizawa keeps his capture scarf on the rare occasion it's not on his person. He walks back with the familiar bands feeling oddly heavy in his hand, with the weight of Hitoshi's focused stare on it, knowing that this exercise isn't just uncomfortable for him.

"Breathing or grounding exercises can help, but so can focusing on something small that you can control and hold in your hands," Aizawa says, and the thing he's holding in his hand, offering to Hitoshi isn't small.

His capture scarf has always been his, it's entirely an extension of himself to the point that he's sure if it were damaged in a fight, he'd flinch and expect to feel pain. He knows that Hitoshi might reject it, because Hitoshi knows somewhat of how it works. To manipulate the scarf, Hitoshi would have to develop a keener sense of his own quirk, and he probably hasn't even accepted his quirk. Despite knowing that, despite knowing the logical reasons for it, there's an apprehension held tight in Aizawa's chest when he thinks it might hurt him if Hitoshi rejects using it.

But Hitoshi holds out his hands, arms still braced against his legs. Aizawa lays the capture scarf across his hands and sits, almost jolts when he sees Hitoshi's arms raise upwards. "It's better not to wear it around your neck until you master controlling it."

He nearly strangled himself a few times doing that, and it seems he had good reason to worry as

the capture scarf nearly flies out of Hitoshi's hands before he grabs it. It still squirms, the end tugging a loop through one of Hitoshi's hands, before it falls limp. Hitoshi still stares at it, and looks up in near awe when he looks at Aizawa.

It's an expression so like the images of that young boy Aizawa had spent nearly an hour looking at that he can't help a fond smile. "It responds-" Aizawa stops, watching the scarf begin to squirm again, just to confirm his suspicions. "To a unique signal in your quirk. You can learn how to manipulate that freely."

But the capture scarf responding before Hitoshi learned to do that confirmed one thing about his quirk. That it didn't entirely rely on his voice.

Hitoshi had been able to use his quirk on Eri without a verbal response from her, or a verbal response from him. Whether it was mere repetition or the deep level of trust between the two wards, that seemed to be an example of the height of Hitoshi's abilities. To take control over another person without a single word being said, or a nonverbal cue being enough.

He sees Hitoshi run his thumb over the white band, he sees that same familiar furrow, and it almost surprises him to see the scarf still again. Hitoshi might have actually mastered that in *minutes*. "E..."

Aizawa mentally tries to smooth over his singing nerves, the shock of hearing that one syllable with Hitoshi's voice. He's heard that voice enough directed at others, directed at a few of his students and Eri, but he wonders if Hizashi nearly flinched the few times he heard it as well. Or if Hizashi had a reason to believe that surprising voice would be forthcoming in those rare moments, when Hizashi had clearly earned the trust for it.

Aizawa doesn't speak, doesn't want to interrupt, and nearly wonders if Hitoshi were trying to say *Eraserhead*, but he sees the capture scarf neatly folded across Hitoshi's knee, before he signs. 'Essay. In trouble. Not....'

It's utterly confusing, until Aizawa realizes Hitoshi spends *too much* time with a few of his students in *particular*. "You're not in trouble for using your quirk on the capture scarf. Or for..."

Hitoshi *should* be in trouble for going off campus like he did, lying to both himself and Hizashi about his whereabouts, going expressly against their wishes to see his mother, and *probably* manipulating Toshinori to go along with it though the retired hero seems convinced that *he* was the one practically forcing Hitoshi to go. But Aizawa will gladly place the blame on Toshinori instead of salting an already clear wound.

"You're not in trouble for visiting your mother either. But I hope you understand that Hizashi and I need to know where you are, and that we have the right to make decisions you don't agree with," Aizawa says, but when Hitoshi glances away with a firmness in his frown, he realizes it's not that simple. "It's for your best interests, not just because we can. And when we disagree, you can make your voice heard, even if Hizashi and I don't change our minds."

He sees a twitch at the end of Hitoshi's eyebrow, and a particularly dry look reminds him, 'Can't. I'm mute.'

Aizawa would be lying if he said that he didn't feel a bit left out of that joke. "Then, you can write an essay filled with all the critiques you have about your care. I'm sure Hizashi will even put a sticker on it."

There's a huff that finds amusement with that, what Aizawa knows for a near-fact would happen.

As much as it is difficult to punish a kid who had been punished enough for things that weren't under his control, Hitoshi was probably the only teenager in the world who needed encouragement to act out a bit, and find that the punishments he had come to expect didn't belong in the world he now lived in. That he was free, and the worst that could happen to him now was being grounded. Not that Aizawa was entirely convinced that would be disciplinary given Hitoshi's choice in friends.

Hitoshi glances back at the laptop, the image of his father and his younger self still displayed. He sees the amusement from before drain away, and whatever Hitoshi feels when he looks back on those memories lost to him, Aizawa still doesn't know it. "There's more, if you want to look--"

Hitoshi shakes his head, and looks instead at the capture scarf, curling a hand over where it rests before he raises his hands to sign. '*Here. But. Want to learn. If okay.*'

It might be hypocritical of him, but Aizawa thinks when Hitoshi looks at him like that, he can deny him nothing.

*

Yamada had to wait in *near agony* for two classes, but when the bell for lunch rings, he practically beats his students out the door.

With his favorite little bean at his side, of course, holding onto his hand and reminding him that little legs can only carry a little bean so fast compared to his. "Did you put secret apple overs in your lunch, Yama?"

Yamada almost laughs, his sweet little Eri being convinced that some apple pastries were the reason he was so eager to get to the teacher's lounge for lunch. "Nope! No secret apple overs today, but we do have some apple bunnies to slice up when we get to lunch!"

He thinks the secret to making sure Eri isn't too terribly distracted by the lack of 'Twenny's at lunch might be a few more apple treats in her bento box, but he hasn't thought to try it until today. And while he is reassured by Shouta's text that those misunderstandings had been cleared up with Hitoshi, and that he seemed to be doing a bit better for it, he's still *itching* to get to a computer and pull up everything that Naomasa emailed to them.

Well, not everything. He doesn't give a rat's ass about Shinsou Ui's confession, and it's hard to care about much when he knows *there are pictures of Hitoshi when he was a baby* that he could be seeing.

They only have two pictures of Eri before she was rescued. When the 8 Precepts compound was thoroughly searched, they were found in a desk that didn't seem to belong to Chisaki, possibly kept by her grandfather. Yamada hasn't found a place for them yet, hasn't brought himself to fill out the first page in Eri's dedicated scrapbook because of it. A sleeping baby, those red eyes closed and that tiny horn little more than a nub, bundled up in a pink hospital blanket, and a two year old girl smiling brightly at the camera in a frilly pink dress.

It's the smile that Yamada worries about. He knows that Eri will have questions one day, she'll want to know, but he doesn't want to risk letting Eri find that picture and somehow feel worse about those shaky smiles that mean so much more after all she's had to go through.

But he thinks that his little bean might also be excited about some 'baby Twenny' pictures, which is why he doesn't try to angle the computer monitor away after setting up lunch. He carves up an apple so it doesn't have time to turn brown, and takes the juice box from her hands when she offers

it, a good attempt made to puncture the straw in by herself. And he has to remind himself to take at least one bite of lunch before he dives into getting those *pictures* in front of his *eyes*.

And he nearly drops his chopsticks when he sees there are *videos* too.

It's not creepy, and it's not like this is reserved to Hitoshi. He wrestled and whined with Shouta for *years* before he got those baby pictures and videos from him, something he felt guilty about later when he found out Shouta never wanted to keep those things for himself and had to suffer through a phone call and nearly a lunch-date with his mother to get them. But there's just something special, something so nearly-astonishing about seeing the younger versions of the people that he loves, and as much as some might cower in embarrassment about it, he's never felt ashamed.

He can't feel ashamed of the first nine years of his life anyway, not the right way, and even if he still can't remember what was so enthralling about tigers to his 10 year old self, he's never shied away from showing off those pictures.

He knows Hitoshi might. He knows Hitoshi has gotten the hang of being embarrassed about baby pictures when he only had one in his possession courtesy of Ashido, and *might* not be terribly fond of Yamada taking liberties here when they were on offer courtesy of Naomasa's thoughtfulness. But absolutely nothing is going to make him regret this.

"Babe, that is hideous. Why did you buy that-"

Yamada regrets it. Probably.

It's a little hard to tell what exactly he feels when he's looking at Hitoshi. As a toddler.

Wearing his merch.

Yamada stares at the paused video for too long, not entirely sure that he's breathing, and not entirely convinced that he's seeing this. But Eri kicking out her feet to try to scoot her chair closer, inadvertently kicking his leg serves just as well as a pinch. He's not dreaming.

He's not sure he *would* be dreaming about this.

He got signed on as a sidekick to the first flashy agency that offered after he graduated, and that agency pumped out merch like nothing else. It seemed like the first month that he was a *professional* hero was filled with more interviews, merch consultations, and costume planning sessions than actual work, and the marketing heads got the *particularly* bright idea to capitalize on a crossover of hero merch and tacky baby clothes to make *that* particular abomination.

'Hear me shout!' the grinning cartoon of his younger self, still wearing bright red speakers on his shoulders with a hairstyle not quite as tall screams at the corner of Hitoshi's shirt, the words taking up the most space across the toddler's torso. Oddly enough, there's a huge demand to make fun of or complain about the natural instincts that babies have by making them wear clothes that almost shame them for it, like one of those pictures of a misbehaving pet standing next to a sign they can't read.

Hitoshi can't read that shirt, he's still frozen in place with his arms lifted above his head, a tight grin and eyes directed to someone standing off to the side, mostly concerned with his silent pleas to be picked up.

The black dress slacks barely in the frame, worn by the person Hitoshi is trying to get to pick him up, don't seem to be Shinsou Ui's style.

“That’s Twenny!” Eri says, around a mouthful of apple that he probably should have tried to get her to save for a dessert. Eri’s excitement seems to remind him of what else they would be seeing, or rather hearing, if the video resumes - Shinsou Ui’s voice. Shinsou Ui would be in these videos and pictures too, and while he doesn’t want that woman even *that* close to Eri, even if Eri doesn’t know who she is and never learns, it somehow feels wrong.

But not wrong enough that Yamada doesn’t resume the video. “Yep, that’s our Twenny when he was younger.”

And his father, who leans down and picks him up with an exaggerated huff, who smiles at the toddler wrapping chubby arms around his neck and then at the woman operating the camera, before he pulls one of Hitoshi’s arms away to show off the shirt again. “*Ui, you cannot talk like that about my guy Present Mic. We’re big ol’ Mic-ies, aren’t we bud?*”

Yamada doesn’t know what gives him whiplash more, the name that his hero fans use to set themselves apart from the casual fans of his radio show, or Hitoshi agreeing with a high pitched “*Yup!*”

Hitoshi might *actually* kill him if he finds out that Yamada has watched this video, that he has it. And *will* save it to every storage device he has, and then some. He’ll program it into the goddamn *microwave* somehow. “*And it cost...*”

3000 yen, unless Hitoshi’s father bought the agency bundle, which he didn’t. And he probably didn’t buy the hooded towel set either, which Yamada can’t decide if that’s criminal or if it might possibly save his life.

“*Ma’am, you are aware that the only reason this lovable hunk is standing here, holding this sweet little guy,*” Hitoshi’s father says, curling his fingers into Hitoshi’s side to bring up some giggles. “*And bringing home a nice little bonus this month is because Present Mic saved my life, right? Legally, he’s our favorite hero, so you can come over here and give us-*”

Yamada has never found the sound of a door opening to the teacher’s lounge more blissful, and he only takes a quick look over to see Nemuri and Toshinori standing in the doorway before he finds the words to choke out. “Defenestration break, take over the little bean for me!”

Yamada pats Eri on the head when he passes, and he knows she’ll probably have *questions* about this one day if she remembers it, but he hopes Shouta makes enough of a habit of jumping out the window in the teacher’s lounge that she won’t.

Yamada feels his boots crunching on the frosty ground outside more than anything, feels the cold air on his face, but doesn’t feel enough. He feels like he probably needs to scream, he needs to scream until it makes sense, but he just leans back on the cold wall behind him and slides down.

He doesn’t even remember the guy.

Yamada has been a hero for 11 years, but he’s done hero work since he was 16. He doesn’t keep track of how many people he’s saved, that’s something for hero managers to obsess over and the Hero Commission to keep track of, and he imagines he’ll be pleasantly surprised when the final number comes out on a plaque when he retires. He doesn’t remember many faces, they usually wear the same expression of terror when he first sees them, and that tends to blend them together over the years. He can practically *hear* Shouta telling him it’s logical that he wouldn’t remember, but he just.

Shinsou Ui slid off the rails when her husband died. She said that she couldn’t take care of Hitoshi

after that, after those *horrifying* brain worms died and started calcifying in her grey matter. He can't be sure of his math, because he doesn't even *remember*, but the first civilian he saved was a middle aged salaryman with a wing quirk who was almost crushed by a bat quirk villain on the second day of his internship.

When he was 16.

A few more incidents after that, during an exciting internship that meant so much at the time, suddenly might mean so much *more*.

He either saved Hitoshi from probably dying of neglect when he was an infant. Or he doomed him to how everything turned out. If he saved his father's life during that internship, before Hitoshi was even born, that meant he was in the hospital to use his quirk on Shinsou Ui, and put those brain worms in place.

Butterfly effect. Yamada never should have been a hero.

He's still stuck on that thought, still trying to force himself to do the math or at least *remember* if he met Hitoshi's father during that time, because he's sure he'll be able to breathe once he gets that answer. He hears the window slide shut behind him and sees Kayama defenestrate herself. "I might have ruined Hitoshi's entire life."

Kayama just lifts an eyebrow, cocking her head. "That shirt *was* hideous, but Eri wants one now, just so you kno-"

"No, I just-" Yamada tries to will the words to come out, throwing his hands back and forth in front of him, the math he's still stuck on and he *knows* Kayama is better at math, she still remembers how to do percentages and everything. "I saved Hitoshi's dad's life, he gave his mom brain worms when Hitoshi was born, that ruined everything, I don't know *which* came first and I *really* need to know if I-"

He throws his hands a few more times, before Kayama's confusion slowly melts into concern. Or as much concern as she can manage when she still seems confused. "Brain...worms... I guess?"

Yamada practically feels the strain in his eyes from how hard he's staring at Kayama, *begging* her to be right. To at *least* tell him that, so he can believe it for a little while.

"You're 32, Shinsou is 16. Shinsou was born six days before you turned 16, and I remember you couldn't *shut up* about saving a person's life and being a *real hero* when you were only 16-"

"*Thank fucking god*," Yamada groans, and lets himself fall forward, finally able to breathe. But *still* cursing that *infernal* abomination that is math for getting him into this state. "I can't believe I just-wait, how do *you* remember his birthday? And my birthday? You *never* remember *anyone's*-"

"Can we go back to brain worms?" Kayama asks, asking a question that she wasn't read into and *should* be spared the answer to because just those *words* being spoken makes Yamada shudder.

"His dad's quirk. Like those little...*parasites*... that just...." Yamada has seen the videos.

Kayama, in an act crueler than when she 'accidentally' stabbed him in the *upper-upper thigh* with those weaponized stilettos, had *shown* him those videos. Insects invaded with tinier, squirmier, *worse* insects. An entirely too-calm narration over a video of a drowning cricket that explains that the cricket didn't *want* to be anywhere near the water, but the swarm of worms bursting out of its creepy little head *made the cricket do that*.

Yamada isn't quirk-shaming. Hitoshi's father might have been a great guy, who at least had great taste in heroes as one of his fans, as a *Mic-ie*. But he does *not* want to think about how his quirk works, *or* his taste in women.

Present Mic... you were his favorite hero.

Yamada's hands fall to his sides when he remembers that, the words that Yamada thought were almost *worse* than not remembering Hitoshi's stuffed cat's name. He thought she was talking about him being *Hitoshi's* favorite hero, something he was sure wasn't true given the Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats merch, something he's still sure of when he can just tell that the Wild Wild Pussycats would have been more to little Hitoshi's tastes.

Shinsou Ui was talking about her husband being a fan. And pleading for Yamada to take care of her son.

He doesn't have to forgive Shinsou Ui, and the jury is still going to be out until the *real* jury is out, and decides whether she *can* exercise her parental rights over Hitoshi and what she does if she keeps those rights. But he can see another flicker of a woman who *did* want the best for her son, and might still want it. And *better* want it if she has any say in Hitoshi's future, unless she wants an extended cut of what *he* would have to say about it. Bass boosted and everything.

"Seems like you're not the only one hoping that Principal Nezu surprises us with an early release," Kayama says with a groan, stretching her arms above her head. Yamada looks at her, clearly wanting that to happen but with no idea why it *would*, before she drops her arms and grins at him with a bit of menace. "Hey *genius*, you want to take a look around? Mr. Oh-so-professional-saved-a-life-at-16 hero, so *incredibly* aware of your surroundings?"

Yamada just has to turn his head a bit to see the static he was feeling wasn't all inside his skull, so far only white patches on the ground that would be a tough sell to the principal, but the thick flurry pouring from the sky is a better argument. "Oh. It's snowing."

And he's *got* to get his little bean out here to see it.

*

He's definitely here now, definitely *completely* inside his body. Everything is *very* real now.

Especially this headache.

Hitoshi knows the training was his idea, and it helped. He knows he still doesn't *get it*, if he thinks hard enough and mostly just glares hard enough at the capture scarf, he can stop it from moving. He can't make it move by itself all the time. There were a few times where he imagined he was talking and it worked, but even that didn't work every time. It will only reliably move when Aizawa talks, and maybe Aizawa knew that, and talked about pointless things just so he could practice stopping it.

It doesn't make sense, this prickle under his skin that wants to keep at it. To keep training until he reaches some conclusion, until he can at least control when the capture scarf moves even if he can't control *how* it moves. This training was his idea, and it seems like he can decide when to stop, and that barely seems like training because of it.

But even when Aizawa sets down a glass of water and a pill, with instructions to drink the entire glass because it will help, he doesn't want to give back the scarf.

The capture scarf is the most valuable thing Aizawa owns, and he doesn't have to say that for

Hitoshi to know it. He knows that even better now, imagining himself using this scarf in a fight, to have the chance to actually put *distance* between himself and his opponent instead of relying on fractions of a second to react or create a pin. This scarf is more important to Aizawa than Hitoshi's knife, maybe as much as the knives 27 first trained with would have meant to him if he could have kept them. Kept the knives that 50 gave him.

And Aizawa just put it into his hands.

The capture scarf uses his quirk. He's not really using his quirk when he holds it, but he is, and Aizawa is *letting* him use it. When 27 slipped up, when that word almost slipped out, Aizawa didn't react *at all*, and he still hasn't said anything about testing his quirk or getting a muzzle.

Hitoshi doesn't know what to think about that, if it's really true. If none of this is a lie, if he won't wake up tomorrow and find all of the things that could *mean* to just be a test, or something that Aizawa doesn't see fit to bother himself with yet. If his quirk isn't that *dangerous* yet.

But his quirk isn't dangerous. Izuku was right.

He didn't hurt his mother, but his father did. His father's quirk caused his mother to sell him, but even then, it didn't seem intentional. His father looks... like a nice person. A person he can't remember at all, a stranger, but not someone unkind. He looks a little bit like Aizawa.

Hitoshi is just *grateful* he doesn't look anything like Bug. He knows that quirks can be similar in families, and he used to wonder if Hari was somehow related to Eri because of that, but the thought of being *related* to Bug because she also had bugs inside her body as part of her quirk....

Aizawa sets out a pre-made bento box after he takes the medicine, and Yamada probably made it to make sure Aizawa wouldn't cook. He wonders what Yamada would think about calling him 'Hitoshi' instead of 'Shinsou' too, or if he wants to keep calling him 'Shinsou' because it's part of his sign-name. He was almost sure that Aizawa would turn him down, to tell him he couldn't be like Eri and just use his other name, but he didn't. And that name sounded so *different* than the way his mother said it.

And he's glad that Hitoshi can be his name.

Hitoshi. It means 'Person,' and 'Messenger,' or 'Use.' To use a person, or deliver a message.

Shinsou. It means 'Mind,' and 'Manipulate.' To control someone's mind. Brainwashing.

His quirk was there, even in the beginning, even when he was born. It was there before he even developed his quirk, before he was sold. His quirk was written in his name.

But his other name, the other half of it that Ashido said he's always kept, even if he forgot it, meant that he was a person. 'Hito.' Despite everything, he was born to be a person.

He wants to get farther away from those other names, and cling to this one. He wanted the wrong one, and he doesn't want to be 'Shinsou.' He doesn't want his quirk to be all that he is, all of his value. He doesn't want to be what The Miasma bought, what his clients rented, what Chisaki bought. He wants to be *Hitoshi*.

Even if he has to use other people to do that.

He starts to wonder how he can use Aizawa, if he can convince him to let him go to school now even if it's almost over. If it's lunch, Eri and Yamada will come back in a matter of hours, but even that seems too far away now. He knows it's selfish, it's almost like there are thousands of words

trapped in his throat that he *needs* to tell them, but he knows it's not. He just misses them, even if it's only been a few hours since he last saw them.

And he almost wonders if he used his quirk to make that happen when he hears a knock at the door, before he remembers that Yamada has the key. And Yamada wouldn't sound *anything* like that voice. "*Oi, open up! I know Shitsou's in there!*"

Aizawa looks at him, like Hitoshi invited this attention at all, which he didn't. But that stare lingers like he's asking if Hitoshi wants him to open the door, as though that's *his* decision. It's Aizawa's dorm, he's the one who decides who's in it, and he's supposed to be in charge of his students anyway.

Aizawa sighs, making his way *slowly* to the door, as though he's barely awake even though it's long past morning, and if he tried to make a secondary barrier with his body when he opened the door, it was a poor one as Bakugo slips under his arm and jumps over the leg kicked out to catch him. And he looks angry at him for some reason. "Great, you saw your shitty mom, you're logging out and shit, so I had to put this shit together to *stop* that shit."

Bakugo tosses a binder at him for some reason, and at first, it looks like that Meme Study Guide that Sparky made, but it has a different cover. 'Hacks for your dumbass PTSD.' It's written in some really sharp calligraphy, and red ink that looks like blood. It looks like a lot of effort went into it, just by how many pages it has.

"And if *someone* wants to get Shitsou any kind of *actual professional* fucking help sometime, that'd be *fucking great*," Bakugo growls, and Hitoshi glances up to see if Aizawa has the capture scarf back, or if he's going to use it, but he just sees Aizawa and Bakugo glaring at each other. For some reason, he wants to slide some paper in between them to see if it catches on fire. "But a real fucking therapist wouldn't let toss Shitsou in a room to see if something rattles out of his fucked up mom's mouth, so I guess that's-"

"I made All Might take me," Hitoshi argues, because even if it seems like Aizawa won't put Bakugo in his place, Bakugo being angry at anyone but him makes him uncomfortable. It feels like he's being ignored. "And I'm fine now, but thanks."

There are a *lot* of pages in this binder. It's like a scrapbook, with printed pages and scribbles in the margins, but unlike Yamada's scrapbooks, the scribbles are written in red and have a lot of irritated and colorful opinions about symptoms of PTSD. There's a lot of red on the sections about 'Irrational anger.' "You're *fine*. You're fine, even though you were blowing the *shit* out of my phone at 3 *fucking* A.M. After your weird fucking zombie mode shit-"

There's a page that looks like a real scrapbook, and it's the first one on the 'Mildly Logged Out' section. It's pictures of Eri. The one at Shichi-Go-San, the picture of her smiling with her friend Mizzy. There are other pictures he doesn't recognize, Eri smiling shakily at the camera with a pair of rabbits crawling over her lap, Eri sleeping on the 1-A dorm's couch and leaning on Todo's arm, though he stares blankly ahead. Eri sitting on Mirio's shoulders in a crowded place, both of them smiling even though Eri's eyes are on one of the candy apples that Mirio is holding.

Eri is the thinnest in that picture, so he knows it's the oldest one in this collection. He knows from the crowd, the candy apples, the fact that Mirio is there, that it must be from the Cultural Festival she told him about. The first time he saw her after the raid, she told him about how loud it was, how scary it was to be among all those people, but she doesn't look afraid.

He was sure he would never get to see that moment that he missed, that place in time that he was away from her. But most of these pictures seem to hold those fragments that he didn't think he'd

get to have.

“As admirable as this effort is,” Aizawa says, looking a bit less angry, but more exhausted for it, his arms crossed loosely over his chest. “You can’t use your access to the staff dorm in a situation like this to bypass asking for permission. And you’re going to be late for your next class.”

“It’s cancelled,” Bakugo answers, oddly devoid of his usual snarling and yelling, and he digs a hand into his pocket. “Heads up, asshole.”

Bakugo usually doesn’t warn him when he’s going to throw something, and it’s more fun that way, but Hitoshi can’t catch it fully, stunned when he notices that it shatters in his hand before he realizes it’s cold. Before he realizes what it is.

“It’s snowing, and it looks like Nezu’s not breaking out the robots to make everyone get back to their shit-*Oi!*”

Hitoshi has to see it for himself, but even when he’s outside, he doesn’t see it. He doesn’t see *Eri* seeing it, and that’s the part he dreads. She’s never seen snow before, and she’s probably looked out the window to see it. She’s probably already ankle-deep in it like the students spread out across the campus, and he’s *missed* whatever first came to her mind when she saw it. But he has to know if she feels the same way too.

He knows he was born in the summer, and the way he feels about snow has nothing to do with some fondness from his birth. He’s not sure if there is some memory hidden inside of himself that has him almost smiling at this blanket of white, or if it’s just how muted the world is now, how it doesn’t seem so loud.

Even when he had jobs, he would stare at the whiteness that didn’t exist in The Miasma’s compound, that wouldn’t touch the inside of secret warehouses and would melt in the hallways of the 8 Precepts compound. It would feel like something untouchable, something that felt colder than he expected it to be when he picked handfuls of it up on that trip to the bookstore. The first time he could touch it.

There must be some kind of universal appreciation for it, because he’s sure the students who are playing in it, rolling it into spheres and throwing it at each other have been able to touch this snow since they were children. The world is quiet enough with the heavy and hazy drifts still falling on the ground that he can barely hear Bakugo yelling at him while he follows. He’s yelling that it’s cold and he’s going to freeze, as though he’s too stupid to notice the chill biting through his clothes and stinging on his bare skin, but he *has* to see it. He can’t miss Eri’s first snowfall.

He sees it.

He sees Yamada first, the black of his leather jacket and pants dusted white, and that his hair is bent upward and frosted. He sees Yamada smiling down at something on the ground, and he can see Eri’s small arms and legs moving where she’s laying down. He’s seen other students doing that.

Yamada bends further over to offer his hand, and pulls Eri off her feet where she’s clinging to it, before he sets her down closer to him. He can barely hear what Yamada says at this distance, and he can’t see what shape he’s pointing at on the ground. But he can see Eri beaming, her hands fisted in front of her chest in excitement before she jumps and lifts them above her head, and keeps jumping, her long white braid bouncing on her back. She’s saying something he can’t hear, but he doesn’t have to hear it.

He can see it. Eri's first snow, and how excited she is.

There's something cold on the back of his head, and it sticks even where it splatters on his back, flecks of it dripping down his neck. "Oi! You've gotta put on a jacket or some shit, you can't just run out without saying shit- the *fuck* are you smiling at?"

He's smiling. He can't stop, even if that makes Bakugo mad. Even if Bakugo doesn't sound that mad about it anyway. "It's the first time she's seen it. Snow."

Bakugo scoffs, still growling under his breath. "Yeah, well, she's gonna see a lot of it. Don't tell me you're obsessed with Christmas or some shit, if I have to keep you from staying up all night trying to brainwash Santa Claus-"

"He owes me a lot of presents," Hitoshi jokes, letting his smile turn a little sharper at the edges, even if he can't will it completely away, even when he looks at Bakugo's scowling. "Yakuza debts and all. Gotta balance my books."

Bakugo rolls his eyes. "Stupid," he mutters under his breath. "Stupidest fucking mafia scheme I've ever heard of. And if you keep standing here *staring* like some creeper, I'm gonna go over there and roll your little sister complex into a snowball and *throw* her at you."

He feels someone behind him, too close, and wonders how he didn't notice before he feels something being tugged over his head. He turns around to see Aizawa with a jacket and scarf, and oddly enough, is actually wearing a jacket himself. "It's probably going to take a while to drag both of them back inside. You might freeze like this."

He's never considered the possibility of freezing to death. Bug, Chisaki, a bad job, 127 coming to finish him off - those all seemed more likely. But when he has to look away to shrug the jacket on, to pull the scarf and gloves on too, he's almost irritated that Aizawa wouldn't let him risk it. "SHOU!"

"Twenny!" Eri calls to him, but starts running anyway. He finally feels the snow sticking to his heels, he kicked his feet into his shoes without properly putting them on, and as he tries to kick them deeper in he can't quite run to her because of it. "Twenny, I made a snow angel! It's snowing! It's snowing! Snow is so pretty!"

It is pretty. The world is blanketed in white, snowflakes catching on the wisps of Eri's hair, on her clothes, how *happy* she is. He has to dust the snow off of her head, finding more clumps sticking to the back of it. "I want to see."

He wants to see all of it.

Yamada is already taking a picture of the snow angel, and he keeps taking them. Hitoshi knows the camera is divided between himself and Eri, and he can't help but glare when he sees it, when he feels that camera's weight. Even if he can't stop smiling.

They have to make a snowman, which was what the other students were doing when they were rolling the snow into spheres. Even though this place, so close to the building where classes are held, was deserted when they arrived, it seems like either Bakugo's lingering or Eri's presence calls more students over. Yamada almost gets his wish for a snow angel that Hitoshi would make when Ashi nearly tackles him in a hug. "Shinny, it's snowing!"

He can't stop thinking about that name.

He watches the others make a big deal out of it, what seems like all of 1-A seems to gather here to

make the largest snowman possible, something that he slowly backs away from. At first it was because Eri answers every question directed at a rolled up sphere with “Bigger!” Then Quirk Thief shows his ugly mug and starts taunting them about the ice sculptures Class B is making. They want to make a snowman bigger than the building to outdo them, somehow.

‘Shinny.’ It’s Ashi’s name for him. Ashi has always called him that. It’s his.

Not hers.

Not his mother’s. Not his mother, who has white hair like she constantly has these snowflakes caught on her scalp. Where his father’s quirk changed her. Her purple hair, the same shade as his, and he doesn’t know what his hair looks like now, if she’s seeing this same snow too-

He hears a clap over his head, and realizes that snow could be dangerous. He’s far less aware of when people are behind him for some reason, and now he’s staring at Todo who is lowering his hands back to his side slowly. He still doesn’t seem to blink enough. “It’s a spell. To sever the ties that bind you to other people, to your family. I just cut them.”

Todo might be fucking with him again, to think he actually *believes* in spells like that. At least this time, he’s not fucking with him with other people watching, since everyone else seems wrapped up in making this giant snowman.

“So now you can choose who is family to you, with a blank slate. And I can repeat it anytime you want,” Todo says, and Hitoshi wonders. He wonders if that really helps, because he’s sure he can do it himself. He’s sure it’s not magic.

But staring at Todo’s scar, feeling his own scars burn on his face, he wonders. “Does it work for you?” Hitoshi asks, and he didn’t entirely mean to. The words spilled out in the quiet of the snow and didn’t come out right, and he feels the quiet that follows too fully, even if it doesn’t last long.

“Yes,” Todo answers, and those unblinking eyes frost over into white without any of Hitoshi’s intentions. He didn’t feel the string, but he severs it anyway, and he glances around to see if anyone saw. To remember that he shouldn’t have asked in the first place. “You’re easy to talk to.”

Todo has a hand curled under his chin, and Hitoshi knows what that means. He’s going to say something that seems stupid on the surface, that sounds absurd, and defend the point at every opportunity, until it seems both pointless to argue or accept it.

“Like me,” Todo says, and that seems to be the end of it. Hitoshi is almost disappointed when he walks away to rejoin the others, Izuku shouting to ask if he could create more snow so that they don’t have to travel to a place that hasn’t been made barren by their efforts. The dead grass keeps stretching farther the more they pile the snow up.

They start to scatter to get more snow, three giant snowballs being merged into a base that’s taller than most of them, and judging by Aizawa and Yamada’s lack of participation, this probably won’t work. They’re probably being a bit too Plus Ultra.

But Bakugo bumps into his shoulder, his hand tugging on his elbow, signalling that he should join the search. “Let’s talk.”

The quiet way he says that is too loud, and Hitoshi follows, noticing that Bakugo is straying behind the more excited others, pulling off to the side. Hitoshi knows what he’s doing, knows that he saw it. He doesn’t know if he can trust it yet.

“IcyHot do some shit to you?” Bakugo asks, his narrow red eyes looking at him instead of ahead,

that voice still too quiet. “I’ll end his shit and you know it.”

“No,” Hitoshi answers, wondering if Bakugo somehow caught Todo’s ability to pull weird assumptions out of nowhere. “He used a spell on me, but I don’t believe in magic.”

Bakugo narrows his eyes, a stutter in his steps, before he sighs. “You talked to All Might, didn’t you? *Talking* talking, ‘cause he ain’t that great at that sign shit.”

He knew. He *already* knew. But he holds his breath and tries to trust it.

Bakugo slaps his arm with the back of his hand. “No one’s gonna do any fucked up shit to you, alright? I garuan-fucking-tee it.”

“It’s different,” Hitoshi admits, because it is. Maybe nothing would change, maybe it would be easier. Maybe he would be more normal. It’s not entirely fear, but something else.

He just doesn’t want to talk anymore.

He wants to keep that excuse, for the people he can use it on, for the people who don’t expect otherwise. Maybe it’s wrong, but he doesn’t miss the mask. He just... likes that it’s different here. That there’s no expectation if he doesn’t set one.

Bakugo stares, long enough that he expects something else, or something different, before he scoffs. “You just want to use that shit to get what you want. Make everyone feel bad when you finally start talking to them.”

He’d be lying if he said that wasn’t true too, and he gets another light slap on his arm when Bakugo notices it in his smirk. Bakugo knows him a bit too well, but it’s fine. He’s a friend, and a good one.

Eri has a lot of good friends. When they come back, Hitoshi having to nearly shove Bakugo so he can roll the giant snowball too, the giant snowman is being completed. Floaty uses her quirk on the head and Neji uses her quirk to guide it to the top of the torso. The Spiny Lizard Quirk from 3-A used some spines to kind of make a nose for it, and there’s holes carved into it for the eyes and mouth.

It honestly looks a little creepy, but Hitoshi hopes they can make another one without involving the students. Maybe just him and Eri, but Yamada and Aizawa would be fine too.

Bakugo grumbles about dragging the snowball this far for nothing, until he sees Izuku and picks it up, his arms straining from the effort. Bakugo really seems to like throwing snow at other people, but that’s definitely not something that’s all his own. There are several students tossing snow at each other, and that’s not just reserved to the students. Aizawa is mostly dodging, probably trying to save face in front of his students, but Witching Hour and Yamada have their attacks divided between each other and him.

Eri is safe from all of that chaos on Mirio’s shoulders, cheering for her creepy but massive snowman once it’s completed for her. “Twenny! The snowman’s so *big*! It’s the biggest snowman ever! Plus Ultra!”

“Plus Ultra!” Mirio parrots exactly, even with his arms raised over his head like Eri’s. It would be almost insulting if Hitoshi wasn’t sure that Mirio taught her that in the first place. “The blizzard might really set in pretty soon, so if you want to make a snow angel-”

“Snow angel!” Eri demands, and it’s not like he can argue with her. Not like this, not *with* this. If

Eri wants him to make a snow angel, he's going to make one for her.

And Yamada being distracted when Aizawa dodges his armful of snow, but tosses a handful of it into his face when he crouches, just makes it easier. He knows Yamada would want to take more pictures of him making it. "Sure."

There's a line of snow angels on the ground, some already trampled, some already half-buried in the drifts. There's a place that Eri saved next to hers for him, and there's a place close to that which Ashido claims when she sees him. It feels embarrassing for some reason to fall back at first, to look up at Mirio and Eri staring, but when he hears Ashido moving and kicking her arms and legs next to him, explaining how to do it, makes it easier. He moves his arms up and down, his legs side to side, but when he closes his eyes, he almost misses it.

There's a silence in the snowfall, and it's comforting. When he first fell back, he wanted to lay there, to just feel himself being swallowed and being buried in it. Every part of his body cradled in the soft cold snow, every part of him felt accepted by it. It felt like he wouldn't mind being buried in the snow, if it was this quiet and comfortable. If he could just stay still.

But Ashido almost somersaults over him to beat Mirio offering his hand, and he takes both so neither of them feel bad. It's just an angel on the ground, and it doesn't feel like it's particularly his. "Now Twenny's an angel too!"

'Twenny' is covered in snow, and it feels especially sharp on his ears. But he thinks of Yamada's promise, what he said would happen if a blizzard came, and can't help but smile. "We can make more of them tomorrow, but it's getting too cold."

Eri's rosy cheeks bitten by the cold makes that pout more potent, but Hitoshi knows if he's cold, Eri has to be too. Before he follows Mirio taking a reluctant Eri back to the dorm, he ducks down and ignores that Ashi was trying to grab him in a hug. It's quick, just a few strokes with his finger, and it makes this angel his. 'Hitoshi.'

Maybe Ashi sees, maybe she thinks it's odd. Maybe she worries, but he ignores that to brush off the snow stuck between her two horns. He's sure it's uncomfortably cold to her. She doesn't say anything, but there's a stillness that makes him think that he misstepped, before she snorts a bit and smiles.

She doesn't say it, but he remembers. He used to scratch around her horns when they were kids, and she used to scratch his head in return. He doesn't remember it, but there's a picture of them doing that, a picture that doesn't feel so distant from him. The young boy in that picture almost looks like him.

It might look more like him if he looks at it again.

Ashi ducks under his arm, winding one of hers around his back. Maybe it's supposed to keep him warm, but her closeness might incriminate her a bit. The name wasn't the only thing he took from the snow on the ground.

It's hard to pick his target, and it shouldn't be. He considers Yamada, but he's practically covered in snow by Witching Hour or Aizawa's hands. He considers Aizawa too, but he might dodge it.

He has to balance his books anyway. "OI!"

Bakugo isn't as good at catching the things Hitoshi throws sometimes.

Bakugo doesn't laugh, but Yamada does. Yamada looks like he wants to take his usual place by

Hitoshi's side with an arm over his shoulder, but with all the snow still clinging to him, it wouldn't make him feel warm. But maybe it would.

He feels blisteringly warm when they get back to the dorm, when everything he imagined happens. He's seen Eri playing in the snow for the first time, he's built a snowman for the first time. He made a snow angel, and threw a snowball, but Yamada told him about other things that happen when it snows.

The hot chocolate tastes warmer, and the kotatsu feels warmer still. He didn't think he could feel this warm, when it has nothing to do with either of those things, and it hardly has to do with the snow and chill melting off his skin.

It's the people around him, Aizawa, Yamada, and Eri that make him feel warm. It has nothing to do with the cold outside, or the snow, but that cold only makes him realize how warm it is.

Eri likes it, even if she's probably exhausted herself. She leans heavily into his side, her eyelids look heavier, and even if she stares at her hot chocolate, it seems to be too far away for her to take another sip. Her horn has grown again, and he doesn't doubt it's due to the hero students' efforts. "Twenny, I love you."

Maybe he's wrong about love, that it doesn't have to be possessive. It doesn't have to be overwhelming, and it doesn't have to fill a void.

It can just be as warm as this.

*

"Snow. Can you say 'snow?' That's snow," Hiroto says, smiling down at his son who seems more interested in eating the stuff than trying to talk. Hitoshi is as bundled up as he can be, a baby Michelin Man with his mittens full of snow, mostly sucking on it. He hopes Ui gets back with the camera so he can record Hitoshi's first brain freeze. "Babe! You're gonna miss it!"

Ui pulls a face at him, trudging back with the vintage video camera that's just a bit more nostalgic for him than a cell phone. "Don't let him eat it off the *ground*, you don't know where it's been!"

Hiroto raises an eyebrow at his son, who just leans back and nearly topples over before he catches him. "Hey, *Mom* says you don't know where it's been. Do you know where that snow's been, Hitoshi? It came from the *sky*, and it's not even that yellow-"

He gets a swat, but he pulls Ui closer when she crouches down next to him, when they're both watching to see what happens next. Ui is a great mom, if a little overprotective thanks to that library she insisted she needed, books filled with all those rules that are utter nonsense. This is technically Hitoshi's *third* snow season, but Ui was sure that Hitoshi would freeze to death if he was out in the cold for longer than an hour or if a single snowflake got on him. "Hitoshi, can you say 'snow?'" Nope, but he can sure eat it. "Can you say... 'Cat?'"

"Cat," Hitoshi says, the *one* thing that can get his attention. He looks around with those handsome violet eyes, trying to find those *elusive* cats that he probably wants to fill his world. Those damn books say they should wait until Hitoshi is older to get a pet, when he understands how to treat a small animal, but he's sure Hitoshi wouldn't poke it in the eye. Too much. "*At?*"

Ui is recording to catch that high pitched squeal, something so excited Hiroto thinks one of the strays must have shown its face. But Hitoshi just grins up at him and finds something to giggle at, his giggly little boy. And another fistful of snow to eat. "Cat. Cuh-cuh-cat."

Ui's a little worried, but Hiroto knows it's nothing. He's closing in on two and a half, and still hasn't figured out sentences, but that's fine, everyone's different. Ui seems to think if they make him use his words, if they start ignoring grabby hands that communicate the need for being picked up or a finger pointing to his open mouth to ask for food, that he'd talk more. He's just a quiet kid, and he's plenty smart. He can already use Hiroto's phone to look at 'Hitoshi Pictures.' Or cat pictures.

It might be due to his quirk. It hasn't come in yet, but it's not unheard of for it to come in early sometimes. Hiroto was one of those 'precocious' types, and he's still got a few baby videos of himself sucking his worms out of his fingertips. "Oh, there it goes."

Hitoshi's face screws up, that mouthful of snow a bit too big for a little mouth, and what Hiroto thought would be funny really isn't when he starts to see tears. "Oh, sweetheart, it's okay."

Ui gives him the camera to pull poor Hitoshi into her arms, and there's no sniffles but plenty of grumpy whines. The lemons were worse. "Aw, buddy, it's okay. Maybe we ate too much, but it'll get better. It'll pass."

Despite the camera in his hands and the warm comfort from Mom, Hitoshi topples forward and faceplants into Hiroto's lap. Ui raises her eyebrows, and yes, he knows he's Hitoshi's favorite right now. But he had to put up with plenty of nights where only *Mom's* singing and rocking could put his precocious attempts at insomnia at an end. Hitoshi's doctor probably thinks they live next to a metal concert with all those bags under his eyes.

"Ya done with the snow?" Hiroto asks, smoothing a hand over Hitoshi's back, and he's not surprised by the pitiful nod. Snow has been ruled out, it's hurt him and these tiny little things are *big* hurts to a little guy. But Hitoshi is a trooper, because he doesn't even cry.

Hiroto carries him inside, and Ui looks a little disappointed that they only got a few minutes on camera when she had to go inside to get it. Hiroto isn't disappointed at all, he's grateful to have it. To have a chance to hold this little guy in his arms one more time.

He almost didn't.

He didn't tell Ui the real story, because it'd be the 'discussion' of all discussions. The dealership is having a rough spell, and even if getting into management gives him a base salary, he still has to oversee quotas and meet them to get a bonus that's livable. Pack Alpha is usually agreeable to 'part time, seasonal' work.

They weren't this time, and he made his intentions clear at the start. He doesn't want to get tangled up in anything more than a job, more than a gig. He doesn't want to get tangled up in 'loyalty' or 'You don't have anywhere else to go, you're nothing without us.' He just wanted to walk away and pretend he wouldn't know what would happen after he made sure that poor guy would say goodbye to his family and wind up at Pack Alpha's pick up location.

But Pack Alpha wanted him to go to their base too, and didn't even give him the chance to say goodbye. Didn't want to give him much of a choice either, not with the guns aimed at his head.

He was lucky, lucky that they didn't pull the trigger. Lucky that the heroes didn't ask too many questions. It felt sick to lie and say he didn't know how he got there either, just like his target was saying. His control broke when the world seemed to stop spinning, a whiz of hoverboards that suddenly set the world in motion too fast, some kid holding onto him with too scrawny arms. Hiroto honestly didn't know if he should hold onto the guy just to keep him from falling off, like this blonde kid wasn't operating the damn thing. "*Hold tight, listener. That's a pretty tough crowd*

down there.”

Hiroto knew, he was still kind of a part of that crowd, even if he hated it. Even if it was always the same, even when he was ‘legally’ quirkless. Honest money doesn’t come as easily, even if he should be more grateful that he has a chance for it. Most reputable employers don’t want to employ someone with petty thefts on their juvenile record and a quirk that has done so much *worse*.

He probably shouldn’t have been up in the air, watching the fireworks below, and he couldn’t help but think that the kid holding him up shouldn’t be here either. The kid seemed oddly eager to get involved, he kept calling out names to make them aware of a new quirk coming out of the shadows to attack, but every huff seemed disappointed that he couldn’t jump in.

The ground came down eventually, and the questions. The police car left without all the criminals that night, but despite how shaken Hiroto was, he had to ask. “*What’s your name?*”

“*Present Mic, the Voice Hero!*” came an enthusiastic answer, a tug on a leather jacket that seemed to try too hard to be cool. “*Just as soon as I graduate....*”

Hiroto knew that heroes had to start somewhere, but he’s never seen a hero start that young. He looks as old as the part-time car washer who doesn’t show up half the time, and this *high schooler* just saved his life. “*I’ll keep my eye out for you, pal. You’re gonna do great as a hero.*”

He hopes Hitoshi never does that. He knows most kids consider being a hero at some point, and he wasn’t lucky enough to. The thought of taking control of some villain and making them dance into handcuffs was cut off pretty quick the first time that his mom couldn’t afford groceries, and needed him to grab the cashier’s face to put his quirk inside her. Every time that woman was on shift, it was grocery day.

He knows Hitoshi will probably have Ui’s quirk or something close to it, something that isn’t useful for heroics or anything else. *Especially* anything else, he doesn’t want Hitoshi to have to go through that.

But he’ll be there, if he does, to have that talk. The Talk, about how people make judgements and sometimes it can be easier to go with the flow, to find the only option that seems to be open to him. To tell him that his dear old dad took that easy way, and he’s regretted it ever since.

And to remind *Mom* that sometimes the grabby hands can slide when we’ve got a nasty brain freeze. “Hitoshi, use your words. Say, ‘Can I have milk?’”

Hiroto pouts alongside the miserable tot in his arms, and Ui shoots him a Look. “*Mommy*, my head hurts and snow is awful and I just want some warm milk-”

“*Please*,” Hitoshi begs, and he’s got the hands folded up and those big eyes begging. We’ve got proper enunciation and everything, more evidence that Ui’s just worrying over *nothing*. Hitoshi has these spells, he’s just a little man of very few words. And when he does want to talk, he proves that all the fuss is for nothing. He just knows he can get whatever he wants without trying too hard. “Yay!”

“Can we say ‘Thank you?’” Ui asks, even if Hitoshi is plenty busy with that cup of warm milk. Hiroto’s pretty sure this is how it is when he’s at work, Ui just telling Hitoshi what to say so he can meet those dumb benchmarks in her books. Hitoshi’s really *fine*, he’s a smart kid. He doesn’t have to worry about school for a couple years anyway.

“Wersi,” Hitoshi says, and grins like he knows his mom’s heart melts a bit. Ui can say all she

wants that making him pick up some foreign languages now will make him into a little baby Einstein, but Hiroto knows what she's doing. She's probably hoping he picks up her quirk, so Hiroto can be left out of all their future secret conversations.

“Merci,” Ui says, and it's always pretty when she says it. She always gets a little blushy, a little glow to her. He fell in love with such a beautiful woman, and he has no idea how he fooled her into picking him.

There are a lot of ways Hiroto's unlucky, a lot of ways he made his own luck the wrong way, but he can't deny he's the luckiest guy on earth to have a family like this to come home to. A beautiful wife, and an amazing son.

As long as Shigaraki never finds him again, he'll get to keep this amazing piece of happiness.

Chapter End Notes

Just to be clear on 'Sato Hiroto's name, 'Sato' is a very common family name in Japan, and he's not related at all to Sato Rikido the 1-A student.

And for those who aren't fully caught up on the manga, 'Shigaraki' is All for One's family name, not just Shigaraki Tomura's name.

Out of Nowhere, We Appear!

Chapter Summary

Surprising visitors come to UA, with a new challenge for students and wards alike! Hitoshi grapples with Ashido's insistence to give him a fake birthday party before Eri's impending birthday, as well as the new worry that even if he's allowed to stay at UA after the investigation into The Miasma wraps up, that he may still find himself unprepared to leave when he becomes an adult. Monoma continues to struggle to win Shinsou's trust, and Bakugo faces yet another rescue training exercise.

The superstition of bad luck befalling Friday the 13th may cast a worse shadow than the curse of the Mondays.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: None

Previously on Wards of UA: Eri's horn has been growing, and Eri wants to make sure that her horn grows from 'happiness,' as it tends to grow with overwhelming emotions. Todoroki showed Shinsou a 'spell' to clap his hands over his head to sever his family connections, so he can pick the ones that he wants. Ashido and Shinsou were 'married' when they were four years old, and never divorced. Shinsou headbutted Monoma after he tried to copy his quirk in Yamada's English class, and signed that Monoma was bullying him to try to get 1-B to turn against Monoma. Eri likes to hug people that are her size, from small children to (unsuccessfully) Nezu or Mimic's puppet. Ashido has been trying to make up for lost time for Shinsou, and threw him a '5 year old's sleepover' successfully with only the people Shinsou could talk to invited.

1-A Groupchat Usernames:

Birthday Boi - Shinsou Hitoshi
Keto Boi - Sato Rikido
Electroshock Pop - Kaminari Denki
Classy Prez - Iida Tenya
BakuBall - Bakugo Katsuki
No Snow Might - Midoriya Izuku
Shnsu's waifu - Ashido Mina

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Toshi.”

Hitoshi pulls himself to roll over, rubbing at his eyes. He feels like he barely got to sleep, everything feels heavier for it, but he holds in the breath that wants to sigh when he sees Eri standing beside his bed with one of her unicorn plushies in her arms. ““Orn? Accident?”

Eri shakes her head, and starts pulling herself onto his bed to lay down next to him. She wanted to sleep by herself tonight, but he's not going to argue if she's changed her mind. It's always harder to fall asleep without her there.

But as soon as he gets comfortable, he pulls her close with an arm around her and his head angled away from her horn, she sighs.

"M' not sleepy."

He's sleepy. And it's hard to remind himself that he can't be anymore. "Want me to read a book? Or sing?" Eri shakes her head, and he gets both of her feet tapping at his knees.

A test kick.

He pulls his head off the pillow and props it up with his hand. "Bad dream?"

Eri nods, but he can already tell she doesn't want to talk about it. He can see the worry in her frown, in how she holds her unicorn tighter when he moves his hand to her horn to measure it for her. He wishes she wouldn't worry so much, Aizawa told her himself that she needs to learn to control it before she can use her quirk on Mirio. This time the horn doesn't have to be full of happiness.

Hitoshi shakes his head. "It didn't grow. It's okay, Eri. It's just a bad dream." Eri tucks her chin into the unicorn regardless, and he can feel her toes picking at him, feels that she's still uneasy. "Want me to get Aizawa?"

Eri shakes her head, and he wishes she wasn't like this right now. When she's quiet like this, he hates it. It wasn't like this at the 8 Precepts, she would always talk to him. She would at least hold him until she worked up the energy to cry.

But it's a good thing this isn't like the 8 Precepts. "Let's make some milk. Maybe it's close to breakfast. We can surprise Yamada."

Hitoshi checks the time on his phone, and it's not that close to breakfast. They still have an hour before they were supposed to wake up, but that probably wouldn't matter to him too much anyway. He feels like he's making good progress on the workbooks and lectures that the Rat Boss gave him, but he wishes that Yamada would tell him what 'grade' he's at in those subjects. He has to keep asking Bakugo.

Hitoshi pours the milk in the mug, before he microwaves it. There's a weird film at the top when it's done, but he scoops it out and hopes Eri doesn't see it. He knows he's never cooked anything that she likes, except for apple bunnies, which is just slicing up an apple a certain way. He's trying to get better at it.

Eri pouts right before he remembers, unfortunately after she takes a sip. "Honey." Hitoshi puts in the honey and mutters 'Sorry,' and after making sure it's right when Eri takes two sips, he starts making coffee. He *really* needs it. "What if my horn's an egg?"

He *really* needs it. "Something would hatch out of it if it was an egg. Did you have a dream about that?" Hitoshi asks, scratching the back of his head, and Eri nods, and he gets another test kick. It was probably a bad dream.

"But it was a bad egg. It just kept growing and growing until it was really big, and it was gonna be really stinky if it broke, so I had to make sure not to bump it, but then I broke it and everyone got mad." Eri hugs her unicorn tighter, leaning her head on top of its head, and he's pretty sure she's

more tired than she thinks. She'll probably be a bit grumpy until Aizawa's free period when she can take a nap. "I don't want my horn to break, Twenny, and it feels breaky now. I messed it up."

Hitoshi leans over the counter and wraps his hand around her horn, feeling how the ridges are barely starting to flare. Her horn aches should start coming soon, it's odd that she hasn't complained about them yet. "It doesn't feel break-y to me. I know that was a scary dream, but it's not real. You can't mess up your horn, no matter what."

He finds himself tapping her forehead near the base of her horn, even if he knows she doesn't like it. It's probably something embarrassing to her now, now that Mirio and Yamada have started talking about how she's going to turn 6 years old this month. She's too *old* for all the things she used to love when she was a *baby*.

"And drinking milk makes your horn stronger, with all the calcium in it," Hitoshi says, and he smiles when she starts drinking it. Aizawa does little things like that too, little 'spells' like the one Todo showed him. If she can't convince herself not to worry, then making her think she can make whatever scares her go away with her own power seems to work. That seems to be the real magic. "Want me to make pancakes or rice cakes?"

"Cereal," Eri decides, and he tries to convince himself it's just because it has milk in it. He forgot to put butter in the pan the last time he made muffins, and he doesn't even *want* to remember that. Yamada said it was fine, that 'everyone has to learn these things.' He had to pretend to study in his room so he wouldn't *cry* in front of Yamada.

"Pancakes?" 27 makes himself ask, but if Eri says no, he'll give up on it. "We have cereal on the weekends, and I... kind of want to do something nice for Yamada."

Eri hums, and moves her unicorn a bit closer to the counter before she lays her head back on it. She might go to sleep if he takes her to bed soon, but she'll probably still be a bit grumpy. "Yama likes those fancy rice cakes. N' he wants you to call him 'Dad' to make him happy."

Eri's *definitely* getting sleepy. "I think I remember how to make those."

He's supposed to use a blender on the leftover rice, but that would be too noisy. Instead, he fills a pot with water, because maybe he can just make it really soft so it still mixes in with the flour to turn out like that batter. He turns his attention to washing and slicing the green onions and carrots, and deciding how many mini sausages to use. And thinking about how he's *not* going to call Yamada 'Dad.'

Hitoshi is a person, like Eri. Hitoshi uses his given name, like Eri, instead of his family name. Hitoshi gets to reject the family he was born with, he gets to ignore that they exist. Todo said something about picking his own family, and he's already done that. Eri is his family, and Yamada is....

Yamada. Not 'Dad.' That's just obvious.

Yamada isn't his father. Hitoshi was born with a father, but that father died. Hitoshi is 16 now, and that means he's almost an adult. Mirio is an adult now that he's 18, and that means Hitoshi has less than two years to learn everything he needs to so he can be just as capable as everyone else. As he should be.

Adults don't need parents, after all. Hitoshi has never really had that in the first place, but Mirio never talks about his parents, neither does Aizawa. Yamada talks about his mothers, but that might just be an oddity with him. Yamada doesn't live with his mothers, so-

So 27 just needs to make sure this coffee is made right this time, and that he doesn't mess up these rice cakes. And stop worrying about what could happen in less than two years, when it hasn't even been six weeks since he arrived to UA. If he wants to worry, he should worry about what he should do for Eri's birthday now that it's only 8 days away.

Hitoshi could go to his room and get the laptop, because he doesn't know how long the rice cakes should bake for, or how hot the oven should be. But that would mean leaving Eri alone, and while she seems to be trying to stay awake so she can finish her milk, she might fall asleep at the counter, and she might fall out of her chair when she does. But it's a good thing he brought his phone.

Birthday Boi: How long should leftover rice cakes bake for, and how hot should the oven be?

Birthday Boi: ...and it's not my birthday.

Keto Boi: Ashido still wants you to pick a cake flavor. And I've only ever fried them? That makes them more crispy like pancakes.

Birthday Boi: Is it like frying eggs?

Keto Boi: Uhhh like pancakes. I'll send you a video.

Keto Boi: <https://www.herotube.com/watch?v=CmAbSJQi53s>

Birthday Boi:There's a lot of water in mine right now. And I haven't added eggs.

Keto Boi: Try to drain it? Should still be okay.

Keto Boi: Send a pic?

Birthday Boi: *Tap to download 22KB*

Keto Boi: Do you have more rice?

Birthday Boi: It's fine. Eri wants cereal.

Electroshop Pop: NONonoNoo shinsy gimme some ur a good cook pls!!!

Classy Prez: It looks like you have the beginnings of a hearty rice porridge, Shinsou! I'm not sure that frying or baking it at this point is necessary, and I'm sure Eri will still enjoy it! It is a bit early for her to be awake at this hour, however.

Birthday Boi: I have flour in it. It's not porridge, it just looks like that. Supposed to be batter.

BakuBall: Season the shit out of it, all that flour and rice is fucking tasteless.

Keto Boi: Bakugo's right, probably 1.5 the seasonings that you were going to add for the batter to even it out.

No Snow Might: OH! Were you trying to make those breakfast bars? I don't have the recipe, but rice porridge is good too! Is Eri okay?

Birthday Boi: Yamada called it rice cakes. Eri's asleep now, just had a weird dream.

Birthday Boi: *Tap to download 22KB*

Electroshop Pop: TT_TT shisnu ur the best persun eber dis cute

Keto Boi: Aw! Tell us how it works out with the porridge!

Electroshop Pop: noooo gimmeee some! Ill bring my bowl 4 porrig

Keto Boi: Kaminari... I'm making breakfast rn

Electroshop Pop: wan shinsooooos

BakuBall: YOU'RE NOT GONNA FUCKING GET SHITSOU'S WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU PLANNING TO DO? GO TO SHITSEI'S PLACE AND BEG FOR PORRIDGE LIKE SOME FUCKING VICTORIAN WAIF OR SOME SHIT?

Electroshop Pop: YES

Birthday Boi: It's not going to be good. Ashi can have some, since we're married.

BakuBall: STOP SAYING THAT SHIT YOU'RE NOT FUCKING MARRIED AND YOU KNOW THAT SHIT YOU'RE JUST FUCKING WITH US

He is, but it's fair, since they fuck with him a lot. They deserve it.

The porridge isn't that great, there's still a lot of clumps of flour that he finds every time that he stirs. He tastes it and he *knows* it isn't good, it isn't as good as Mirio's because the texture is off, and the seasonings still don't help.

And he knows that Yamada will still lie to him. "Coffee and breakfast already made? Jeez, what a lucky guy I am!"

Hitoshi knows he's not a lucky guy. Hitoshi knows what this porridge tastes like, how it turned into *paste*, and he knows there's no way that Yamada actually enjoys eating it. Even Eri only takes a few bites before she drags herself to her room to get ready for school.

Now that there's no time left to get any amount of sleep, Hitoshi washes down another clump of flour with his coffee, and debates whether he should rest his head on the table for a few minutes. He's already eaten breakfast, so he just needs to get dressed now. Maybe comb his hair, but he wonders if anyone would notice a difference. "Now *that* is some great home-cooking. Rice porridge just like my mother used to make--"

'*Horrible*,' Hitoshi signs, and looks up to see how well Yamada is trying to lie to him. He really doesn't have to, he can just tell him it's too thick and too bland and *just* because 27 is just *that* fucking terrible at it, it's too *flavorful* too. Bland *and* too flavorful. '*Bad. Don't eat it.*'

Yamada takes another spoonful just to spite him, and somehow, he actually finished his bowl. 27 knows from eating it himself, that's a painful thing to accomplish. "It's really not, Hitoshi. It's nice and thick, and tastes like--"

'*H-O-R-R-I-B-L-E*,' Hitoshi signs, and glares like he's actually convinced that Yamada woke up today with no tastebuds and an inability to understand sign language. He doesn't have to *lie*, he can just tell him that it's horrible and anyone else could do this better than he can. That he's really just a hopeless cause at this point, because he doesn't know anything that anyone else does, and the things that he does know are worthless here. Aizawa hasn't asked him about The Miasma in *weeks*.

But Yamada just smiles at him, and pushes his chair closer to his with a loud screech, pressing his arm tight against Hitoshi's. "It's great, Hitoshi. There's a million and one recipes for rice porridge, and maybe most of them don't use flour, but it makes it really thick! Next time, we can work it out so it tastes amazing, alright?"

Hitoshi decides he's neither going to lay his head on the table or get ready, when Yamada's shoulder is right there. He's not dressed like Present Mic to go to school yet, so there's no spikes to stab his face. He's too tired to decide whether that's what he'd rather have happen. *'Wanted to bake. Couldn't remember. Hero students said porridge.'*

"See? We can blame those herolets for cramping your culinary style. This could've been a *fantastic* breakfast rice cake mix," Yamada says, and he can still lie to him. It would be nicer if Yamada could lie to him and have a softer shoulder to rest his face on, and it would be nicer if Hitoshi could just fall asleep here. "We can get back at them when we grade the pop quiz that's coming for them today, or when Shou ruins their afterschool plans with that secret training sesh."

The 'secret training sesh' that he doesn't have to be a part of anymore, but Aizawa still seems worried about for some reason. Aizawa is just making a bigger deal of it than it has to be, he's not going to break down into tears or forget how to breathe over the sight of a few heroes. He can even handle messing up breakfast without crying today, even though he feels like he wants to go back to sleep and hide in his room until he can forget it happened. But blaming the hero students makes him feel a bit better. *'Want to use red pen.'*

"But it makes them *feel bad*, they've gone nine years fearing that red pen of death, and blue is a more comforting color," Yamada tries to argue, and Hitoshi knows it's pointless. At least he can draw a face on Bakugo's test, so he nods. "Besides, you can't be too mad at the guys trying to throw you a birthday party this weekend."

Hitoshi rolls his eyes, because he's been avoiding it this long, nearly a month, but Yamada finally found out about it. Ashi is too *insistent* that it has to happen, for *whatever* reason, and that it has to happen on a weekend, probably because it's harder for him to escape. And while he's been able to avoid it by going to the radio station Saturday nights and hiding in the Safe Room Friday and Sunday nights with the excuse that Aizawa grounded him over something, Ashi complained to Yamada that he must be horribly mistreated by Aizawa to get grounded so much and now *this* happened. Now *Yamada* wants him to at least try to endure it, and he can leave if he doesn't like it.

Or he can tell Ashi to stop trying to throw him a birthday party to make up for all the ones he missed or doesn't remember, but Yamada clearly doesn't know Ashi at all if he thinks that would work.

He's going to have to write another essay at this point to convince Aizawa to defend him, to tell Ashi that he's done something so horrible that he's forbidden from having birthdays until his actual birthday in July. Or at least until the 21st, after Eri has her rightful birthday party. A birthday that requires a gift and he *still* doesn't know what to get for her.

But at least that birthday is 8 days away, and the weekend threat of his fake birthday can be avoided until after school. Maybe if the training session is grueling enough, he can avoid it for another day.

He forces himself to look at his phone when he feels two vibrations in quick succession, which usually means that one of the hero students mentioned him by name. And seeing the message that mentioned him feels especially foreboding when he's realized that he hasn't even started on that essay.

Shnsu's waifu: @Shinsou HAPPY BIRTHDAY SHINNNYYYYYYY!!!

*

Monoma wouldn't have known about it if Kendo didn't try to put an end to what he *knows* is the only method he has to end this unbearable situation he's been placed in. "What the *hell* is this?"

Kendo tries to hand him the advent calendar that she had 'confiscated' (used Honenuki for his Softening quirk on the lock of his dorm room in the dead of night, probably), but he's *far* more interested in this little piece of paper that was left out in the open on her desk, practically begging to be read.

After he might have copied Honenuki's quirk to get access to her locked dorm room.

"It's supposed to be a secret training exercise. Class A is only going first--"

"Of *course* they're going first, but what is this about getting volunteers?" Monoma asks, still trying to figure out why the numbers for volunteers are different for each class, why there's *ten* volunteers registered for Class 1-A already but only *nine* for Class B. The names listed aren't lined up symmetrically for each list.

"It's a rescue exercise, but they couldn't get the victim actors like they could at the--"

"The Provisional Licensing Exam that *Class B* already *passed* with *flying* colors, meaning this is all solely for *Class A*'s benefit and only for that empty headed heir falling off his father's coattails and that *wretched* barbarian and *why is Shinsou's name not on our list?*" Monoma asks, asking the *real* questions, and thrusts the paper towards Kendo in hopes that he's simply overlooked that name in the grogginess of the early hour, and she can point it out with some fond ribbing.

But she doesn't. She sighs, and he gets the hand on hip pose as though she's already explained something she *hasn't* explained in the slightest. "*You*, Monoma. *You're* the reason that Shinsou wasn't going to volunteer to help us. Present Mic has already moved your seat *and* mine, and he's probably going to kick you out if you don't--"

"I don't stop *sharing* the wonders of the winter season with two wards in UA's care who have never experienced it?" Monoma asks, and wonders if she can smell the bullshit on his breath. While wintry decor suits his complexion far better, he enjoys the spring for its cherry blossom blooms far better than stifling family traditions even when weighed against the promise of gifts. And there were several gifts in that advent calendar that better not have gone missing. "I don't even *talk* to Shinsou, or *look* at him--"

"Monoma." Well, of *course* he looks at him, he needs to make sure that Shinsou isn't *visibly* dying, which is not a dramatic concern given how much school he's missed. Sure, he's been attending for nearly two weeks without issue, but that only seems to make it more likely that there's an invisible strain on his health waiting to come to the surface. "Vlad told us to ignore Shinsou. Shinsou wants to just be ignored. So just *ignore* him, because you're making him uncomfortable."

Kendo doesn't say it, this time. That horrible word that he's sure is the machination of some absolutely *fiendish* member of 1-A, one so intolerable that he can scarcely imagine even that foul mouthed cur *Bakugo* would be behind it. 'Bullying.'

Shinsou has been *told* to think that Monoma was bullying him, when he was just trying to make sure that his quirk wasn't bothering him anymore. There was an odd rumor that Shinsou's quirk was the reason he was sick a few weeks ago, which was clearly just the adjustment to his quirk

suppressants that had made his quirk impossible for him to even *copy* because they were so strong. Shinsou reacted a bit *poorly* to his attempts to check that situation, he seemed to think that such a pure-hearted and well-intended gesture was an affront to his person, and called it *bullying*.

And *no one* seems to know what it really was, what it really *is*. Monoma is simply reaching out to a person who's clearly in need, he's behaving like an upstanding hero to someone who *clearly* needs one.

He will admit that Kendo and Vlad's long, *long* discussion with him and the points to that discussion had merit. There are people who are more sensitive to a friendly touch, and Shinsou might very well be one of them. Shinsou seems to be fine now, regardless of the state of his mysterious quirk, and Monoma is....

Fine with never knowing what that quirk is. Really, he's truly fine with that. Even if he *never* knows what that intangible piece of Shinsou looks like, how it relates to his personality, how it feels to be a little bit like him in the span of 10 minutes, he's *fine* with that.

He'd just like to know that *Shinsou* is actually, *truly* fine, and he can wash his hands of it. But that's the problem, because no one reputable will *tell* him that Shinsou is fine or that his quirk is fine, and as Present Mic still hasn't coughed up the name of the quirk specialist that Shinsou is seeing *or* the one that should be stripped of their license for medicating him to the point that he felt *quirkless*, so he's been forced into *this* course of action.

Making Shinsou and Eri both an advent calendar, and giving them a gift in accordance for the day. He honestly can't say which was more difficult, buying 31 small gifts that he was reasonably sure would be to the two wards' liking or having to set foot in *Class 1-A's* dorm to deliver those gifts on the weekend. At least his attempts to court Eri's favor seem to be working, as whenever he gets the chance to give them to her at the dorm, he earns a bright smile and a few reasons why she likes his efforts. He had thought that Shinsou would have warmed up to him through that clear demonstration that he is *not* the 'dark face of UA,' as Eri has finally been convinced, but that isn't the case.

Shinsou *must* be rejecting him even further if he's unwilling to aid Class B in a training exercise if he'll do so for Class A, just as Kendo surmised. But Kendo doesn't seem to understand the wasted potential there, something that he can't fully fathom the *magnitude* of himself.

"But if I save him in the rescue exercise, then--"

"*Monoma.*" Kendo looks horrified, but Monoma can't shake the image now that it's still forming in his head. Shinsou, *finally* seeing who Monoma is, what a *true* hero looks like. He isn't privy to the details of Shinsou's initial rescue, the *real* rescue operation where he wasn't a pre-prepared volunteer. But the fact that Shinsou was placed in the custody of the police directly afterwards certainly seems to indicate that the heroes who responded were *grossly* incompetent, and the rumors that have since been proven fact that four members of *Class A* were involved only proves that.

"It's unfair that Class A has 10 volunteers and we don't," Monoma says, crossing his arms and wishing that he had the foresight to copy Tokage's Lizard Tail Splitter quirk. From this angle, it would be an easy thing to have his hand pop off for a bit, grab that pen on the desk, and *correct* the issue of Shinsou not being registered for Class B's exercise. Shinsou, while safe in the knowledge that the exercise was a mock one and not as dangerous as the one he experienced in real life, would clearly see the difference between Class B's professional attitude and whatever he silently suffered at the hands of Class A. Shinsou, looking up to see Phantom Thief smiling down at him, extending a hand and the reassuring demeanor that puts to rest the terror of field triage. Shinsou, realizing

what a kind and intelligent and becoming hero Monoma is-

“They already got volunteers from Gen Ed, that was an old list,” Kendo says, and while that’s so beyond the point that it’s nearly off-topic, it’s just another *horrible* mistreatment of Class B that *Kendo*, their beloved class president, had to assist their beleaguered teacher Vlad to help cope with this injustice. “So now that you know about the *secret* training exercise that you shouldn’t, just act surprised when it happens, and don’t tell anyone else. And *don’t*.”

“Bring it up to Shinsou, of course not,” Monoma says, scratching that option off of a list that’s limited now, but he’s sure he has a few hours to brainstorm. “I haven’t said a word to him in weeks, and you know that.”

Kendo also knows that rule doesn’t include sign language, but since she probably wants to get ready for the school day ahead of them and thus get him out of her room, she doesn’t mention it. It doesn’t seem to help either.

There’s truly nothing as infuriating as trying to help someone who desperately needs it, especially when that person is already selectively mute and seems inclined to simulate the experience of being blind whenever Monoma tries to sign to him and he lays his head on his desk instead so he doesn’t see it.

*

Hitoshi made a promise to 50, before he ever touched a knife, before he ever picked his weapon of choice. 50 told him to never go that far, to never kill someone. That’s a step no one can come back from, to have blood on their hands and a life snuffed out of this world completely. It’s a heavy weight, and he’s never been forced to make that call, to strike with the intent to kill.

But sometimes he wonders how much Quirk Thief’s life really weighs. “Sailor Moon is dressed like a cat! I love Sailor Moon, and she’s so cute like a cat Mono!”

Hitoshi stares at his desk so he doesn’t see it, seeing Quirk Thief’s preening or Eri’s ever-increasing excitement to his daily offerings. It’s always interesting to see what tactic he comes up with to deliver these small tokens, and it’s always getting more difficult for him. Since Quirk Thief’s desk was moved to the front of the classroom with Kendo sitting directly behind him, he’s resorted to stealing the quirks of his classmates to dodge Kendo’s attempts to swat those gifts out of his hands. Today he used one of his favorite tactics, popping his hands off at the wrist and making them fly over to them like that Lizard themed hero student.

The sight of it makes Hitoshi feel queasy, and somehow it’s worse than the Lizard quirk student herself using it. Those hands should be bleeding where they’ve been cut off, instead of levitating in the air and *petting* the top of Eri’s head. Hitoshi is sure that Quirk Thief could steal her quirk like that. That Quirk Thief could steal *his* quirk like that.

Hitoshi glares out of the corner of his eye, watching those disgusting hands sign ‘*Thank you*’ without a body behind it to accurately place the gestures. Watching Quirk Thief earn another piece of Eri’s affection by giving her a gift she appreciates, some small thing that she enjoys. Quirk Thief has it easier because he got the idea to give 31 small gifts instead of a grand one on her birthday, and Hitoshi never *fucking* thought to do that.

Those hands slide in front of him, even though the offering is already placed on his desk. It’s a purple pillowcase with a cartoon cat on it, because Quirk Thief is truly the worst person that Hitoshi has ever met. It’s *purple*, and it has a cat sticking its tiny pink tongue out while its eyes are closed and it’s body is curled around the place that someone’s head would rest.

Quirk Thief is *horrible*, because he always finds tokens that Hitoshi can't find fault with. 'You like?' Hitoshi is only looking at the hands to make sure that they won't touch him to try to steal his quirk. He's only looking at Quirk Thief to confirm his suspicions that the bastard is *too damn pleased* with his efforts. 'Blushing.'

Hitoshi is *not blushing*. The cat is *not* that cute, he's not going to *use* this pillowcase, and Quirk Thief is a *bastard*. 'Go away.'

What Hitoshi wants to sign is 'go die in a fire,' but Yamada didn't really like that one. At least Quirk Thief goes away, he pulls those creepy levitating hands back to himself. Leaving him with this pillowcase.

He *can't* use it, it's creepy. He wouldn't be able to rest if he knew whose hands *touched* this adorable cat. And that just makes it worse.

Hitoshi sighs, and tries to forget about that. Sometimes, he'll work on his lectures, but usually in Yamada's classes, he listens to Yamada's lessons. He was worried that answering Yamada's questions that were directed to the students in sign would be distracting, but Yamada seems to enjoy it. Yamada nods if he got it right, but just tilts his head and looks to the students if he got it wrong. Yamada won't even *tell* him when he's messed up in this class.

And it just stings worse in *this* class. "Correct, Monoma! C uses both present and past tense, and A misspelled '*giraffe*,' but B won out in both meanings of the word!"

Aizawa said he could start going to his other Hero Ethics class instead of this one, and Hitoshi considers it too much. He doesn't want to miss Yamada's class, and it seems unfair to give that up just because he hates Quirk Thief so much. But Yamada also said that he should tell Quirk Thief to stop bothering him, as if that would help. Yamada clearly doesn't know who Quirk Thief is as a person.

But there's a note hidden in the pillowcase that falls out when Hitoshi has to move it to his backpack. 'My chat is waiting.'

Hitoshi remembers that chat, and he's never used it, never had the intentions to use it. But the thought of putting to words exactly how he thinks Quirk Thief should meet his end is tempting right now. That might be a good use of his time during Aizawa's free period.

And that temptation almost makes him forget why they're not going to the teacher's lounge after Aizawa meets them for that free period.

"We're going to run through the final checks at USJ to make sure it's safe for the exercise," Aizawa says, because he probably noticed that Hitoshi forgot. That *should* be an indication that he really doesn't care about who they're going to meet, but. "You're free to do whatever you want while we run through it, it shouldn't take long. And Kota is... excited to meet you."

There's a hesitation that Hitoshi doesn't like. He knows that Eri should probably have more friends her own age, and that concern is more prominent with her impending birthday. All her other friends are siblings to the hero students, like Shoji's little sister Mizuno or Amphibian Fibber's little sister and brother. Kota is new, and he's probably being considered for an invitation to Eri's birthday party. And he'd *better* not be a deviation from Eri's other fast friends. "I want to meet him too! Izuku said he's really cool, and he has a cool quirk that shoots out water!"

Eri curls a hand over her horn after she says that, and he hates it. He hates that she's so concerned with her quirk now, that it seems to be haunting her dreams. Aizawa said she needs to learn to

control it herself, and she needs to use it to do that. To get more comfortable with having it, and possess it entirely for herself.

But if Eri could stop having her quirk, and having all those worries, to have nothing to set herself apart from her friends, she would probably be happier for it.

“Kota is... a bit like Bakugo sometimes,” Aizawa says, his head tilting to the side like that’s a new observation to him, and it *shouldn’t be*. It’s bad enough that Eri has to deal with the real Bakugo. “If he’s a bit standoffish at first, it’s probably due to how he’s often brought along to these types of things. He’s only upset at that, not at you.”

Kota. Had better be as excited to meet Eri as she is to meet him. *Or else.*

And the little punk doesn’t look like he is, even if he looks *frighteningly* like Bakugo. That sneer, that glare under his oversized hat. Even his red shoes are too big. 27 wants to flip him. “With glittering eyes, rock on!”

With cat paws- “With cat paws, we’re here to help!”

“Out of nowhere, we appear!”

“Cutely catly, we sting!”

“The Wild Wild Pussycats!” Mandalay, Ragdoll, Tiger, and Pixie-Bob are *posing*, after jumping out from behind the columns in the entrance, after repeating their theme song, and Hitoshi wishes he wore a face mask today. His face feels hot for some reason, but he’s pretty sure he’s just embarrassed for them. That they’re doing all of that for Eri.

“Did you have to do that?” Aizawa asks, asking the real questions almost like he knows how badly Hitoshi wants to ask that. “The exercise isn’t for another-”

“Four hours, *but*,” Tiger says, and he’s much more muscular than he was in the cartoon. “Presentation is everything, nya?”

There’s a way that they’re staring at him that he doesn’t like. He doesn’t know how much Aizawa knows, and that’s always frightening, but this is even more so. *Mandalay* is looking at him, she’s real and in the flesh, and what he thought he could shrug off and ignore isn’t as easy to do now that he’s faced with that.

He doesn’t know what’s normal to do, if it would be easier to pretend that he doesn’t know them or that he’s not even here. That he’s only here to make sure that snot-nosed kid treats Eri well, and not that he’s dying to ask if Mandalay can use her quirk on him. He’s always wondered if she can really scream inside someone’s mind like she can on the show. [*We need to make sure the surprise is perfect, right?*]

It feels like that, then. Just a little echo behind each word, and the tickle in his skull that makes it clear that it’s not someone talking to him out loud. It’s Mandalay’s Telepathy quirk.

Hitoshi can die happy now.

Mandalay winks, but none of them seem likely to break their pose until they’ve earned some praise, which Aizawa isn’t going to give. Hitoshi can’t offer it himself, he’s sure he’d choke on his tongue if he tried, but Eri is there. “It’s so cool! Your ‘presentation’ is really cool!”

Eri is absolutely sincere, her arms lifted above her head, and that seems to be what they wanted as

the heroes breathe easier and relax. That snot nosed brat in the middle scoffs and turns his head to the side, reprimanded *far* too gently with Mandalay's paw on his shoulder. "Thank you, Eri. This is my cousin Kota Izumi, and he's-"

"Tired," the kid cuts in, and Hitoshi *is going to flip him*. His stupid little flat-topped hat should balance him perfectly. "And I'm not gonna play babysitter."

The kid is only a little taller than Eri, and it's probably just the hat. He's still so *perfectly* flippable, it's so easy and Hitoshi feels exactly what he needs to do to grab the little shit and *flip him* in his arms when Eri walks over to the kid and grabs his hand out of the pocket he's stuffed it in. When she definitely gives him a smile he doesn't deserve, that Hitoshi can't see right now. "It's okay, 'cause Tw-oshi can babysit us! Right, Toshi?"

Hitoshi nods, and if the kid is scared of the scars on his face, he doesn't regret not wearing a face mask. "Right. This place could be dangerous if you're not careful." A *warning*.

He's not sure if the warning is heard, or if Eri's pure smile finally touches some part of that miniature gremlin's heart, but Kota ducks his head. "Fine." The brat stiffens when Eri wraps her arms around him to give him her usual hug, but he grits his teeth and bears it. 27 narrows his eyes, because if this kid isn't careful, if he *hurts* Eri's feelings, he will *pay for it*.

27 might not stoop to child murder, but he's pretty sure that tossing him into that pool would be acceptable. Almost like Aizawa has a stronger Telepathy quirk, he stares at Hitoshi too long, before he starts talking about sectors of this gym and how it hasn't been used in a few months.

That's odd, because this place looks like an amazing training ground. It's massive, but from what Hitoshi can see, there's every conceivable environmental danger that could be made into an advantage in this place. The pools of water, the mountains and ruined city buildings, and the domes that promise more extreme situations. The red domed area with painted fire licking around the edges of it looks the most interesting.

But the heroes are going to explore those areas, while Hitoshi 'babysits.' "Can we play hide and seek-"

"No," Aizawa says, a bit too sharply, but Hitoshi tries to reason that he was distracted with his conversation with Mandalay. That nervous tick when he folds a hand over the back of his neck seems to confirm it. "This is a dangerous area. You three should stay by the entrance. This won't take long."

Eri hums and nods, swinging Kota's captive hand, and seems to look towards her new potential friend for something to do. The brat seems to ignore that, seems to be glaring at the ground, and he'd *better* get over that quickly. "I...can show you my quirk... if you want to-"

"Yeah!" Eri cheers, and she's too excited about it. Izuku talking up this snot nosed kid placed her expectations too high, and they were too high to begin with. Eri seems to like seeing demonstrations of quirks far weaker than hers, evident by the way she kept cheering for the Asui siblings to show off their long tongues, even though she's not a stranger to Amphibian Fibber's. He imagines that she wishes she had one like that.

He imagines she knows her quirk caused her so much pain to begin with.

"*Nya-at* even a little Plus Ultra?" Pixie-Bob nearly yowls, her eyes looking wicked even if her face is a tense grin. "You know your snot nos- most of your students think they've already learned everything about rescue operations after that Provisional Licensing exam. Just a *few* of my golems

could-”

“A *few*,” Aizawa says, even if he’s missing a huge opportunity. The hero students *should* be overwhelmed in a training situation, and Hitoshi can imagine that the large mountain that looked to be made out of loosely packed dirt would be challenging with an army of those golems bearing better footing than the students. “But twenty facing down three students is too much.”

Is it? When those heroes won’t be facing fair odds in real life? Villains won’t stop to ponder if their numbers are too much to overwhelm them, if the environments are too challenging. Aizawa is just being too soft on them, and he usually is, but today it almost seems worse.

“Ah, I’m getting a signal,” Ragdoll says, her eyes closed as she concentrates, her hands splayed out to frame her face as though her quirk needs that. “It seems like two children are running towards... the Flood Zone!”

27 turns to see Eri being convinced by that *gremlin* to keep running down the stairs. They’re nearly at the central plaza, but the direction they’re running towards is *definitely* the giant pool of water. The pool of water, that’s probably deep, probably has a lot of strong currents due to the giant pipe at one end of it.

And Eri can’t swim. “Hito-”

Aizawa shouldn’t worry so much, it’s faster to sprint and jump over these stairs instead of walking down them, it’s not like he’s so ill-trained that he’d *slip*. That’s a mistake you only make a few times with Bug, there’s no reason to have hard concrete breaking bones when she’d gladly do the same as soon as 10 was done healing the break. The *exact* same, which might have made the bones harder to break the next time.

That *little shit* Kota looks at him and tries to run faster, almost tugging Eri too hard, but before she slips and falls, 27 catches her by the back of her dress. “Do *not* run off like that.”

“But it’s tag!” Eri says, because she was cruelly manipulated into this. Her wide red eyes are still full of innocence, and that Kota kid looks like he still wants to run. 27 is *not* above shoving him into the pool to teach him a lesson. “Now I’m it!”

“Now, we’re going to go back to the entrance where Aizawa told us to stay,” Hitoshi says, and keeps his eyes on Kota so that he doesn’t run, and so that he doesn’t see the full force of Eri’s disappointed frown. But just knowing that it’s there makes his legs feel weak.

“I need to be by the water to use my quirk, idiot,” the *little shit* says, and Hitoshi doesn’t *care*. He doesn’t give a shit about his little weak water quirk, but if he needs to be *by* the water, he’ll *gladly* help him into it.

The thought of tossing the little shit in is too tempting to ignore, even if he tells himself that he can’t deny Eri something that she wants. “Fine, but don’t get too close.”

He’s only talking to Eri, but Kota doesn’t need to know that.

*

Aizawa doesn’t like using USJ as a training ground, but the Wild Wild Pussycats had been too excited to play in it. He reached out to them months ago to ask if they would visit so that the rescue training that was derailed at summer camp this year could actually take place, but understandably, they had their own issues to deal with after that training camp.

Ragdoll pretending that she still had Search in front of his wards was concerning, especially because he knows it's something that one of his students will remark on. They'll ask, because they won't truly realize how much losing her quirk must have impacted her as a hero.

And when Ragdoll finds him kicking the piles of shattered glass in the Ruins Zone, ruminating if it's too much and too dangerous for environmental awareness, he has to ask first. "It seems like you've taken point on organizing training sessions like these. Mandalay usually does it."

Ragdoll just tilts her head, winding her paw-covered hands behind her back. "Ah, y'know. Without my quirk, my hero license is suspended, so I'm just helping out however I can. As a *receptionist*."

There's a wink with that word. A wink, a cheeky grin, and something he *knows* would get her in trouble if the wrong person heard that.

He's not that person.

"Of course. All your years of experience in rescue operations are meaningless without your quirk, after all." He's goddamn *proud*, and he has no right to be. But he straightens and looks at her, and tries to impress the importance of this. "Do *not* tell my students anything about that."

"Of course! I don't want anyone to feel bad about it," Ragdoll says, spinning into a twirl that ends with her cat paws raised up in a pose. Sometimes, he wonders if they know how much he would let them get away with, despite knowing how irrational it is. He knows it's just a costume. "About that, though...."

But he won't let it go that far. "About *what*?"

About the investigation, he imagines, which might find a Nomu that has her quirk. That means talking about the leads that still won't talk, the hours that he's spent on the street in the dead of night tracking down any looser end that *might* talk about how Miasma offers their muscle when most imprisoned criminals have been burned through. The 'field interrogations' that he feels will only become closer to something unprofessional the longer this stalemate drags out.

He doesn't have answers for Ragdoll, and she knows it. *How* she knows it is still concerning, but Endeavor somehow found out, so Aizawa wouldn't put it past The Commission of Wardship Affairs to ask the Hero Commission to start filtering the existence of Hitoshi's case through the pro-hero ranks to find another placement for him if he doesn't turn up *something*.

"*Hi-to-shi*."

Ragdoll grins like the cat that got the cream, and Aizawa hates that he slipped up at that moment. Even if he knows seeing his ward hurtling himself down the stairs flight by flight is a logical reason for it.

He avoids addressing Hitoshi by name when they're not in private, because Hitoshi has made it clear that he wants to be addressed as 'Hitoshi.' That comes with implications that Hitoshi doesn't understand, and Aizawa doesn't see the point of explaining them. *Especially* to his students, who for some reason are permitted to call him 'Shinsou.' Aizawa doesn't want to know why that difference exists, even if he worries that he already does.

And that it's Hizashi's fault.

"I was his favorite, right? Right?!" Ragdoll asks, and that's *not* what Aizawa was anticipating. He was honestly sure that they were only showing off for Eri, that they wouldn't have known about that two minute phone call that he asked Mandalay to forget about when he made it more than a

month ago. “*C’mom*, we have a betting pool and I put a *lot* of money on myself-”

“I don’t know,” Aizawa says, because he doesn’t. He wouldn’t ask Hitoshi that question, wouldn’t stir up more of his past with a question Hitoshi likely can’t answer. He probably doesn’t remember which hero was his favorite before he entered Miasma’s hands, and pieces of Hitoshi’s childhood like that are still too difficult to discuss. Too raw. “And you might regret asking him. It’s likely he only watched the show.”

“And they made me so *whiny* before Pixie-Bob joined us!” Ragdoll pouts, likely an old wound, but they were incredibly young when they were signed on for ‘Kawaii Kawaii Pussycats.’ Only Mandalay will talk about it, and talk about how they were able to educate children in age-appropriate first aid techniques, and what to do in a real life emergency to better aid the heroes dispatched to help them, but he’s *sure* the others have problems with their ‘characters.’ Mandalay *was* the star, after all. “But, you’re right, he was a little kid. He probably just watched the show, and he’s probably forgotten about it.”

There’s something more somber in her tone, the way she glances up at the ruined buildings above them as though she’s checking to make sure the shattered glass isn’t likely to fall. Something he’s already checked.

“We looked for him too, you know. Had to for a fan. Search could have...”

Aizawa, as a rule, doesn’t tolerate regrets like that. “He was likely far out of your range. They’re very good at what they do. Not being found.”

Not leaving a single *trace*.

It’s frustrating, but Aizawa reminds himself that the only reason they’ve gotten this far is because Hitoshi is there, giving a reason for their focus, an evident link in the supply chain that results in Nomus. Miasma silences all loose ends, and they’ve tried to kill Hitoshi twice. There’s a saying about a third time, but that’s all the more reason to be cautious.

In another sense, Aizawa will take the Shinketsu student who has no memory of taking the Provisional License exam as proof that there’s already been a third incident, and that it passed with far less casualties than expected. But his class this year has terrible luck with rescue training exercises, after USJ and the summer training camp.

“Any ladders we can walk under?” Ragdoll asks, somewhat out of the blue, but then he remembers that this zone is one of the few that would actually have that temptation of fate. “Looks like you’re trying to find a mirror anyway-”

Aizawa sighs, even if he knows it’s irrational. He doesn’t want to get into it. “I would *like* to make my job as easy as it can be, and keep Recovery Girl from having more reasons to retire. The Mountain Zone is fine?”

Ragdoll nods, then adds in a salute. “Pixie’s only adding four golems there, but the footholds are still stable. Mandalay is going to take some time in the Downpour Zone, y’know she’s just as thorough as you are.”

At least one of them is.

Tiger should also take his time in the Conflagration Zone, which meant that they could both patrol the Flood Zone. And *not* find Hitoshi or the two small children with him anywhere near it.

But while Aizawa was already on edge stepping onto the Central Plaza, looking up at the stairs to

find the entrance barren made that worse. And from the edge of the flat Central Plaza, it was easy to see where his charges were.

Kota must have been training with his quirk in the past few months, much like he is right now. He's pulling the water in the Flood Zone pool into thin arches that hold shakily for a few seconds, then shooting a spray of water beneath them from his palms before they fall, to Eri's excited cheering. The volume of water that he can manipulate might be small, but the technique has become quite advanced. "That's really cool, Mi-Mi!"

"Izumi," Kota corrects grumpily, but allowing Eri to use his given name is still a greater concession on his part than Aizawa anticipated. "It's not really cool right now, but I'll get better at it. My... my parents were better at it. They were heroes."

"Mine too," Eri replies, and Aizawa *pointedly* doesn't look at Ragdoll. He knows what he'd see. "Heroes are really cool, and they have to work really hard to learn how to use their quirks. You're gonna be a great hero too, Zumi."

Aizawa sees both of his wards shuffle on their feet, for likely two different reasons. Hitoshi has been staring at Kota, his arms crossed, and from what Aizawa can see from this angle, an unimpressed look on his face bordering on irritation. Eri inching a bit closer to Kota, moving a bit behind him while his focus is on building another loop higher than the first. And while Aizawa knows what Eri is probably attempting to do, he imagines Kota wouldn't be a fan of it. "What's your quirk, anyway? Is it just your horn or-"

"Eri," Hitoshi warns instead, Eri's hands hovering over Kota's shoulders before they drop. "-'s quirk is none of your business. You're being nosy."

While Hitoshi seemed to have some grudge against Kota already, it's not entirely one-sided. Kota bristles, his concentration breaking the water he was manipulating falls with a splash. "I wasn't *talking* to you, idiot."

Kota punctuates that remark with a splash of water aimed at Hitoshi's feet, which Hitoshi steps back from. The quick glaring contest breaks when Eri steps between them, arms spread out in Hitoshi's defense. "Zumi, don't be mean to Toshi! Toshi's being really nice by talking to you!"

"I don't *want* him to talk to me, or look at me with his weird, tired, hag eyes," Kota retorts, and while Eri already provides an unnecessary defense for the teenager being somewhat bullied, Aizawa walks a bit faster to provide a better one. "He's weird for creeping around us, like some kind of-"

Hitoshi reaches over Eri, getting some form of retaliation by swatting Kota's hat down over his face, but Kota answers in kind with a spray of water from his hands. A juvenile fight doesn't have much opportunity to escalate further, though it claims an unintended victim. "Hey!"

Eri turns and tucks herself, and the soaked front of her dress into Hitoshi's quick and comforting crouch, and Aizawa shouldn't feel like he's coming to the defense of two children who don't get along with Kota. Kota, who sees the approaching adults first and devolves into predictable and frustrated explanations. "I didn't mean to splash her! That guy just- *they're* just weird! Why do I have to-"

"Izumi," Ragdoll interrupts, arms crossed and eyebrow raised. It's the perfect picture of parental disappointment. "You're not supposed to use your quirk on anyone. Remember what your teacher said? What Sasaki-"

“Using your quirk on civi-silions makes you a villain!” Eri cuts in, tossing a glare over her shoulder despite her teary eyes and sniffles. “And you can’t be a hero if you’re a villain!”

Kota honestly looks a bit struck by that, which doesn’t have the intended effect. Instead, he stomps and bares his teeth, frustration and anger deepening. “*I’m* not a villain! You don’t even know what that means! And you-” Another stomp, another attempt to call Kota’s attention by Ragdoll, but it blows over into a scream. “*You’re weird!* You keep grabbing me like some kind of *weirdo*, and *he’s* weird, and-”

“And we’re *not* behaving in a way Deku would like,” Mandalay interrupts, herself a bit drenched from the Downpour Zone, but she wields that firm tone with an authority that Kota doesn’t question, blanching at the sight. And the threat that Aizawa hadn’t considered. “Izumi, come here.”

Kota turns to look at Eri before he does, perhaps a bit of guilt setting in already, but Eri turns her face from him to press it against Hitoshi’s shirt. Aizawa would rather that Ragdoll not follow him when he approaches his wards, but she seems to respect Mandalay’s need for privacy with her charge more than his. “Are you alright, Eri?”

Eri shakes her head, and Hitoshi’s loose embrace around her tightens. “‘M not weird, ‘n Toshi’s not weird, and he’s *mean*, Zawa!” Eri’s hiccuping sobs are only growing stronger, and Aizawa can’t help the wince when Eri’s horn begins to grow. “He’s *mean*, he’s not like Ugo, an’ I don’t *like* him, an-an...”

“Maybe... you shouldn’t have hugged him so much,” Hitoshi mutters, something he’s clearly uncomfortable doing, while he runs a hand over the back of Eri’s head. “But, now that you know he’s mean, you don’t have to try to like-”

Eri pulls away from Hitoshi, breaking out of his hold and runs straight into Ragdoll’s legs for comfort. Aizawa doesn’t know who looks the most disheartened by that - the sobbing child, the stricken teenager crouching on the ground, or Aizawa himself who was passed over for a complete stranger. “Aw, there there! Rotten boys don’t know nothing about *anything*! Let’s take this to the girl’s room to get you cleaned up, okay?”

Eri nods, sniffing as Ragdoll pulls her into her arms and carries her off, and though Aizawa knows the tail part of Ragdoll’s costume shouldn’t move on its own, he swears it swishes. Like it *won* something.

Hitoshi is clearly more upset about it than he shows, and he shows quite a bit of it in a murderous glare directed at a small child. ‘*Little shit. Not invited to birthday.*’

“Yours or Eri’s?” Aizawa asks, trying to make light of the situation. Something that clearly doesn’t work as he catches the tail end of Hitoshi’s sour look before he retreats into his usual blankness. “Kota is a bit different from the other children Eri has met. A bit more like a typical boy her age.”

‘*More normal,*’ Hitoshi signs, but that sign is sharp and the anger behind his narrowed eyes deeper than Aizawa can see. He’s not entirely sure that it’s all on Eri’s behalf.

“Not entirely. Most children his age aren’t in the care of a team of pro-heroes,” Aizawa says, and he doesn’t miss Hitoshi’s flash of confusion before it settles. He imagines that Hitoshi already knows Eri’s situation isn’t typical in that regard, but the reminder of it caught him off guard. “It could have been a similarity that would help them see eye-to-eye, but Kota was probably already irritated with the situation. He was only speaking out of anger.”

Aizawa shouldn’t feel like he’s comforting a teenager after some harsh words from a six year old,

but he does. And he shouldn't feel like he should step between Hitoshi and the six year old in question approaching with Mandalay's hand resting firmly on his shoulder, but he does.

"Sorry," Kota grumbles, staring pointedly at the ground until he glances up at his guardian, and seems to know that apology was lacking to Mandalay's eyes. "*Sorry* I called you weird, and splashed your sister. That's not heroic behavior."

Hitoshi glances at Aizawa, at first seeming to wordlessly ask what the proper response to that should be, before he signs. *'I want to make him feel worse.'*

Aizawa only barely keeps himself from rolling his eyes, realizing that this *indeed* was not going to be an event where Hitoshi could be the responsible teenager who was above a petty feud with a child. "That means that he accepts your apology, and understands that you made a mistake."

'He splash Eri. Should toss into pool. Or flip upside down.'

"He hopes you understand that Eri was hoping to befriend you, and he might have been a bit overprotective of her in the beginning, which he apologizes for," Aizawa says, earning a flicker of a glare from Hitoshi from his efforts. But Hitoshi keeps forcing him to translate.

'Stupid hat. His hat is stupid. He's stupid.'

"And he's a fan of the Wild Wild Pussycats, and Mandalay is his favorite hero," Aizawa says, which draws a bright grin from Mandalay, just as he hoped. Hitoshi pointing so much at Kota and using a rather easily-translatable sign like 'stupid' would have made it too easy for Mandalay to figure out what he was *really* saying.

But from the way that Hitoshi freezes before he ducks his head, nearly hiding his face in his arm when he rubs the back of his neck, makes Aizawa think that he made an unfortunately accurate guess.

"And you two could have been gushing about how much you like me instead of fighting," Mandalay teases, earning some grouching and blushing in equal measure from Kota when she pinches at his cheek, and Aizawa isn't blind to the fact that *Hitoshi* is blushing too. "So, we can start all over with that, can't we? A handshake between Mandalay-fans!"

Instead of a handshake, a cat fight is more likely with the way the two boys glare at each other. But Hitoshi offers his hand, and Kota takes it, a limp-wristed shake that neither of them mean is made and broken quickly just to put Mandalay at ease.

"So, Kota can go first with his favorite thing about me," Mandalay says, a tail that shouldn't swish behind her does, but before Kota can bristle or Mandalay can insist further, the chanting begins and she turns to join in, Tiger and Pixie-Bob framing either side of Ragdoll as the group approaches.

"With glittering eyes, rock on! With cat paws, we're here to help! Out of nowhere, we appear! Cutely catly, we sting! The Wild Wild Pussycats!"

And Eri.

Dressed.

As a member.

Of The Wild Wild Pussycats.

Aizawa is beginning to understand the appeal for taking several pictures of every memorable event in Eri's life.

Eri poses in the center where Ragdoll placed her, smiling with her white cat-paw gloves, a radio communicator on her head that looks more like cat ears, wearing a dress rather than the skirt and midriff combo, which is a bit more practical for the snowy weather outside but not as much as what she had on before.

What she had been wearing before, the same long sleeves and leggings that she's worn practically since she was discharged from the hospital, is practical in more ways than one.

Aizawa doesn't want to disturb this, what he knows might be peace before the storm breaks. Eri might not have seen her scars yet, but the sight of them is often enough for a meltdown. He doesn't know if that's why Hitoshi seems eerily still with the sight, or if Kota's similar stillness will break with the clumsy words of a child and become the push over the edge, but that forces him to say it. "Cute."

Eri presses her paw-gloves together, beaming at that, and Aizawa appreciates that far more than Tiger, Pixie-Bob, and Ragdoll's flustered blushing, when they *know* he wasn't talking about them. "Eraserhead finally said it! And he was sober this time!"

Tiger *didn't* need to add that.

Eri walks over to Hitoshi, whose blush hasn't faded, and who still seems entirely stricken by the sight. "Toshi, 'm sorry that I got mad, but you're right. Some boys have 'toxic masc-linity' and can't handle cute girls and hugs, so I'm not gonna hug Kota anymore."

Aizawa knows he's reading into things seven years too early when he sees Kota begin to fluster with that.

"Just-I don't-*don't* do it so much and it's fine! You're not weird, and..." Kota glances away, even if Eri's cautious stare is impossible not to read. Despite the bravado that Aizawa is sure was all Ragdoll's engineering, possibly with encouragement from the others, Eri isn't quite so willing to write off Kota's friendship as she claims. "I'm sorry I splashed you. It was an accident, but... I shouldn't've been mean to a Deku fan."

Eri's cat-paw gloves seem dangerously adorable now, raised up and slightly curled in her excitement. "Izuku's the best! You didn't tell me you liked Izuku too!"

"I like-" Kota stops, his lips contorting in a frown he seems to be trying to fight. "You *can't* just call him 'Izuku' though! Calling people by their given name is a big thing! It's like saying you're best friends, or family, or boy...boy..."

He can't say it, and Aizawa *worries*.

"But everyone's my best friend," Eri says, with an sincerity that can only be tolerated from a child her age. "'Cause I've only got one name, so everyone has to call me 'Eri.' And Izuku and Mirio said it's okay if I call them that too."

That was more of Togata's idea than Midoriya's, but Midoriya would only fluster slightly when Eri first started calling him that. It's a habit that borders on inappropriate, something that Eri would have to learn eventually not to do. But she should have a family name that she picks herself before that time comes.

"If Deku... says it's okay, then," Kota says, kicking with his bright red and oversized shoes that

Aizawa hadn't paid that much attention to before now. He *dreads* having to get the Problem Child's attention on the rescue training exercise when he knows his ever-attentive student will notice them and have an emotional crisis. "You can call me 'Izumi.' And we'll be *friends*."

"Best friends," Eri corrects, and makes another correction. "Zumi."

The glance to the side is the best sign of surrender that Eri will get, and she doesn't seem displeased by it. Hitoshi has been able to draw himself out of his spell enough to be displeased by *all* of this, still crouching on the ground and close enough to Eri to rest his arms on her shoulders in a way that can't be read as anything but *possessive*.

Aizawa will count it as a win given that Hitoshi doesn't act that way around most of the people in Eri's circle. And that it's something he's startled to find sympathy with.

"Wait!" Eri says, remembering something with widened eyes before she turns to face Hitoshi, and with some struggle, pulls the cat eared headband off her head to try to place it on Hitoshi's. "Tiger said this was for you, 'cause he knows you're a fan of him or maybe Miss Mandalay, but he's pretty sure it's him."

Hitoshi takes the red headband from Eri's oversized gloves, holding it in his hands to examine the dark red piece that doesn't *quite* match the Wild Wild Pussycat's costume, given that it doesn't vaguely resemble cat ears and instead looks more like cat-merch than hero merch. He presses his thumbs to either side of the plastic ears and drops his head when they move, somehow overwhelmed by the way that they *wiggle*.

"The ears are speakers, but there's little headphones tucked into the side so you can listen to stuff without anyone overhearing," Ragdoll explains, before she seems to devolve into a marketing spiel. "They're bluetooth compatible, aux compatible but the cord is sold separately, and lasts up to 8 hours between charges so you never have a music emergency!"

"We hope you like them," Mandalay says coolly, maturely, before that begins to wane. "And I can send you some stickers of my face paint so you can *properly* mark them with your *favorite* hero's decal, with some more merch of course."

"Thank you," Hitoshi whispers, barely more than a breath, but it's still surprising. Less so that he doesn't try to look up, or that he seems to like wiggling the ear speakers.

Aizawa simply tries to count this exercise as a win. USJ was properly checked, Eri had some trials with Kota's personality that couldn't be overcome, but all in all, his wards surprised him by weathering yet another challenging social interaction with visitors from outside UA.

He knows he's just being selfishly irrational when he thinks that Hitoshi's wardship could end, and the teenager could never say a single word to him.

*

Hitoshi has been getting out of practice.

Aizawa made sure they would avoid the hero students during lunch while Eri's dress was still being dried, by climbing into the teacher's lounge through a window. Aizawa didn't want Eri's costume to spoil this 'surprise' of the Wild Wild Pussycats visit, which meant that he couldn't wear the headphones either when they could be spotted. Eri pouted when she had to change back into her usual clothes, and nearly won when Yamada walked in and saw her like that.

Aizawa hadn't expected Yamada's entrance, and that's how he nearly lost. An unplanned influence

tipped the game in his favor.

Hitoshi has honestly been *stupid* until this point.

Ashi took some time to counter him, but she did so brilliantly. Hiding behind Aizawa would eventually come to an end, and with Yamada on her side, Hitoshi knew Aizawa could be the shield that crumbles. His loyalty was to his husband before Hitoshi, Ashi had flipped two of his pieces in one fell swoop. But an unexpected pawn....

Was easy to win.

“Oh, so you have a new friend named Kota!” Mirio beams, once again dominating most of 3-A’s ‘five minutes to bother the wards’ time before their Hero Ethics class began.

Hitoshi doesn’t know if Eri’s growing horn is the reason that Mirio has been spending more time with them, or if he’s just entirely too enthusiastic about snow activities for the rest of his friends to tolerate. At least every other day, he stops by the dorm to build snow bunnies, snow men, snow angels, and try to teach Eri how to throw a snowball.

There were more than a few times Mirio wanted Hitoshi’s help to ‘demonstrate’ by having a snowball fight with him, which almost made Hitoshi feel guilty about how much he enjoyed it.

‘Worry.’ Mirio might be talking to Eri, but Hitoshi’s hands are in his line of sight. Eri’s attention is focused on Mirio unwaveringly, telling him all about the Wild Wild Pussycats and their gremlin, so Hitoshi doesn’t have to worry that she’ll see it. ‘*Mean. Eri cry.*’

It’s just a waver in Mirio’s smile, but a wink that isn’t entirely directed at Eri confirms it. “I’d really like to meet your new friend!”

A piece sliding into place.

Hitoshi *should* feel bad about being misleading but not dishonest. He’s worried, just not about the training exercise where that tiny gremlin would have access to Eri. The gremlin is mean, and he did make Eri cry.

But if Mirio crashes the training exercise, that’s a shield that Hitoshi can keep. He can convince Mirio to take them out to play in the snow afterwards, he *might* be able to convince Mirio to keep them out of 1-A’s dorm until curfew hits. After that, he’ll find some way to attach himself to Mirio all weekend, perhaps stirring up some rivalry for Eri’s affection with that Kota kid, but he’ll devolve into begging if he can just last one more week.

After Eri’s birthday, Ashi can do whatever she wants, but throwing him a fake birthday before Eri’s is just an insult. One that he’ll avoid at any cost.

If Yamada thinks he’s won, he doesn’t look like it. There’s a wincing smile that he seems to wear before he talks about something he doesn’t want to, but he never says anything. He just creates English exercises on the chalkboard for Hitoshi to answer, and Eri chimes in whenever she reads a word she recognizes. Learning these small English words will probably help her when she ‘goes to school.’

When she spends time with children who are less like her other friends, and more like Kota. When she’s away from Hitoshi for most of the day. When she’s more ‘normal.’

‘Normal’ comes quicker for Eri, which is always what he wanted, but realizing how close the precipice was for her makes it seem sour.

Maybe it's the snowfall that makes him realize how much he loves being at UA. Maybe it was that trip that Yamada took Mirio on to look at apartments, since he won't be able to live in the dorms after this school year ends. Maybe it's looking at Mirio, and knowing that they're different in every conceivable way, that even if Yamada says he'll stay after the investigation, that's still too vague a promise.

There are things that happen every year, that are *supposed* to happen, at least. Eri had a birthday even if it wasn't celebrated properly, but this one will be. She'll have 13 birthdays with her fathers, and each one will look more distant from the one before, from all those days that Eri passed that threshold in the dark, without him knowing it.

At best, Hitoshi has two birthdays to look forward to before he turns 18, and Ashi's efforts to give him a fake one are meaningless. He's on a precipice, and it only draws closer, this peace will never last. He could be found, he could be killed, he could be taken away if Yamada is lying and the investigation was all he was good for.

Or he could stay here, for less than two years, until he has to move on and try to be something utterly normal, which he's not. Which he can never hope to be, and he can't hope that the world outside of UA's walls will be any kinder if he's a person instead of a Number, or a Dog.

Eri will be prepared. He can't *possibly* be.

It's the barest relief that the shoe he's worried will drop isn't coming from Ashi.

*

"Y'know Shitsou doesn't fucking want this," Bakugo says, cutting in on Ashido pestering Sato about that bullshit coffee cake when they're supposed to be marching their asses to USJ. Dressed up in their hero gear, marching through this bullshit snow, which makes it feel like some kind of trench-warfare kind of bullshit, and Nezu could probably afford to shovel this shit out of the way with all the money he's got to run this school.

"He just doesn't *know* he really wants it," Ashido argues, because she's stuck on this shit exactly like some fucking wad of gum on a shoe. She's got this grand ass plan to give Shitsou a fucking childhood now that he's 16, and she's even made a lame-ass list about it. It's clear as fucking day that Shitsou's too chickenshit to tell her to fuck off, and that's probably why she likes the asshole. "We've got cake, and birthday hats, and pin-the-hair-on-All-Might games, and it's going to be *fun*! Even if it's a little lame at first-

"Fucking *cringey as fuck*," Bakugo argues, and he's not going to that shit despite all the nagging he'll have to put up with. If Shitsou would just get over his 'I'm gonna pretend I can't talk because that gets my needy ass all the attention' shit, he wouldn't be invited to this bullshit anyway. "Shit's going to waste when Shitsou gets 'grounded' again."

"I baked the cake," Sato says, putting his hands up because he's probably *over* this shit, and he should be. "And I'm not baking it again, until it's *actually* his birthday. Not that it's ever appreciated-

"Thank you, oh magnificent culinary master, oh deliverer of the food that fills our bellies, and the warmth that fills our hearts," Kaminari pipes up, because he can't fucking help himself. "But seriously, if we tried to make something ourselves, Shinsou's most belated birthday ever would be ruined, so you're the bomb. Almost as bomb as Bakugo."

Sato grins like he's fucking proud of that shit, now that his ego has been stroked enough. Fucking

master of the culinary arts, fuck Kaminari if he ever wants to mooch off of Bakugo's cooking ever again.

"Ugo!" The pipsqueak has to hop over the snow like some fucking bunny, and she's going to trip eventually, which means Nezu *needs* to get on his shit.

"What?" Bakugo asks, and he's waiting for one of the extras to pick her up because her tiny fucking legs aren't built for this shit. She's got some shit to say, and she wants to say it bad enough to let go of 'Mommy's' hand and trudge through the snow with the rest of them, but when she gets close enough she just stops and fidgets with her tiny fucking hands. "*What?*"

"Hug me," Eri says, her arms out and waiting, and *fuck no*. No, everyone is fucking *staring* at him now, Kaminari is *losing* his shit, the brat knows the rules and this is against them. He'll do whatever the fuck she wants when no one's fucking looking, but he's not going to act like that with all these fucking extras around.

But the pipsqueak won't get out of his way until he does it, so he crouches down, hugs her for a second, before he picks her up and drops her in Ashido's arms so she won't get fucking stepped on. "There. Happy?"

Eri nods, and he can tell just from the wide-eyed look on her face she's got some startling fucking revelation to share. "Ugo, I'm glad you don't got toxic masc-linity. Kota kinda does, but he says he's gonna be nicer this time."

Whoever the fuck Kota was *better* get over whatever shit he's got stuck in his-

Wait.

Fuck, that's why they're heading over to USJ. Shitsei fucking hates the place, big *fucking* wonder why, but apparently that shit is out of his hands because they've all got to make up some summer camp bullshit. Fucking *fantastic*, Bakugo has *nothing* but fond memories of the *summer camp bullshit*.

The other extras probably haven't figured it out, even if Eri spilled the whole fucking bean field. Nope, they're all cooing and awwing over Eri like it's a fucking rarity that she's with them. Eri Obsessive Compulsion Disorder at fucking work.

"Yeah dude, that toxic masculinity isn't manly at all!" Shitty Hair says, because he's just *twitching* to yoinK Eri out of Acid Wash's arms, and he'll probably have to fight for it. "Yo, can I get a toxic masculinity check?"

Or, he actually has some brains in that thick skull that hasn't been bleached to shit.

Of course, Eri's never going to turn down a fucking hug, but Shitty Hair can yoinK her right out of Ashido's arms with that. That starts the fucking 'Toxic Masculinity Check' for all the fucking idiots who can't fucking help themselves, and they might as well just fucking toss her to get some fucking cuddles. Fucking *idiots*.

Even Eri catches on to their bullshit, giggling at fucking IcyHot when he keeps asking if she's sure, because he wants to cheat at that shit instead of sharing the fucking toddler. But it's cold and shit, he's a fucking heater when he wants to be, so not even shitty Deku's whining is going to get him a turn with the fucking brat.

And they have no idea they've got bigger shit to deal with. "With glittering eyes, rock on! With cat paws, we're here to help! Out of nowhere, we appear! Cutely catly, we sting! The Wild Wild

Pussycats!”

Fucking *lame as shit*, and Shitsou and Shitsei are right in fucking center, taking the full fucking assault of this shit. And probably *enjoying it*, the stupid fucking cat addicts.

And no one can fucking help themselves, ooh-ing and aw-ing like these fuckers didn't toss them over a fucking *mountainside* within 10 minutes of doing that pose the first time they saw it. Deku and his shitty friends are right and fucking center, asking all these fucking invasive questions like the green haired bitch didn't lose her fucking quirk so she can't be a fucking hero.

And that fucking *Kota brat* is wearing Deku's stupid ass shoes. The hits *just* keep coming on this shitty fucking day.

He's fucking fine, it's fucking stupid, this fucking place doesn't get to him and he doesn't *fucking care* about these fucking furry freaks. So what, they were there and they didn't fucking stop him from getting snatched, so they weren't *fucking there*. He shouldn't feel so fucking twitchy about it and he should probably be paying attention to this fucking bullshit exercise Shitsei and the Four Fucking Furies are going over.

But Shitsou looks like he's worried about something. Probably. It's not a fucking excuse when Shitsou's always got issues, and Bakugo always has to deal with them because he's his only fucking friend and shit. “What?”

Shitsou gives him some fucking *look*, like *Bakugo's* the one acting weird for asking. But he *knows* something is giving Shitsou some fucking issues, he's developed some fucking spidey senses for it because the dumb fuck won't tell *anyone* about his issues half the time, and then he sees it when Eri toddles over to grab that little summer camp brat and drag him over to Deku to get properly cooed over.

Shitsou's *fucking little sister complex*. “Oi, if you've got some fucking problem with the twerp, fucking deal with it-”

“*Bakugo*,” Shitsei can fucking mind his own business and shit, he's got two fucking ears so he can listen to the exercise bullshit and deal with Shitsou's issues. Fucking multitasking. “Asui, and Tokoyami will take the Downpour Zone.”

Fucking Downpour Zone where his explosions will be worth positively fuck all. Fuck, he'll be fucking *quirkless* with all the fucking rain coming down, which is *exactly* what fucking *Shitsei* wants because he's a shitty fucking smartass. *Yeah*, he's had to deal with fucking *Half and Half* and the other fucking fail extras in the remedial classes for that *stupid* fucking provisional license, and this fucking *rescue exercise* is just rubbing salt in the fucking wound.

‘*Too loud*,’ Shitsou signs, and *fucking fuck him then*. He wasn't fucking being *loud*, like some shitty fucking kid in class who can't fucking *shut up* and gets everyone held back before recess. *Fuck him*, he can deal with his fucking issues himself.

‘*Fuck you stupid dipshit. Choke and die*,’ Bakugo signs back, and *fuck* Shitsei's eyeroll. Fucker is just setting him up, getting his fucking jollies off to this pointless fucking bullshit by trying to keep this shit *secret*. They *just* got out of All Might's Hero Practical class, that shit was fucking *brutal*, and this shit is going to take too long. ‘*Fuck-*’

Shitsou puts his hand over Bakugo's while he's signing, getting his fucking *panties* in a twist over some shit, and pulls his hand down to his side like he's trying to get him to shut up and *behave* or some shit. And he fucking *holds his hand* like that's *fucking normal* and then he just *breathes* at

him.

Just making a big *fucking* deal about taking a deep breath in, then letting it out, and *fuck him*.

But fine, maybe he shouldn't be sparking over this shit. It's fucking bullshit, but he's a hero and he's supposed to deal with this bullshit. He's supposed to deal with *worse* bullshit, this is just year *fucking one*, and he can *fucking* deal with 'Surprise! We got these Nightmare Furies again!'

He's not going to *associate* with the cat fetish freaks in any way, so he's not going to *associate* them with his fucking trauma. He's going to put the kidnapping bullshit squarely with the kidnapping freaks, and his fucked up brain is going to have to *deal with it*.

"I wonder how the number one hero is going to rescue someone quirkless," Shitsou mutters under his breath, and it's fucking obnoxious because Bakugo can barely hear his tiny fucking mumbles. But he catches that shit eating smirk, and he *knows* what Shitsou's doing. Being a little *shit*.

"Watch and *fucking learn*," Bakugo baits back, because Shitsou has a point. Bakugo is *going* to be the number one hero, he's proven that shit before, and he'll prove it again. The real number one, All Might, has never backed down from this kind of shit, and even if he'd save all the rescue actors before Frog Bitch got a ribbit out or Hot Topic talked to his imaginary friend.

But *Endeavor* couldn't do this shit at all. Endeavor would be fucking quirkless in all that rain, so Bakugo beating the shit out of this exercise just proves he's fucking *ready* to go toe-to-toe with the pros and knock Flame Princess off his fucking pedestal.

Shitsou rolls his eyes and tips his head back, like he fucking *will* watch, but Bakugo knows as soon as the rest of them fuck off to do actual fucking training, he's going to go back to scaring the shit out of Kota with his crazy eyes. "Not that you *fucking will*, when you can contemplate murdering a tiny little kid because he's not going cuckoo for Eri puffs."

Shitsou raises an eyebrow, and for some *fucking* reason, he's side-eying Deku pretty hard. "No, it'll be interesting. Maybe Midoriya will learn how to save someone without using their quirk to do it."

That shit's *cold*, and it's a fucking shame Shitsou doesn't say that shit loud enough for Deku to hear it. He'd fucking *cry* if he knew that's what Shitsou thinks about his big fucking Eri rescue operation shit.

Teary eyed bitch is already getting snotty over the sight of the two little shits he saved being friendly and shit, even if Kota still looks fucking *uncomfortable* with all of it. Eri's really got to get over the hugging shit if she wants to make friends, shitty little boys don't like that shit. Bakugo probably would have bullied the shit out of her when he was a shitty little kid.

But if Kota does, he's fucking *dead*, and he knows it. Even IcyHot is staring at him too damn hard, waiting for something to happen like he's on Shitsou's level with freezing the little shit into an ice cube if he offends Eri's sensibilities and shit.

Bird Beak makes a big fucking deal of coughing into his hand, and he shouldn't because he can't properly cover that shit with the beak and all, and Shitsou's *still holding his hand*. "Let's get this shit over with," Bakugo says, tucking his hand into his pocket because it's been there the whole time as far as anyone knows. As far as anyone will say unless they want *to die*.

The quirkless bitch is the one that gets to lead them to their zone, which is real fucking reassuring. Some real fucking shit goes down and they're on their own, but that doesn't fucking matter,

because Frog Bitch is made for this. Shitsei isn't even hiding how much she's the fucking teacher's pet.

"It's gonna be fucking dark, and fucking raining, so I'll be manning fucking med-station," Bakugo says, because he knows his shit. That's the tactical fucking answer, because rescue exercises are fucking *bullshit*. There should be actual fucking medics backing them up instead of making them learn that fucking bullshit.

"That's oddly considerate of you, Bakugo," Frog Bitch says, like she's fucking *surprised* he can do that easy fucking math. "But, it seems likely that there are at least three rescue actors in our zone, kero. Tokoyami and I can still cover more ground, but we shouldn't overlook that you might be required to save an actor to pass this exercise too. Or that there could be a villain attack, kero."

The cat freak fucking *giggles*, and if that shit wasn't obvious before, it is now. "20 actors, six zones! How many could there be, what could happen, *nya?*"

Fucking *obvious*.

"Then, we should find a base camp near the center of the zone to keep in somewhat communication," Tokoyami says, and that's the right fucking idea in some situations, but it might not be for this one.

"Depends on how dark that shit is in there, and if there's cover," Bakugo argues, because getting surrounded on all sides is a rookie fucking mistake. He's known this shit before he got his first Zombie Survival Guide.

And it's fucking *dark*. There's rain pouring down in sheets, it's loud as *shit*, but the zone's supposed to be modeled after some kind of fishing village. There's only a few huts those shits could be hiding in, and the northeast side looks like it has a beach and a tiny model ocean.

"Great, Froggy takes the water since you spent all that time on a boat, but that's probably where some pop-up villains are coming from so keep your eyes peeled," Bakugo says, and Froggy nods because she knows what's fucking what. "Which means there's extras hiding in their houses and down the hill over there at the southwest-"

"I can take the downslope," Beaker says, because he *thinks* he's being polite, but that shit's not flying on Bakugo's grade.

"*Or* the huts, so you can back up Froggy and scare the shit out of any opportunists hiding in those shitty huts," Bakugo argues, because he doesn't fucking *need* his quirk to be a goddamn hero, and this bullshit cold ass rain is fucking *nothing* compared to real ass villains. "I'm not *hiding* or some shit, I'll beat the shit out of any actor with my bare fucking fists-"

"Exactly," Donnie Beak-o says, but he looks like a drowned ass bird the more they stand there and his feathers get soaked, and it's fucking *creepy* to know he has *skin* under there. "But I'm just as useful in the field as I am in the houses, while the roofs would allow you to use your quirk. If there are opportunists hiding in wait, you would be just as adequate to scare them. Your explosions could also be a way of communicating an emergency, such as an opportunistic attack."

And Froggy would be running back to shore anyway if there's some swamp men in the water, which means they could still pull off a pincer attack if she leads them into a hut. "Fine."

Bakugo goes through two houses before he finds one of the Gen Ed extras taking this shit *real* seriously. If this dick is supposed to be hiding under the bed like a terrified victim, he's doing a

shit job of it with his legs hanging out and his phone light grabbing Bakugo's attention. "I'm a hero here to save your ass, are you injured?"

"Oh shit," Dumbass hostage says, and that light disappears. "Uh, yeah, my leg's broken. There were some- I mean. *Ahhh*."

Why the *fuck* couldn't they get the rescue actors again?

Bakugo has to fucking *carry* this shithead to the hut with the weirdly big chimney, and put him on a bed and fucking *act* like he's got a broken leg. The idiot already let it slip that there was a villain attack that caused this, but he keeps shaking his head and *trying* to act like he's shaking, and it's fucking *obnoxious*. "I c-can't, I'm traumatized by these horrific events. I can't remember their quirks or what they looked like, or where they were going. I just blacked out and you were there. My *hero*."

It doesn't get better when Froggy pulls in some chick that was hiding in a boat, but Froggy takes care of the 'shock treatment' and wraps a blanket around her. That blanket's looking pretty fucking *nice* now that Bakugo's just on fucking standby and defense, and he's fucking *soaked* and shit.

And they're just *waiting*.

Tokoyami comes back empty handed, and that shit can't be right. There'd be at least three victims for each zone, that shit's easily divisible, and if they *think* they're being smart by keeping them off-guard, it's just stupid. The animal quirk assholes go off to play *real heroes* again, and both the Gen Ed extras are on their phones at this point. And it's fucking *boring*.

And when the fuck-off animal couple comes back, there's a fucking tarp trailing after them like they don't see that shit. "Oi, look fucking alive!"

Tokoyami and Asui turn and they'd probably do the real work if this *was* a fight, but the tarp flies off and quirkless cat bitch throws up peace signs. "And that's it! An unpredictable rescue mission indeed! You got all the rescue victims, treated their injuries, defending them instead of running off, and now reinforcements have arrived! It was-" *She better not fucking say it*. "Purr-fect!"

Fucking *kill him*. "That... was a bit easier than expected, kero," Asui says, and that's *all* that needs to be said about it. Fucking *waste* of time.

And when Bakugo gets back to report to Shitsei that this pointless bullshit was fucking *stupid*, he doesn't see Shitsou or Eri around, but he sees Deku, Shitty Hair, and Four Eyes also got off stupidly easy. "Oi, that shit was too fucking easy. Let me in on that Conflagration Zone shit-"

"Congratulations on passing this exercise," Shitsei says with a monotone that says he's phoning *all* this shit in. "You're free to leave now."

Fucking *bullshit* waste of time. "And where the fuck did Shitsou run off to?"

"Togata-sempai came by to take Eri and Kota to play in the snow for a bit," Deku says, and that sounds like some shit right up his alley. And he's probably *not* tagging along for that shit just because he feels like he needs to cheer for all the fucking extras once they're done with their bullshit training.

And the fucking *snow* is going to be fun now that he's fucking soaked. "Fucking *great*, no one fucking brought their uniform because we had to change before we came here, fucking *amazing* foresight right there."

If Shitsei can hear that shit, he doesn't fucking act like it, and he *should* because Frog Bitch is gonna die if she tries to leave right now.

"Ah, that was something I overlooked, so thank you for pointing it out, Bakugo," Iida says, because he's fucking *dying* to be useful when he really just wants to ditch but he can't because he takes that student president post too fucking seriously. "I'll return with everyone's uniforms so that our hero costumes can be properly stored until the next exercise!"

Hopefully he does that shit quick, because Bakugo has some snowballs to toss at Shitsou's dumbass purple head for running off like that, and maybe he can go to sleep before the birthday bullshit starts to go down.

*

It's not working as well as Hitoshi thought, because he misstepped in the beginning.

When Mirio arrived, it was clear to see that Eri was having a fun time with the flat-hat bastard. The gremlin had an All Might action figure that was painted green, and Eri still had that Cat Sailor Moon action figure from Quirk Thief. Kota was trying to make Sailor Moon into a villain he could fight, and Eri was trying to argue that this weird 'Deku' action figure wouldn't fight Sailor Moon, so Mirio stepped in and said they could find some snow villains and a snow fortress to play in.

And Hitoshi shouldn't have invited Mirio's attention so early, because he forgot that Eri can only stay out in the cold for so long. He should have somehow insisted that the gremlin be left behind, because they have to return him to the Wild Wild Pussycats, which means that he'll be in Ashi's crosshairs if she's done with training by that point.

And after watching all three of them play in the snow, Mirio pointed those two things out as the sun began to set, and now Hitoshi was walking back towards his doom if he didn't think of something else to say. Some reason to keep him out a bit longer, for just three more hours.

Hitoshi considers what to say, and how to say it. He could *say it*, but he won't not unless his situation gets that dire. Mirio is still learning sign language, and even if he seems to pick it up faster than Bakugo, Hitoshi can't risk it. And the lies that should get him what he wants can't be spoken on his phone app where Eri would hear it, even though she's still holding hands with Kota and walking in front of them, so Hitoshi pulls up his chat with Mirio.

Eri's Mom: Eri wants to spend time with you after this. She's missed you a lot.

Mirio puts his hand to his phone in his pocket, but doesn't check it until Hitoshi shows him what he wrote, which almost defeats the purpose. Mirio looks at it, and at Eri, a bit confused by the way his eyebrows work together, but then he pulls out his phone with a weird little smile.

Eri's Plushie Dealer: aw, didn't want to embarrass her??? Was planning to come by 2morrow. New plushies at the shop!

Hitoshi frowns, because he meant 'after you toss the little gremlin back to his caretakers' instead of 'at some point in the near future.' Tomorrow will not help him.

Eri's Mom: Eri has been having bad dreams. Might help if she spends time with you tonight.

Eri's Plushie Dealer: I can come by the dorm if u think it would help, but im p sure u n Aizawa got it covered :)

Mirio *could not* be this clueless. He could *not* be this stubborn, this *reasonable*. Hitoshi glances at him and only sees Mirio's smile, Mirio offering help, but not the help that Hitoshi *needs*. And as USJ only draws closer the further that they walk, Hitoshi turns to desperation.

Eri's Mom: I need you to kidnap me so I don't have to go to the dorm until curfew. They're trying to throw me a birthday party I don't want.

He hears a snort as soon as he sends the message, and looks over to see Mirio biting his lips, his smile odd for it before he tilts his head and smiles fully. "I guess if that's the case, I can help you out, Shinsou. As long as Aizawa-sensei agrees with the 'kidnapping' and all."

Aizawa should, and Hitoshi hopes that Mirio makes that argument. Aizawa might know what it means, but he's hopeful he can just wait outside until Mirio makes the deal in his favor, so he can keep away from Ashi's sight. He's sure she'd try to kidnap him first.

"But it is a little weird though," Mirio says, and it's *more* than 'a little weird,' because absolutely no one has ever had a fake birthday party and no one *should*. "If you can pick any day to have a birthday party, I definitely wouldn't pick Friday the 13th. It's kind of bad luck, you know?"

And 27's luck runs out.

He stops in his tracks, and doesn't know how he didn't notice it before, how he could have missed it, even if he knows *exactly* how he wouldn't. He can't force himself to move, he can't force himself to *breathe*. The seconds it takes for Mirio to notice stretch on in nigh-unending terror, and 27 doesn't want him to notice at all. Even if that was the first irrational thought in his mind.

He doesn't know if the blade pressing against his throat is pressing hard enough to reveal its existence, but he imagines it's invisible even when he can't bring himself to look. He just stares ahead, Mirio taking two more steps, Eri's back turned, *Eri* is here. And 27 wishes she were *anywhere* else.

"Happy birthday, little bro," 127 whispers, right beside 27's ear. He doesn't know if Mirio can hear it.

He doesn't want him to.

His moment of peace at UA has come to an end.

Chapter End Notes

I was unfortunately ill-informed when I wrote and published this chapter initially. I had seen online that Tiger was a transwoman, but corrected by a reader that Tiger is a transman. This version has been corrected.

Blood on The Snow

Chapter Summary

127 is on UA's campus, and the heroes struggle to respond to the situation, thwarted by the security protocols in place. The heroes attempt to respond to every threat that they find.

27 is faced with a choice, a decision that 50 wouldn't approve of.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Bug mention, Dissociation

Previously on Wards of UA: The Wild Wild Pussycats are visiting UA to use USJ as the grounds for rescue training exercises. Shiori is an informant for Aizawa, a hacker who has hijacked his phone multiple times. The last chapter ended with 127 pressing a knife to Shinsou's throat, stopping him from following Mirio, Eri, and Kota back to USJ, and Mirio was telling Shinsou that Friday the 13th was a rather ominous date for a fake birthday. Shinsou can use his quirk to its fullest extent with Eri, not requiring questions and commanding her without speaking, after repeatedly using his quirk on her thousands of times. 127 stabbed Shinsou in the side when Shinsou had been placed in a juvenile corrections facility for his own protection, in an attempt to kill him before he was placed in a wardship. During the raid on the 8 Precepts, Shinsou was absorbed into Chisaki and later Nemoto was absorbed, and Shinsou's only awareness during that time was pain when Chisaki asked a question. Hari would torture Shinsou by pulling him by his hair into a bath that was treated with bleach. Midoriya, Iida, Asui, Tokoyami, Kirishima, and Bakugo were the students that finished their rescue exercise first. Shinsou brainwashed Midoriya when he attempted to escape UA in Chapter 49. The interest in The Miasma is mostly due to how The Miasma is suspected to provide 'parts' for Nomus. Aizawa spent most of his childhood with his grandfather, who paid for his tuition and board at UA, but Aizawa has been distant from his grandfather after he became engaged with Yamada. Shinsou has been selectively mute for the bulk of the story so far, but after he got sick, he believed he was not selectively mute anymore, but intended to keep acting like he was, and has never said a word to Aizawa though he has broken his silence with other characters such as Yamada or Mirio.

Despite how many times Aizawa has heard the lockdown protocols fall into place, doors and windows becoming barricades with reinforced steel plates and the lights dimming as non-essential power is cut and routed to robots and electrical and plasma fences on the perimeter, he nearly jumps this time. Not just flinching, not just startling, his feet nearly leave the ground and his scarf flares around his shoulders before he realizes that there are several students, a full class of Gen Ed volunteers, and a few visiting heroes waiting near him who don't know what's going on.

“An intruder was detected on campus,” Aizawa says, and he sees the palpable anxiety rise where it

shouldn't in his students. It's enough that he feels it in himself, but knowing that they remember the USJ incident as fondly as he does makes him wish he could take more of it on himself. "Just at the perimeter. All buildings on campus will be on lockdown until Hound Dog responds."

Hound Dog is the first line of defense, and the security robots are trained to follow his lead. Heroes on staff are supposed to do a headcount, report back to Nezu how many students are in their charge, if any are missing. The students are the priority. The students in his charge are clearly on the verge of panicking, especially the Gen Ed students talking amongst themselves. His students are worried, but somewhat prepared. "Izumi."

Mandalay isn't the picture of heroic composure right now, her hands wringing in front of her, her eyes too wide and pleading at Aizawa. They've gone over the procedures before, just as protocol, but Aizawa pulls out his phone to call Nezu instead of reporting his headcount through the app that's already pulled up with a text box that would report directly to Nezu's little 'War Room.' "Eraserhead, USJ. 33 students, six may be unattended at 1-A dorm. Four guests accounted for. Kota, Eri, Mirio, and Hitoshi are outside, requesting access to leave."

Even his staff access badge can't override these security protocols without Nezu's permission, since the biometrics could be overridden if a villain with a shapeshifting quirk had gotten that badge. "*Granting, allow...*" Nezu goes silent, 'allow 10 seconds to process' goes unsaid, and Aizawa finds himself going unnaturally still, warring with the need to run to the door behind him and leave his remaining students in the Wild Wild Pussycats' more than capable hands. Instead, he hears an odd snort. "*Allow 50 seconds, this is very odd.*"

Aizawa doesn't like that, the implication that all of these security protocols could be *faulty* at a time where they *might* actually be necessary. He tries to keep the image of some third year Gen Ed student sneaking someone over the wall for a weekend romance, some petty but ultimately pathetic criminal 'doing it for the Vine' again. But Hitoshi is out there, out of his line of sight, with Eri and Kota in tow and Mirio to defend them. And Mirio is...

"Ah, Hound Dog has made contact. One intruder, female, strong stench. Possibly homeless. *Surrendering*," Nezu recounts those things, and Aizawa breathes a sigh of relief. *Why* a vagrant would try to find a warm shelter on UA's grounds can only have illogical answers, but he doubts it's more than- "*Oh, what luck. She's asking for you. A 'Miss Shiori?'*"

Aizawa doesn't have time to consider apologies or promises that he'll *deal with her*, before Nezu somehow transfers him and he hears Hound Dog's growling in the background. "*Eraserhead-*"

"What the *hell* are you doing?" Aizawa demands, because there were billions of yen spent on these security protocols but still hundreds of students and staff panicking right now, and there's not a single answer Shiori could give that could explain why she's *here*. "There's no way I can keep you from getting trespassing charges-"

"*I wouldn't be worried about me right now.*"

The line drops.

Aizawa pulls his phone away and confirms it, the small beep and silence due to the call dropping. Aizawa tries to call into Nezu's 'War Room' again, tries to call Nezu's personal line, his office. Every single call drops.

"Mandalay, I need you to dial this number to get in contact with Principal Nezu," Aizawa says, because his phone is just having an inconvenient error right now. Mandalay's phone wouldn't be affected. His phone has been having issues, he should have listened to Hizashi when he talked

about getting an upgrade.

It's not due to Shiori, and Mandalay getting through to Nezu's personal line isn't because her phone wouldn't be affected if the security protocols were hijacked like all members of staff's phones would be. The method of communication that would be their lifeline in a real incident.

It's been more than 50 seconds, and Aizawa makes his way to the door, confident that Mandalay can manage the situation. USJ would be secure, his students protected by four pro-heroes, but there are six unaccounted for students who might be on campus grounds and locked out of any safe bunker, a group with two young children in a similar situation. There are supposed to be orders coming down from Nezu as to who would sweep the campus for those unfortunate enough to be locked out, to find the intruders and dispatch them, but those orders might not be coming down. "Sensei!"

Aizawa tries his badge again, and it doesn't work. The light remains red. "Yes?" Aizawa finds himself surprised that he can answer Jirou and only sound annoyed, rather than panicking.

Jirou hands him her cell phone, and Aizawa already knows he doesn't need to ask who 'Loudmouth' is, even if he eventually wants to know why Jirou has Hizashi's phone number. "*Hey, couldn't get through to you, I know you're busy but just tell me the kids are okay?*"

Hizashi is panicking, because he knows that Aizawa *would* be busy with the orders that *still* aren't coming through, and that he'd be searching for Hitoshi and Eri if this *door would open*. "They're locked out, but Mirio is with them. You'll likely be called back to campus for the meeting."

That's not according to protocol. Hizashi is on patrol and the after-incident meeting would take place with responding staff members, then mentioned again at the monthly staff meeting. And Hizashi knows that. "*On my way. 10 minutes.*"

10 minutes, and Aizawa has no idea what he'll find when he gets close enough to campus. He can only hope that Hizashi *can* get on campus, that those security protocols won't lock him out as well. He hands Jirou's phone back to her, tries to keep himself from reacting. He's a hero, he's Eraserhead, he's their teacher. He's not worried.

"The rooftop has manual access, the key is in the breaker box," Mandalay reports, and the rest of her team is trying to reassure the students. His own students are among them, the students coming out of those zones where training had suddenly been cut short emerge into this darkened arena confused but their peers are going to meet them, to explain the situation. "40 students unaccounted for on the grounds, but Midnight, Thirteen, and Powerloader are outside."

Hound Dog isn't mentioned, and Aizawa doesn't want to think about that. As soon as he starts to move to the door that leads to the access stairwell, Mandalay grabs his arm and tries to hand him her phone, but he shakes his head. "You need to be in communication."

Mandalay's quirk would do just as well as the intercom announcements he still hasn't heard.

[Intruder detected on campus. All buildings are on lock down. Heroes are being dispatched for those who are locked outside. Please make your way to the nearest building to assist them.]

Mandalay's voice echoing in Aizawa's head sounds steady, professional, and he envies that now. Now that he feels the same panic under his skin, making the cold air outside duller with it, because he doesn't know where his charges are either.

Mirio stops and turns, his eyes going a little wider *because he sees it*. “Oh, I’m sure they’re not being mean, Shinsou! I just thought it was kind of funny. If you could pick whatever birthday you want, why that one, you know?”

Mirio’s smiling, so 27 tries to smile back. He tries to laugh, but the air is cut off in his throat, right below the knife. ‘*Funny.*’

The knife pulls a little tighter, and 27 *knows* he’ll see it. The knife placed right in the gap between two folds of his orange knit scarf. He’s already seen that 27 isn’t moving, that he’s stuck in place in a way that has everything to do with 127’s hand on the back of his neck, the cold scales of his fingers holding his shoulder and neck at the join. “And half-birthdays are a thing, you know! My dad would make super-fruity-tooty pancakes for my half-birthdays before I kind of grew out of them. And since your birthday is July 1st... That means New Year’s Day can be super special!”

27 won’t see it. “Get rid of them,” 127 rasps, so quietly, and 27 doesn’t know why he wants that. Why he won’t just *do it*, why he cares, why the scar on his side where 127’s blade should have done the job already stings.

But he knows it’s not worth questioning. He has to obey. “Hey Eri,” 27 calls, and he doesn’t want her to see it. He knows he has to use her, and it feels sick, it feels sicker than the cold numbness that’s enveloped him completely.

He’s just grateful he has the words this time.

“I love you,” 27 says, and hates he can’t just say those words. That Mirio has to find those words odd, even if he just smiles at it, at Eri. That he can’t just see her swinging Kota’s hand in hers, see her smiling at him, the snowflakes dancing in the air. He has to leave it.

“I love you too!” Eri answers, and he knew she would. He didn’t know if he’d be able to catch the string but he does, he doesn’t know if it will work but he has *no idea* what to do if it doesn’t.

Eri’s eyes turn white, and she drops Kota’s hand, but he forces the thought like he used to. *Take Kota’s hand. Turn around.* Eri does, she *does it and it works*, but he doesn’t feel any warmer from it. *Run forward.*

Eri runs, and Kota finds it odd. He tries to tug his hand away, shouting complaints, but he’s dragged behind her and forced to keep up. They’ll both be safe as long as they keep running.

“Wait, Eri!” Mirio looks confused, and he *looks at him*. He shouldn’t, he should just run after Eri, he should *leave*, he can’t stay here.

“T-tag,” 27 says, as soon as he thinks of it. Eri is running, Kota is running. This is just a game, and Mirio *just* has to chase after them. “You’re it.”

27 just keeps trying to smile, to say that everything is okay. It’s okay, he’ll follow if Mirio runs. He’s smiling, it’s fine. *Just run.*

But he can’t command Mirio with his quirk like that. He can’t do that to anyone but Eri. He just has to *hope* that Mirio will turn around, instead of smiling like that. Instead of snorting like this is funny.

“Tag, huh?” There’s a moment where 27 is *sure* Mirio sees it, the line he knows is drawn over his neck, where 127 has made his threat too clearly. Mirio walks forward, towards him, the *wrong* way, and despite how wrong it is, 27 nearly sees the red cape that he saw before, during the raid on the 8 Precepts. “You’re it!”

It's a blur, too many hands on him, tugging in too many ways he doesn't know which one to follow. Mirio's hand on his shoulder pulls away and wraps around 127's hand, something dragging him down and away, the gasped sounds of a struggle. 27 is on the ground, the snow is cold on his folded legs. He's just sitting there, staring at Mirio's back, his arms outward but bent, hands fisted, until he wipes his nose, blood smeared on the back of his white glove.

Mirio is crouched, and waiting, 127 is out of his reach and *invisible* but he made Mirio *bleed*.
"Shinsou, run."

27 can't breathe. Mirio can't *fight this*. "'Shinsou,' eh? You got found, got this cute little *family* now. 'I love you,' how *sweet*."

127 is invisible, nearby, but the only indication of his presence is that taunting voice. There's no breath, no footprints made in the snow. He sees Mirio's breath in clouds and thinks he can't do that. "Shinsou, I need you to move. Go and get Eri, get Aizawa—"

"Eri? Aizawa? Making all *kinds* of friends here," 127 says, and he's *somewhere else*. He's closer, to the side, *closer to 27*. "Oh, I'm not mad though! I'm proud of ya, kiddo. You were always such a *quiet* little kid back at Miasma."

27 feels the tremble in his chest, a puff of air from his mouth that feels more like vomit. Mirio *can't* know that name. "Shinsou!"

"It's been a while, you might not recognize me," 127 says, closer still. 27 hears footsteps but they aren't as loud as they should be. Mirio is pulling him up to stand on legs 27 barely has, and against his chest isn't warm at all, it's barely there. "Of course, anyone who sees my face gets...."

Killed. "Shinsou, look at me," Mirio isn't smiling, it's worse than when he looked at Chisaki. It's worse than the determined grin and eyebrows drawing tighter, more like a frustrated grimace with each dodge. "You need to go—"

If I go, you need to come with me, I can't let you die. Why won't you leave? "What can you possibly do without your quirk?"

"I can distract him so you can get away, and if I die, I'll die as a hero," Mirio answers, before his hands on 27's shoulders fall away, and his face turns blank, his eyes frosting over. That isn't what Mirio wanted to say, 27 imagines.

That's not what he wanted to say either. Those weren't his words. "Jeez, that's pretty messed up. What the hell have these guys been feeding you? Your eyes freakin' *glowed*..."

Not his words.

Those weren't his words.

Not his quirk.

Fingers snapping in his face. "Earth to 27, we back? We good? Yeah, let's get Tin-Tin out of here, we're on a tight schedule, alright? And my ass is *freezing* out here, literally. Cold blooded and all."

127 still isn't killing him, and it doesn't make sense. Not when he hears the knife slide back into its sheath.

"Look, it's *fine*, you're not in trouble anymore. Boss just wants to bring you back home. No hard feelings about last time, right? I'll just take some blood out of you, you'll come back home- hey,

no mask this time! Isn't that nice? Bug said it herself!"

That doesn't make any *sense*.

"Look," 127 says, a hand resting on 27's shoulder, and he *can't* look at 127 anyway, he's invisible. "Things might have been fun here, with the... eating I guess, the friends. You can tell us all about it! But, you know this is the best way it can go, right? I'm not gonna kill you, those heroes don't have to know what you did. Because if this investigation ends with Miasma going topside, that means all those little compliment cards from your clients get found, and that's...."

Aizawa said he's not going to jail. He said it. He said he was forced to do it. He won't be in trouble. He'll stay.

"There's two ways this can go, little bro," 127 says, his voice growing firm along with the grip he has on his shoulder. "Either Tin-Tin leaves, and we make our way back to our merry little home, or... *I* make him leave, and then I'm looking at a disloyal little Number who doesn't like those nice second chances. Do you think Boss didn't tell me what to do if that happens?"

Disloyal little Numbers... disloyal little Numbers.... Are the tastiest to them. Cherry and Blossom. Bug's voice echoes in his head, she's almost *here*, but she's not. 27 tells himself she's not, those bugs aren't in his skin, even if the scars are burning, even if he can feel 127's eyes on him. He goes back, or Mirio dies, and then he dies.

The silence of the snow answers him, there are no heroes and no robots here. And they won't be coming.

An unexpected influence can tip the game.

What will happen? "Do you think you'll end up any differently from 148?" 27 asks, but he doesn't, it's not him asking. He's aware this time of that blindness that flashes before he finds the words pulling in his throat, how *someone* else possesses him like a ghost, like a Gengar. A piece deeper than skin, deeper than the tattoo that he took from Nemoto in that fusion.

"No, when it comes to that, I want them to put me in the same fucked up body he has," 127 answers, his words monotone and forced, as blank as his eyes probably are at this point. "It's romantic, being one like that. The only way we could ever escape."

27 forces himself to breathe, even if he wants to collapse and curl into himself, he can't. Mirio is still behind him, 127 is somewhere in front of him, even if his hand has fallen away from his shoulder. Three people under his control, Eri was running away with Kota but they might find someone.

Someone else might come and see this.

"Mirio, take two steps back." The crunching snow answers him, the barest feeling of warmth that 27 had at his back taken over by cold. "Turn to face the dorms."

He could leave it there. He could wait for someone to come. He could make 127 walk with them to USJ. He can't imagine the look on Aizawa's face, but he imagines he would be proud. Proud that 27 captured a real Number like that.

"Walk forward."

But 27 knows that won't work. 127 will never talk, and at the end of his time, he'll be pulled back, and 127 knows it. 127 will fail his job, but he'll tell Boss everything - where 27 is, where Eri and

Mirio are. Who they are to them. To *kill* them.

Mirio's back is turned to him when he looks, and there's no objects that will stop him until he gets to the dorms, or the trees far beyond the dorm buildings. Even then, he might keep walking until he reaches the wall around campus.

Everything is silent and deserted. No one is coming. Yet.

The snow continues to fall, and 27 knows what he has to do. "De-deactivate your quirk-k."

127 is standing in front of him, his eyes focused on either side of his head, but he imagines they're glazed over. He wears the same black uniform, it seems oddly nostalgic to see it after so many years, the only change is the weird red button on 127's shoulder. But the trailing scars where his scales have been peeled away from his neck and over his chameleon face make him shudder. He failed, only once, only with 27, and Bug *did that*.

But he can't feel guilty now. "T-take your kn-nife out, and ha-hand it over."

127 has his katanas strapped to his back behind his small backpack, a row of throwing knives on his belt. There's two larger knives that he enjoys using the most, polished and gleaming and wickedly curved. There's a moment of hesitation because 27 wasn't specific, but 127's hand draws up and pulls out the one on the left. 27 can't ask if it's his favorite.

27 takes the knife carefully by the blade, wrapping his hand around the handle like it's his first time holding a weapon. He adjusts his grip pointlessly, tries to breathe out this trembling worry. He can't think of what will happen to the body, not when that thought is overwhelmed by where to strike to make sure 127 doesn't have long to fight after the control breaks. Severing his spinal cord at the back of his neck would be the best, but 127 was happy to brag that the flaring cartilage over the top of his head and down the back protected him against that. His scales also make it tough to get a good strike in.

50 told him to never do this. 50 said he wouldn't be able to come back the same way. Taking a life takes something from a person, something that can't be recovered. The Miasma would take enough, *everything* has taken too much. 27's skin is little more than scars, his mind is broken, he'll never be *normal*.

Not even his *quirk* is his.

27 has nothing left to him, nothing that's his own. He has a promise that for over a year, he can stay at UA, but promises are just stories. Nothing has been proven. There's just a *chance* he can keep this.

But there's more than a promise, there's a *threat* he knows The Miasma means now. 127 will take him back for whatever reason, or he'll kill him. Failing that, he'll bring back all the information that Miasma needs to kill *Eri*. To make him regret it. To sever any loose end that 27 has made because he *talked* about The Miasma. Aizawa, Yamada, Eri, Mirio, every student he's ever met. They'll all *die*, and all that blood will be on his hands.

27 raises the knife, ignoring how it's shaking, how he can't make himself hold it tight enough. His hands are refusing to obey him. He can see the twin valleys in 127's neck where his scales become smaller, turn white underneath his neck until it reaches the high collar of his black uniform. He imagines the front of 127's torso is like that, like a chameleon's. The small white scales look a bit softer on the underside.

There are too many things on the edges of 27's mind, how he shouldn't, how he *shouldn't*, the icy air around him nearly filled with other voices. 50 telling him not to, Bug's growl when he messed up in training, Boss' snort and the smell of his cigar smoke, things he *left behind* and things he intends to *keep*. His teeth are grinding, jaw too tight, he can *feel the mask* again and digging into his face to do more than create scars, to *bleed*.

The swing of the knife should have slit half of 127's throat, the tip angled to dig in deeper to hit that vein. The knife falls out of his hands afterwards and 27 watches the blood gush from the wound, 127 bends forward and pulls his hands around it. "Little *shit*-"

Little shit little shit little shit Cherry and Blossom 8 hours 12 hours

He holds a hand in front of himself, trying to shove 127 away when he charges, but there's a blinding blow to his jaw before the ground rises up to meet him. 127 holding his arm too tight behind his back, the strain and stretch in his shoulder is too painful, sharp knee in the middle of his back, snow instead of air in front of his face. He just needs to raise his head enough to talk, 127 will have to answer-

Hari's hand in his hair can't breathe can't breathe water is supposed to be warm it's cold it's not warm it's cold it's cold so he's not there, he's not there, he's not here either-

He only has time to gasp when 127 tugs his head back further, too rough and it feels like his neck will break, but his hand releases and *cold*

Cold metal digs in.

"Bug really thought of everything-" *Click*.

His old mask is back on his face, no bigger than it was before. His face is bigger, everything too tight, he can feel the blood warm on his skin more than the pain where his flesh is being sliced through. He doesn't miss this, it's not nostalgic even if this is the biggest piece of his childhood he could ever regain. He's long since learned not to try to open his mouth, that the metal will dig in deeper, but he does. And he *screams*.

He's losing pieces of his body in this cold, in this numb, in this red *red* anger. He thrashes, losing thought, the knowledge that there's some way out of this pin is only a *thought* he can't catch in his mind because he needs to *get out*. They can't take him, they can't *take* him, they can't *take him back*.

127 was always bigger than him, but he's smaller now. There's a blade at his throat, a tug at the strap of the mask, but 27 is able to roll with it. He thrashes and bucks, gets himself free despite the fingers still clawing at him, he claws through the snow until he can pull himself up, until he can run.

Until his hand finds the blade of that knife he dropped.

27 drags himself up, holds the knife, and the blade is no longer shaking. He's shaking at every edge, but inside the frenzy, there is steel inside himself. He knows 127 is better at knives, he's trained more, he's *killed* more, but 27 holds the knife in front of himself and doesn't flinch when 127 uses his quirk to disappear.

127's Chameleon quirk means that he's cold blooded. He can't count on any surveillance cameras to detect his body temperature, that's why 127 is so good at his job. But that means 127 is likely reaching a limit for what his body can handle in these cold conditions, like Asui would. The blood

from the wound at his neck does more than better 27's chances, it *gives* him one.

He can see the droplets of blood on the snow. He can see the bigger smears where his face was pressed against it when 127 put on the mask, and he can feel that warm blood flowing down his neck, catching on the scarf.

27 was forced to wear this mask again, but this time, he's taking it *off*. His blood flows, and his blood sings, and the only thought in his mind is how to spill the last of 127's blood on this snow, to free himself from Miasma.

*

"Open the *fuck* up!" Kacchan screams, kicking at the door to the dorm, and Midoriya bites down the urge to tell him to calm down, because he knows that will only make Kacchan more angry. More worried.

They all heard Mandalay's voice through her quirk, that there was an intruder on campus and they needed to stay by the nearest building until the situation could be better assessed. That didn't include instructions for hero students with provisional licenses to help, but he's sure Iida feels the same pull he does. That they *could* help, they could at least find the others who are locked outside and probably scared.

Kirishima probably picks up that Kacchan might be in the same situation. "Hey bro, if we have to replace the door again, Sensei's *so* not gonna be happy with us—"

"Frog bitch is gonna freeze to death thanks to those fucking Herotube clout mongering *fucks*," Kacchan argues, and it's a little surprising. Midoriya didn't think he was paying attention at all when he talked about how it was kind of sad that Gentle and La Brava turned to petty villainy when they couldn't make it as heroes. And being worried about Tsuyu, even if he was still using that insulting nickname, was nice.

"I'm fine," Tsuyu argues, but she sounds a bit more irritated than usual, and leans a bit closer to Iida from where she's standing. Aizawa-sensei lets her wear leggings and long-sleeved shirts in the winter under her uniform, but she only has one set from the Support Department that has self-contained heating elements woven in to be truly effective from the cold. Kacchan might be exaggerating how dangerous the situation is, but it's still not entirely safe.

Midoriya steps closer to Tsuyu anyway, just in case. It might be a better use of Kacchan's frustration if they could all just huddle close around Tsuyu to make sure she's kept warm while they wait for more instructions. At least Tokoyami seems to agree, also wordlessly stepping forward to close Tsuyu in a bit more.

Looking at the other dorms, not a lot of students are locked out with them, and they mostly seem bored or frustrated with the situation. He can see Hadou and Amajiki on the front steps of the 3-A dorm, but he's not sure if it would be weird to call out to them. Hadou is still in her costume, probably coming back from a patrol. Amajiki looks oddly well-dressed, kind of like he's getting ready to go on a date.

Monoma, Tetsutesu, and Kendo had also been locked out, but Monoma shouted some things that were hard to hear from this distance, then started storming off. Tetsutetsu chased after him, but Kendo was still in front of the dorm, sitting on the steps all alone. Midoriya should probably invite her to join them in waiting, but he still hasn't worked up the nerve to do that yet.

Midoriya hears Hadou shouting, and looks over to see her running towards Togata. Mirio doesn't

look like he's reacting to Hadou, he's walking in a very odd way. He doesn't have Eri or Kota or Shinsou with him either, and that doesn't make sense, because he wouldn't leave them at another building. "Togata-sempai!"

Midoriya runs, but Hadou reached Togata first, she saw the blood trailing down Togata's nose where it looked like he had been punched. Midoriya only caught a glance before Hadou shook his shoulder then slapped him, something he might be wrong about, but he was sure that Togata's eyes were glazed over and white.

What Kacchan said his eyes looked like when Shinsou used his quirk on him.

Togata jumps back from Hadou, like he hadn't noticed she was there, like he couldn't really see it before, and Midoriya stops in his tracks. He knows what that feels like, to have everything crashing back at once. "Shinso-Shinsou, he's being attacked!"

Togata tries to turn around and run back the way he came, but Hadou holds his arm. Midoriya hears the others running over, he feels the urge swell to run forward in his upperclassman's stead. "How many? Where, what quirks?" Hadou asks, and her voice is far more serious than it usually is when she asks less important questions.

"One, invisible with a knife, between the P.E. grounds and USJ," Togata answers, before he grits his teeth, tugging his arm out of Hadou's grasp to wipe at the blood under his nose. "Got a cheap shot- Eri and Kota were running towards USJ, Shinsou made them. Tried to get-get everyone to leave."

Amajiki and Hadou trade a look, a look that Midoriya only has to look back to confirm with the others. Eight heroes to respond to one villain, one rescue operation. To save Shinsou from the intruder that was attacking him.

Amajiki lays a hand on Togata's shoulder, and Midoriya almost wants to look away out of respect for his upperclassman. "Stay here-"

"No," Togata refuses, swatting his classmate's hand away. "Hell no, it's one guy, Shinsou is-"

"The teachers are going to come here first to check for students that are locked out," Amajiki argues. "We need someone to tell them what's going on. Just in case it's not just one person."

"Come on!" Kacchan yells, dragging Kirishima with him. Iida hesitates, but fires up his quirk and quickly pulls ahead of them, Tokoyami manifests Dark Shadow into wings and takes flight, Tsuyu drops to all fours because she can be quicker that way than standing. Midoriya knows he can catch up to them, that he will, but he can't ignore the pain so clear in Togata's eyes when he realizes what Amajiki really means.

That Lemillion can't respond to this.

"Sempai," Midoriya says, because he has to say it. He has to take responsibility for what he offered but was still denied, something that wouldn't have needed to be offered if All Might had never noticed him. Something that Midoriya reminds himself might have been lost to the quirk erasing bullet regardless. "Lemillion cleared the way."

Lemillion let them know what to expect, that the fight was taking place, and who to rescue. Midoriya doesn't doubt that Lemillion gave Shinsou a fighting chance, that he fought for Shinsou to have a chance to run, and that he was injured for that.

He worries that Shinsou turned around like Eri did, and tried to do something to protect them. Eri

surrendered, asking Overhaul to take her back if everyone who had gotten hurt could be healed, and the hurting could *stop*.

Midoriya has no idea who this ‘Overhaul’ really is in this situation, if it’s a member of the ‘Villain School’ Shinsou talked about that Aizawa-sensei is investigating, or if it’s someone more familiar. Someone from the League of Villains.

But he won’t let them take Shinsou.

Midoriya activates Full Cowl to catch up with the others, to at least accompany Iida who should be first on the scene. He knows Hadou should catch up sooner if she uses her quirk to fly, that Amajiki will be the last to arrive. That if Amajiki wanted to stay behind with Togata, no one would fault him for it.

But Midoriya catches up to Tsuyu and Kirishima in time to see the others standing near a group of trees, and he can see Shinsou’s purple hair in the distance. He can see that Shinsou is moving a lot, as he gets closer he can see someone with black clothes and a green head moving around with him. Attacking him, and Midoriya can see that he’s fighting back. And he can see that Tetsutetsu is nearby, with his quirk activated and his skin metallic, but he’s waving his arms around like he can’t see where the fight is. “FUCK OFF-”

Kacchan lunges, his feet sparking off with an explosion, but something grabs him and throws him back to the ground. Midoriya sprints and arrives at the back of the group, where Monoma is standing in front of them with his arms raised up, blocking them. And Monoma meets his eyes with a sour look, before he glances behind him. “Yes, you can see them right *now*, but that invisibility quirk is affecting Shinsou too, it looks like it has a radius of about 16 meters. That means anyone who gets close enough to intervene goes in blind.”

“We only need to provide a distraction and defense for Shinsou,” Iida argues. “I can charge through-”

“And get sliced up by *both* of them because Shinsou *isn’t retreating*,” Monoma shouts, closer to how he normally talks with a derisive snort that Midoriya is sure will follow with a bunch of insults that *won’t* help the situation. “Tetsutetsu and I tried that tactic, we lost track of the fight-Frog girl, remind me how long your tongue is.”

“20... meters, kero,” Tsuyu answers, probably catching the same thing Midoriya does, that Monoma needs a *reminder*. Not an *answer*. And he’s probably copied Tsuyu’s quirk when they didn’t notice.

“Great, extraction. You need to pull Shinsou out, Hardening pairs nicely with Steel to provide a defensive wall, I’ll join in of course,” Monoma says, before his skin turns just as metallic as Tetsutetsu’s. “We’ll need distraction to break through the fight and know where it is, thank you Engine and Speed Strength enhancement quirks. Shadowy Shadow, I think you had enhanced durability but coordinating the wall and distraction would be *swell*, Blasty needs to fetch an adult-”

“Like *fucking hell*-”

“*Because* he doesn’t have a license and he’ll just get stabbed to *shit*,” Monoma says, and he sounds like he hasn’t sworn very much from the way he says that word. He’s glaring down at Kacchan, but that’s not an easy fight to win. “Shinsou is already hurt and needs medical attention and I’m *not arguing, let’s go*.”

“Eri,” Kirishima says, laying a hand on Kacchan’s shoulder that he only shrugs off. It’s only a

look, and barely a nod, but Kacchan turns and starts running towards USJ, where Eri and Kota were last seen heading towards.

“Nejire-chan is coming too!” Midoriya adds, but Monoma just nods and gets into position with Kirishima to provide an initial defense for Tsuyu.

This isn’t the time or place for it, not when Midoriya is running shoulder to shoulder with Iida and trying to see which trees he can jump off of, whether he can reorient himself at a distance and jump forward to still enter the fray as fast as he can. This isn’t the *time*.

But he *really* needs to hang out with Monoma if he can take inventory of their quirks and have a plan like this figured out in *seconds*. “Now!”

*

Aizawa finds his breath caught in his throat as soon as he sees those two small figures. “Eri!”

He’s already running towards them, he can see that it’s only Eri and Kota, that Hitoshi and Mirio are still unaccounted for. He can see that Kota is digging his heels into the snow, that he’s shouting, but Eri isn’t reacting to him. Aizawa doesn’t need to get close enough to confirm her white eyes. “She’s not listening to me!”

Aizawa steps in front of Eri’s path, and she doesn’t react to it at all. Even when he tries to pick her up, he feels her legs still kicking, that her hold on Kota’s captive hand doesn’t loosen. Her expression is still blank and familiar. “Eri,” Aizawa has to say, and it’s illogical, but that small pinch he gives to her ear makes him feel guilty.

But pain is the only way to interrupt Hitoshi’s control when he’s not in Aizawa’s line of sight.

Eri jolts and seems surprised, looking around then at Aizawa’s arm around her, before Kota tugs his hand out of her grasp. “That weird guy was acting weird, then she ran off and didn’t let me go, and there-there was-”

“Twenny,” Eri says, quietly at first before her hands find Aizawa’s shoulder, nearly jolts out of his arms to try to find leverage to look around. “TWENNY!”

“Where were you two? Where is Hitoshi and Mirio?” Aizawa asks, pulling Eri closer to his chest while he looks at Kota. He knows Eri isn’t in a state to answer, knows by her panicked attempts to free herself from his grasp that something went *wrong*. Something is *horribly* wrong, and this is no benign intrusion.

“Next to some trees, and a big track,” Kota answers, his own eyes too wide, too panicked. But Mandalay taught him well, he knows how to help heroes in these situations. “There was a guy, he appeared out of nowhere when I looked back, he was standing behind the weird guy with a knife. Looked like a lizard.”

Near the P.E. field, a man with some lizard quirk was standing behind Hitoshi after Hitoshi used his quirk on Eri to make both children leave. And he had a knife.

And Hitoshi must have known him.

“You two...” Aizawa trails off, because he can’t abandon these two to the locked doors of USJ. They would be utterly defenseless, not even Mandalay could get to her charge, and these two are the most vulnerable children on campus.

But he doesn't know if Hitoshi is properly defended either. Even with Mirio's training, that was training to compliment a *quirk* he no longer has.

Eri has stopped fighting, but trembles in his arms, and he hears explosions in the distance. With a sigh of relief he feels guilty for immediately, he can see that they are indeed familiar. Bakugo spots them from where he was using successive blasts from his quirk to rocket towards them, and raises his hands up above his head to try to accelerate his descent to the ground with two more blasts.

He lands heavily a safe distance away, but wipes his nose and gives no indication of the rough impact when he jogs forward. "Invisibility quirk, P.E. grounds, Shitsou. Do the *fucking* math and hand her over."

Bakugo opens his arms for Eri, but when Aizawa tugs, she clings to him with small arms far heavier than his capture scarf. "No! He's safe, he's not scared, he's not *scared*, Zawa! 'S bad dream!"

Aizawa hears the sob, and he can feel the tears running warm over Eri's cheeks before he pulls her away enough to look at her properly. He can see how much this terrifies her, how unfair it is, how they should *both* be safe.

And he'll make them safe. "Eri, I need to go to Shinsou. I'm going to bring him back here. I need you to stay here with Bakugo so we know where to go, where to find you."

Eri nods, despite her tears and her sobbing, she sucks in her lip and nods because she wants to *help* them know where to go, even if she doesn't understand that instruction or that it's pointless. She wants to have some small part in saving Hitoshi, some power over that, and Aizawa will make sure she succeeds.

Bakugo takes Eri into his arms and she quickly buries her face in his shoulder, but he doesn't hesitate to take Kota's hand too. Kota didn't hesitate to offer it. "The doors are locked, but Mandalay can still hear you-"

"Go," Bakugo barks out, and Aizawa knows he can handle this much. Bakugo is his student, he *knows* he can defend these two children, and Bakugo already likely knows that permission to use his quirk to do so is already given. It was before at summer camp, and Aizawa will take any blame again to avoid casualties.

Aizawa runs towards the P.E. grounds, 'invisibility' running through his mind, and he dares not think of the efficient and highly-praised murderer 127. Not until he can see him with his own eyes.

*

27 can't see where he is, and no one can see him. 127 is hiding him too. "Shinsou! Over here!"

Quirk Thief and Metal tried to cut in, but they won't *see it*. Not until more blood flows on the snow, the last of it. It's getting easier to tell where 127 is. "Oh, Bug's gonna do a number on you, little brother, I guarantee it."

He still can't see 127's breath, but he hears how ragged it is. How long this has drawn out - lunge, strike or not, dodge, dodge, *dodge*. 127 can still see him. He can choose what's seen to others inside those 15 meters.

27 should feel more than the trickle of blood where he's been cut, but he doesn't. The only pain he feels is where the mask digs in. "Shinsou!"

He should hear the engines, but instead he hears too-quick, too loud footsteps. He turns to look, knowing that he's going to lose track of the blood on the snow, whose it is, but sees Iida and Midoriya charging for him. He sees too many of them, so many of them, *they'll see it*.

But Midoriya darts past him, the glow and crackle of his electric quirk a blur, and Iida grunts where he's been *stabbed 127 stabbed him killed him blood on his hands*

Something wraps around his stomach and pulls, nearly pulls him to the ground *Aizawa's scarf* but it pulls him to land in the snow, at a distance. He can see two Metals and Kirishima, their backs turned to him, standing close. "I have him!"

He turns to look, not Aizawa. Asui, crouching next to him, her tongue hanging too far out of her mouth. He looks down and it's wrapped around him. There's so much blood, his clothes are torn, he feels so much *blood*.

"Shinsou, it's alright-" Asui's hands hovered, not sure exactly where he was, and that's how he knew. And she should have known, he's shown him before. Her tongue is vulnerable to his knife, it only took a nick to loosen it with her pained yelp.

27 charges forth and knows that 127's quirk is still being used on him. He dives through a gap in the wall of durability quirks, feels hands grasping at him but missing, sees Iida kneeling alive not bleeding. He hears shouting, knows they're shouting again, but he just needs to find that blood on the snow, the trail.

He sees the shadow descend, leaps over it, and sees 127 *running away*. He's far enough into the trees that 27 can see him, and he charges after him, uneven ground made more dangerous with this blanket of snow, but there's droplets of *blood*. There's a knife in his hands aching for more.

127 asked for this. When they put that mask on him the first time, they *wanted* this. Everything that they wrought, everything that was ripped and warped from him. This is *him*, now. He'll take what can't be recovered from, and the trees will hide it from their sight. "Shinsou!"

127 was bending down, slowing, when Midoriya called out from his left. 27 keeps running, keeps track of where 127 was, there should be blood on the ground. There should be blood, *will* be blood, he'll dig this knife in and make it *hurt*, pay 127 back in kind from that cold blade that sank into 27's side the first time. 'No hard feelings,' he said.

There won't be, not after this. "Shinsou!"

The wind is knocked out of his ribs, the crackling of Midoriya's quirk, and he sees it glowing where Midoriya has grabbed him around his waist, his shoulder digging into his chest. The ground and snow has been taken from him, he's flying or falling, but he sees 127 come into view from the distance that swiftly comes. Sees that 127 wasn't as wounded as he seemed, but has drawn out his katana.

He feels the impact when Midoriya crouches and lands with his feet braced against a tree, feels the cold dig of the bark against his back after the blistering warmth of Midoriya's hand on his chest, pinning him there. He sees that Midoriya almost knows where to look him in the eye, and that determined frown has a harder edge to it. Almost as sharp as the edge of the blade he used to cut Asui's tongue.

"Lot of friends, got a *lot of friends*," 127 rasps in the distance, behind Midoriya's shoulder. Midoriya turns to look, his hand still braced on 27's chest. 27 looks too, and sees the exact moment when 127 disappears. "They know what you did, little bro? They know how much you *loved* it?"

How you're so *good* at being a *good little Number* when you want to be."

Lies. Bug never said that. He's never been good, not for anyone, but especially for *them*.

"*You*," Midoriya nearly growls, his voice almost foreign with that tone, his quirk seeming to glow brighter. "You... put that mask on--"

"Talked too much, sure was *shit* at listening," 127 says, closer now. Midoriya can't see him either, he doesn't know to look for the blood. 27 can't tell him, can't see it either. "You know there's no escape, no retirement. You're not getting out. There's only so many ways it can end, little bro, I've already told you how it goes. Those little friends you've got are *dead*, you're gonna *wish* you were dead, and I'm gonna carve that little girl up like a--"

The hand pinning his chest leaves, but 27's breath catches because *Midoriya can't see him*. He thinks Midoriya is charging to his doom, right into that blade, but he kicks into a tree, into the air, before he twists with a fist raised, with his quirk glowing and flickering. He's high enough in the air to see 127, if 127 doesn't move.

If 127 doesn't see him too, doesn't prepare for it. He *will*.

127 will kill Midoriya if 27 doesn't kill him first.

He sees more than blood, snow kicked up, and charges with the knife held tight in his fist. He doesn't know if 127 will take him out instead, but he *can't* let Midoriya be killed, he can't let him fall on that blade. He swings his knife forward and feels it connect, feels 127's arm against his collarbone and only has a second to think it should be sharper, should be his sword. "*60%!*"

27 loses his footing when he feels that wave, that forceful wall in front of him, and nearly slips, before something winds around his waist again. He's dragged back, his vision blurs, he only catches the sight of green hair and pink tongue before his head tips downwards.

He can't drag enough air into his mask, somehow he hasn't noticed this suffocation. His arms won't move, but they sting.

"Shinsou," Tamaki crouches next to him, there's a rustle of fabric then something light against his shoulders. "Froppy, let him go, he's going into shock."

There's a hum in the air, and it's all he hears or feels, he feels like he's being pulled into it. He raises his head, tries to see where he's going. Golden spirals are pressing 127 into the ground, flowing from someone with so much light blue, a speck of green. Midoriya is being held up in the air by them.

There's a sting, worse than the others, throbbing worse. 27 pulls his shaking hand to it, gritting his teeth, other hands are on him. There's muttering, muted, he can barely hear it. His head swims, but he tries to feel that throbbing on the top of his shoulder because he's *sure* he's been stabbed there, even if there's no tear.

"*Suneater*," Neji's voice is too distant, 27's head spins. Tamaki yells something back, he's been *stabbed*. This burning in his shoulder, he has to concentrate to make himself breathe. He's going to die, fall asleep maybe. It's just like falling asleep.

He forces his eyes open, because he's sure he's dreaming it. Aizawa stands in front of him, his hair straight above him instead of floating. 27 follows the white of his scarf twisting in the air above his shoulders, a line to a tree. A tree where 127 is bound by that scarf.

“Hitoshi.” 27 knows he’s dreaming now, everything too light. Yamada’s green eyes catch too much light, Yamada is there at his side, hand curling around his shoulder, pulling something around him. A blanket that won’t stretch.

“One. Twenty. Seven,” Aizawa growls, slowly. It’s menacing, it’s frightening, he’s never seen Aizawa sound or look that angry. 127 laughs, a wheezing cut short when the capture scarf tightens. There’s too many people around 27, making him feel light, he needs to be more solid. “You’re going to regret attacking UA.”

127 hacks, drawing more ragged, rapid breaths when he’s able to. 27 wonders when the blood will seep into the capture scarf, how red it will stain. How it will be 27’s fault. “Oh, no regrets here. Just doing my job. Those sedatives kicking in, little bro?”

Sedatives? Probably. He feels so tired, but it’s fine. Yamada and Aizawa are here. He didn’t kill anyone. “Hitoshi, it’s alright. Come on, we’ll-we’ll get that off of you.” Right, his mask. Still hurts.

127’s grin twists, his lips bloodied, but he twists his body and thrashes until that red button slips under the loops of the capture scarf. It’s flashing now. “Just needed a little blood, you know. Don’t worry, 10’ll patch you right up.”

Sedatives. Not the katana. Throbbing. Stinging. *Syringe*.

127’s eyes are focused on him. Despite the hands under 27’s knees and knowing whose they are, he tries to pull away from them, his body barely responding. 127 *grins*. “See you at home, little bro.”

127 disappears, and the capture scarf falls limply into the snow. Not 127’s quirk. *Boss*’.

The sedatives. A syringe. 127 has his blood. And he’s going ‘home.’ *Boss*.

“..shi.” 27 can hear screaming, but it’s muffled behind clenched teeth and metal, before everything goes black.

*

Three injured students, their wounds minor - Mirio’s bloodied nose, Iida’s shallow laceration down his back, Asui’s tongue. Authorization was quickly given for licensed students to sweep the campus grounds once control over the security protocols was recovered, USJ and the A and B class dorms opening up.

Aizawa received a call from Principal Nezu that he only barely remembers answering, remembers the instructions to escort anyone injured to the staff dorm where Recovery Girl was setting up a station in the common room, a more defensible position than her office in the expansive academic building with too many entrances to maintain. He remembers what Nezu said more than what he said, that Eri, Kota, and Bakugo had joined the Wild Wild Pussycats’ group and were escorting the Gen Ed students to their assigned dorms. That as soon as Hitoshi’s condition had stabilized, he needed to report to the principal in person.

Hizashi carried Hitoshi the entire way, and didn’t think to return Amajiki’s jacket nearly falling out of the cradle of his arms. Aizawa passed along the instructions for the nine hero students that responded to sweep the grounds, unsurprised that Midoriya had to be convinced to go to reassure Eri, unwilling to argue when Amajiki insisted on following Iida, Asui, and Hizashi to the staff dorm.

Just in case. The situation had improved with the reinstated command of the security protocols, but only the sweep would prove whether every Number had been dealt with. If they hadn't *escaped* into thin air.

Hizashi lays Hitoshi down on a cot already prepared with an IV and med cart, and Recovery Girl begins asking questions while pulling off his jacket and scarf, his clothes. Trying to make sure to see the extent of the wounds beneath the bloody tears. There's so much *blood*.

"Shouta," Hizashi calls, his voice too steady and firm, but Aizawa can see the trembling rage in the corner of his jaw, in his eyes. "Get that *thing* off of him."

The mask. Black, cruel, ill-fitting. Forced on Hitoshi's face on *UA's grounds*, weeping blood in trails down his neck and gathering at every edge. Aizawa moves to stand at the head of Hitoshi's cot, lifting his unresponsive head with one hand while his other pulls out his lockpick set from his uniform. He has to crouch when he finds the lock more convoluted than it should be, but gently pulls the metal bands out and away and lifts it off of his face before Recovery Girl finishes cutting the last seam of Hitoshi's shirt. The kid is a bloody *mess*, his lips are blue and skin too pale and spotted with sweat.

Recovery Girl doesn't hesitate to start on the IV, but the lacerations seem shallow. Hizashi works to help confirm that, sanitizing a paper towel to begin cleaning it up. To reveal the worst of it.

"-might have used a sedative on Shinsou, it might have been shock, kero," Asui says, has been talking while Aizawa only heard numbness. Has been giving a report, helping Iida out of his shirt so that Amajiki and herself can determine whether he needs stitches. "He had been fighting until Nejire-chan attacked, he... was fighting us to keep attacking."

Hizashi presses a pre-prepared gauze to each wound, there's too many to count. Fresh wounds over scars, Hitoshi's face is still a bloody *mess*. Aizawa is still stuck standing there, staring. His students are doing more for this situation than he is. "Shou-"

Aizawa turns and leaves, the cold air meets him with only a second's hesitation, but he grits his teeth and won't go to Eri. Hitoshi is in good hands, his students are safe, and Aizawa wants *answers*.

He sees a few pairs of students sweeping the grounds, still in casual clothes for the most part. Upperclassmen that didn't have training scheduled, that were safe in their dorms after an uneventful week of school, that are answering the call to keep their very *school* safe. Students that he would probably recognize if he forced himself to look at them, but he doesn't.

Nezu's 'War Room' is on the bottom floor of the Support Department's dedicated studio, where the bulk of support equipment is tested and produced, along with the exam robots and security measures. Aizawa sees a fleet of unused robots collecting dust on the first floor before he turns and finds the door to the access stairwell, swiping his badge. He descends two steps at a time, scarcely recognizing how dark it becomes.

He opens the door to see well over 30 screens of live video on campus, flicking through cameras in seconds. A team of Support Department instructors that work beneath Powerloader are watching the screens, typing on keyboards, ultimately being *useless*. Principal Nezu sits in his chair facing the door, paws folded in front of a cold cup of tea, and Mirio turns to look at him with a flinch. "Eraserhead-"

"The security measures *failed*," Aizawa says, and he means worse. Worse than failure, they were a hindrance, those minutes clawing his way to the access door meant *everything* to his wards' safety.

“Why?”

Nezu doesn't react, but turns to nod at an instructor who looks away from the screens to nod back, and Nezu pulls himself out of his chair before he waves a hand for Mirio to follow. Aizawa thinks pettily about refusing to let them through the doorway, to kick the animal principal and send him flying, but grits his teeth and follows into the hall. Somewhere that apparently has more privacy.

“Togata, for the next 48 hours, you cannot breathe a word of this. Can I hold your confidence for that long?” Principal Nezu asks, the permanent smile carved into his face by his animal features seems gone and his eyes are oddly wide, oddly searching for honesty or any hint of weakness when Mirio nods. He closes his eyes for too long when he folds his hands behind his back and sighs. “The traitor inside UA tipped their hand to do this. To devastating consequences, but they have been found. It's undeniable now.”

Aizawa had two lists of suspects, one that Principal Nezu and Hizashi both agreed with, and one that he kept to himself. There are similarities between those names, but there is *one* name now, and he *wants* it. “Who?”

Even when he asks, he practically hears Principal Nezu answer with ‘Shiori.’ His informant, his asset, the pain in his ass that had made a game of hacking into his cellphone more than once but he *trusted* her when he shouldn't have. He has no idea if it's possible for her to make a jump from his hijacked phone to the security measures on campus, but he *should* have been more careful. She was *there*, before the attack happened. *I wouldn't be worried about me right now.*

That's a tone he's never heard from Shiori before, and he wonders if he ever really knew her. If the gray he saw was an illusion, the thinnest coat of white over pure *black*. But Principal Nezu frowns and shakes his head.

“That would be my domain. You have other concerns,” Principal Nezu says, then tilts his head up to look at Togata, who startles, still too jumpy now. Still too unnerved by these events, and Aizawa feels that too keenly. “Apart from the woman, the ‘distraction’ as I gather that dispatched Hound Dog with a near-lethal taser, there were three other assailants. Midnight and Powerloader saw them disappear as well at the end of the fight, but it seems that the target of this assault was Shinsou. Togata, if you would.”

Mirio refuses to look at Aizawa. His hands are fisted at his side, eyes on the ground, *too much* like the student he had to inform was quirkless only months ago. Who stared too long at first, taking too long to take in those words, before the gasped pleas his smiling mouth tried to fashion into laughter turned to sobs too rigidly felt on Aizawa's shoulder.

“We were heading back, towards USJ, and Shinsou stopped for some reason. I knew something was off, maybe something was getting to him. He... called out to Eri, and told her he loved her. Eri said she loved him too, then she turned around and started running off with Kota. That... was too weird, and I saw... how scared he was.”

The assailant, 127, had an invisibility quirk that would work within a 15 meter radius. Hitoshi stopped suddenly, then verbally called out to Eri with something that he knew would get a verbal response, to brainwash her and make her and Kota leave the scene. Somehow, those commands were carried through nonverbally.

“He told me it was a game of tag, that I was ‘it.’ I *knew* something was wrong, Shinsou has talked to me before, but it's always when something's going on.” Hizashi has said the same thing. With the exception of those Hitoshi has brainwashed, he tends to speak during times of severe distress. “Then, I saw blood. On his neck, out of nowhere. Like a knife was being held at his throat and I

couldn't see it. Shinsou was so *scared* and I couldn't help thinking that-that I wasn't *wrong* about that, that something was *wrong*, so I grabbed him and there *was* that guy. I tried to get Shinsou to run away, but that invisible guy was taunting him, threatening him. Something about 'anyone who sees my face,' and 'Miasma.' And Shinsou... was too scared to move, and he looked at me and... his eyes lit up for a second."

Despite the exhausted and defeated look on Mirio's face, despite knowing how that confrontation ended, Aizawa can only think that Hitoshi saw hope in that brief moment instead of what Mirio truly means.

"He asked me, 'What can you possibly do without your quirk?' and I told him that I'd die if that kept him safe," Mirio says, his fists tightening at his side, his teeth catching on his bottom lip in a flash of a grimace, and Aizawa *knows* that Mirio knows better reassurance tactics from his class. He barely fathoms the real answer before Mirio says it. "I had to answer him, like in the raid. It felt exactly like that Confession quirk. And then Shinsou took control of me."

Confession, which forces an honest verbal response, and Brainwashing, that requires a verbal response. Something that Aizawa imagines Chisaki was trying to accomplish as much as he was trying to extend his own life in that inhumane abomination, that fusion where he pulled Hitoshi and Nemoto into his own body. In Chisaki's utter desperation, in his disregard for human life, he stitched three bodies into one squirming mass with blackened tendrils carved over his skin, a mouth in his right hand.

Hitoshi's right hand, that Chisaki had Unmade in front of Eri during a traumatic event, that trembled and shook so much at the beginning of his wardship. A tremble that hasn't bothered him since Chisaki died. Every visible sign that something was wrong with Hitoshi's quirk from the brutal sickness to his selective mutism, they've *known* from the beginning.

Hitoshi came out of that fusion with Nemoto's tattoo, and something *else* beneath the surface. Something that took time to take root, those severe fevers and temperature fluctuations were a sign of *infection*. Something mutated with Shinsou's quirk and made it into something *else*. Something he *refuses* to name.

"Sensei," Mirio says, he sees the grimace and stiff bend at his waist, but he catches Mirio's shoulder and stops him. He's *not* going to tolerate apologies in this. Not from *Mirio*.

"You did everything you could. You had no choice," Aizawa says, too stiffly. He still refuses to name it, this horror churning under his ribs. What Shinsou has *become* under their watch, while they were completely unaware. "I need you to go to Eri. She's at the 1-C dorm. She's worried, but she can't see Shinsou yet."

There's a break in Mirio's expression, already riddled with too much guilt, and before he can put the question to words, Aizawa forces himself to answer it.

"He's safe, but injured. With Recovery Girl," Aizawa says, his words fracturing as he feels like he's drawn into a pit despite how he fights it. He won't believe it, despite logic, despite the inevitable conclusion of Mirio's words that he doesn't doubt. Multiple quirks in one body.

Mirio nods, shakily, but his eyes seem too full of concern for Aizawa. "She can't see him like that, blood and all. He's hurt and he needs-" Mirio looks away, the back of his hand rubbing beneath his reddened nose, an injury he probably hasn't given himself time to feel. "He needs to be safe. Healed. I'll tell Eri-"

"Take your time," Aizawa says, squeezing Mirio's shoulder. Shoulders that carry too much

already, that he relies on too easily, still belong to a student of his who has done enough. Mirio nods, breathes out to try to force his relief and composure into being, and looks at Aizawa before he turns and begins walking up the stairs.

Principal Nezu waits until they hear the door close, before he fixes Aizawa with a stare that lets him know this discussion isn't at an end. "UA should have been a safe place for Shinsou. You're right that those security protocols that we placed our trust in failed him, and for that, you have not only my apologies, but a promise that I will amend this."

"The name," Aizawa demands, because *he* has half a mind to make it right far within the 48 hours that Principal Nezu requested. He needs to know, in more ways than one, and Principal Nezu's silent refusal with a shake of his head confirms his worst suspicions.

There were students who were suspected, and he can't rule them out.

"Shiori," Aizawa asks, because he needs that at least. He's one of very few people who knows where she lives, and the chance that she's still there is diminishing. She's involved in this, he *knows* it. There's just the faintest sliver of his mind that hopes she somehow knew about the attack beforehand and tried to warn him.

"Detective Tsukauchi was the first person I contacted. He'll be handling that aspect," Principal Nezu answers, *infuriatingly* doesn't answer him properly. Principal Nezu knows what he means, but he won't say it.

Aizawa realizes that he can't handle knowing either. Not until it's done.

"The next 72 hours pose the greatest threat to Shinsou's safety, with the risk of a second attack. Especially because it will take time to carefully extract the traitor and the methods that they used to bring down our system. That unfortunately means that Shinsou will need to be moved to a safe house, a place completely off the grid," Principal Nezu says, and Aizawa has no idea where that would be.

He knows he needs to contact The Commission of Wardship Affairs, and he can think of few things he'd rather not do right now. He'd eat molten glass if that was an option, rather than trust Shinsou's safety with them and admit that he failed here.

"Have you visited your grandfather recently?" Contacting The Commission is a far better option.

"*How* do you even know about that?" Aizawa asks, because he doesn't want Principal Nezu to know that he's *known* that he knows for years, ever since he read his own staff file. *No one* knows or should know about his grandfather, and Aizawa can only imagine the conniption the old man would have if he knew that a Principal Nezu, so close to a *government official*, knew that he lived on a remote mountainside in a shack with no proper mailing address. He imagines that would be the shock that ends his grandfather's life.

He honestly doesn't know if the man *is* alive at this point. "It was quite an ordeal, but I do need to know these things about my employees," Principal Nezu says, but he *doesn't*. He *doesn't* need to know that about him at all. "It's because of that difficulty that I believe a little family reunion would be in order. I can see to it that your position at the dorm is covered this weekend-"

"This isn't protocol," Aizawa says, a weak defense. The Commission needs to be informed, Shinsou isn't even allowed to go off campus and especially not spirited away to a shack without running water. He knows that comes with devastating consequences, with a demand to trust them with Shinsou's safety and he *doesn't*. Especially not *now*.

“Protocol can *fail*,” Principal Nezu reminds him, and there’s a sternness in his unbreaking stare that reminds Aizawa that Nezu has many reasons to be protective of his ward. Many similarities. “It’s *quite* convenient that I will be *ensuring* a quirk specialist visit that will be kept confidential. Protocol be *damned*.”

Aizawa has *never* heard Principal Nezu mutter a swear harsher than ‘goodness,’ but he understands where it comes from too easily. Shinsou was a key component to the Nomu investigation, but not like *this*. If they knew, and if they learned they had a reason to take him away from this wardship, Aizawa doubts he would be placed with another hero. Not when ‘examining’ him may lead to different answers, and those ‘examinations’ might lead to Mind Slice’s involvement. “I need a HAM radio.”

Principal Nezu nods, and leads him up the stairs, past those useless robots and into a dark studio that already has the radio set up on a long workbench. Once again, Principal Nezu seemed to know he would win that argument and planned accordingly.

Principal Nezu leaves afterwards, and Aizawa appreciates that too much. Left in a dimly lit room, hesitating before he dials the frequency he still remembers somehow. After *everything* he’s been through today, this shouldn’t rattle him so much. “This is Shouta.”

He waits, gets the crackle of static and non-answers. As far as he remembers, the HAM radio has always been set up in the ‘living room.’ There’s a chance that the old man is outside. There’s a chance that the old man has died in the last nine years and is decomposing on the floor right by the radio.

“This is Shouta, I need... your help,” Aizawa answers, and his age shames him. He never asked the old man for a *thing* when he was growing up, and now at 32, he’s nearly begging for it. He doesn’t know if Principal Nezu has a Plan C, but Plan B can’t happen.

There’s a growl and a puff of air blown into the receiver, and Aizawa amends his previous worry about a dead man to a *drunk* one. “*You shouldn’t be on this damn frequency, whoever you are. You tell me how you know that name, or by God I’ll- I’ll have you.*”

A *terrifying* threat from a deranged hermit in his nineties. “*This is your grandson, Shouta. I’d offer to tell you something only I would know, but I doubt you’d be able to remember anything.*” He hears a short pause, followed by a chuckle. “*Right, that is you. This a goddamn welfare check or something? Or you leave that blonde whats-his-name?*”

That was the perfect can of worms to open if Aizawa wanted to push right past his breaking point. He’s well aware he should have hit it before now, and the fact that he’s asking for this is evidence to the point that he already has. “I need to stay with you for a few days, with... someone in my protection. It’s part of my hero work, and it’s extremely important.”

The static sings on every last nerve Aizawa has, because if the old man turns him down, he has no idea what to *do*. Shinsou’s condition can’t be discovered right now, this attack needs to be covered up, and if this is the first option Aizawa barely wants to *consider* the next one. “*Who? You can’t just bring anyone here and you know it. You can’t say you know them either, I need to know them - their contacts, their people. Shady enough stuff out there.*”

Aizawa sighs, rubbing his eyes. He briefly considers forcing one of his fingers through his eye socket as a reprieve from having to answer that. “A teenage boy, my ward. That means that he’s in danger, I’m supposed to protect him from criminals that are trying to silence him. Your place is the best safe house I have right now.”

He hears another snort, drier this time. “*Criminals. Meaning this kid probably is one.*” If he says that again, Aizawa will ignore all semblance of respect for the man who practically raised him or any mercy for his old age, and make sure he never says it *again*. “*Criminals are easier to deal with though, more predictable than those shady suits you work for. Fine. A few days, I’ll straighten out your old room. I’m not taking down the traps this time.*”

An oddly thoughtful gesture on the old man’s part that happened exactly *once*, when Aizawa announced that he was going to be married and didn’t correct the old man when he asked to meet *her*. Aizawa made a mistake, and for that, he and Hizashi had to flee from crossbow bolts. “I know where they are. Tonight or tomorrow, I don’t know yet.”

He hears a grunt, the closest to acknowledgement that he’ll get at this point of the conversation, and turns off the radio. That is how their conversations usually end, once everything is said.

Aizawa drops his head to his hands, finding the silence of the room too open for too *many* things, but the one he tries to focus on is how he’ll be able to provide for his ward in a rickety shack on a mountainside with no plumbing, barely any electricity, and a deranged hermit that he’ll have to introduce as his *relative*.

Hizashi, once he caught his breath halfway down the mountainside, said that it explained a lot.

*

Yamada folds his hands over the bridge of his nose, sitting on the edge of the couch in the common room that’s closest to Hitoshi. Iida and Asui, the only two injured herolets were patched up by Recovery Girl and sent on their way in minutes, maybe. He should have paid attention, should have thanked them. Probably.

He just watches the scabs growing smaller and smaller on Hitoshi’s face and grinds his teeth at the thought that he’ll have more scars from that *thing*. That metal torture device laying on the floor, that Yamada would kick if he thought he could destroy it instead of just making a racket.

They put a knife to his kid’s throat, cut him more than a dozen times, put that *thing* on his face, then drugged him for good measure. All on campus grounds, all at *UA* while Yamada wasn’t even *there*. He was on patrol, a patrol he should return to or at least call in cover for Byte Sound if she hasn’t already done it herself. He just can’t move.

Not until Hitoshi wakes up.

Yamada catches the sight of long black hair in the corner of his eye, an arm winding over his shoulders, and for a second thinks it’s his husband. But it’s not.

“He’s going to be alright,” Kayama says, folding her legs beneath her as she sits as close as she can to Yamada, winding her other arm around the front of his chest to hold him close. He feels too rigid in her embrace. “Sweep ended a few minutes ago, everything’s safe. No one- no one else was hurt.”

Just Hitoshi. Their target. His *kid*.

“Babe,” Kayama says, like she can feel how he can’t fucking *relax* right now. He’s wired up and rooted all the same, he’s not going to *leave* like Shouta did just to feel like he’s *done* something because Hitoshi *can’t* wake up alone after this. “It’s not your fault-”

“He’s my *ward*,” Yamada argues, too sharp and he knows it. His hands move down and up, down and up, it doesn’t *fucking* matter. “I *swore* to him so many times... So many *times*. And he *trusted*

that.”

He’ll be surprised if he sees even a ghost of the kid that would walk through his dorm like it was carpeted with eggshells. He’ll be surprised if he sees anything as trusting as the way Hitoshi acted in that damn *interrogation room* he had been living in, when he first met the kid. If Hitoshi wakes up and can bear to go *on* after he failed him this *completely*.

After Hitoshi *trusted him* to keep him *safe*.

Kayama runs a hand over his back, and he can feel her nails through the leather. It’s more soothing than the seductive way she teases with, and he feels like he doesn’t deserve *soothing*. Not after all he *didn’t* do. “These guys are serious, Hizashi. I’ve seen a lot, I’ve faced a lot. Coordinated, powerful. Three heroes against three of them, and they were just the *distraction*. Thirteen’s suit was damaged, and we barely got two of them down. And then they disappeared into thin air. With a push of a button. No trace.”

Shouta should have broken his ribs. Should have held him tighter. Yamada should have worked up the nerve to *scream* and damn the consequences instead of letting that guy get away.

“I don’t know... how Shinsou is here right now,” Kayama says, quietly against his shoulder. Yamada hasn’t looked away from his ward for a second, because he’s worried about that. Miasma has tried to kill Hitoshi, but this time they didn’t seem to try. The set up, the fight, the chase, the sedatives. The *mask*. They didn’t *want* to leave Hitoshi here.

See you at home, little bro. Yamada knows staring at the kid isn’t going to stop it, but he can’t do anything else. If Hitoshi just *disappears*-

Kayama jumps, but Yamada *screams*.

An IV drip needle bleeds on an empty cot.

*

Aizawa was walking towards the dorms, still unsure if he should go to the staff dorm or 1-C’s, which ward to return to first, when the decision was made for him.

He hears Yaoyorozu yelp and turns to see that she and Shoji were part of the paired off hero students who were returning to the dorms after sweeping the campus. A short distance away, he sees her run forward and kneel next to someone he first recognizes as shirtless, and second as Shinsou when he pulls himself from a crouch to grab her wrist and twist her arm painfully. “Shinsou!”

Shinsou is shaking, and he imagines it’s not entirely from the cold, but Shoji is still pulling his jacket off regardless. Yaoyorozu winces, but he hears her soft voice offering reassurances as Aizawa approaches. “Shinsou, it’s alright. You’re at-*you’re* at UA. It’s Momo-”

Yaoyorozu’s eyes close and her teeth bare with another sharp twist, but she still hasn’t tried to break his ward’s grip on her wrist. Aizawa gets close enough to hear his ward’s ragged breathing, how every scar on his back looks darker against his pale skin. “Shinsou.”

Shinsou drops Yaoyorozu’s wrist and turns to stand, his other arm still curled loosely against his stomach. His eyebrows drawn down sharply, his eyes narrowed and blazing. His face twisted in absolute *fury*. “119 hero students. 20 pro heroes. 2834 exam robots. 124 combat units. The most *advanced* security system in Japan next to Tartarus.”

Aizawa schools his face to show nothing, but he expected fury. He expected these words.

He didn't expect Shinsou to *say* them. "*They. Can't touch you here.*"

He didn't expect the first words Shinsou would ever say to him would be his own words. His own promise. What he *swore* to Shinsou on the first day that he arrived to UA.

He didn't expect that promise to ever seem hollow. "And you *let* him get away."

Aizawa hears his ringtone, but can't think of anything but those angry words he has to meet, that he has to struggle to not meet with his own irritation. Things he can't say with an audience.

"Yaoyorozu, Shoji. You need to leave-"

"You need to tell me why you didn't just *kill him!*" Shinsou shouts, his free hand sweeping up and down at his side once before the one in front of his stomach, barely hiding the scars there, tightens with a fist and a flash of a weaker grimace. "He saw Eri-"

"You told me *nothing*," Aizawa snaps, too numb to anything but the twisting shock at the pit of his stomach when he thinks of how close to danger both of his wards were. He wanted to protect them both, care for them both. But he knows he has only the faintest idea of how to defend them from their worst enemies. "And that *will* change."

Shinsou told him that 127 had an invisibility quirk, but not that it was a Chameleon quirk, and the cold-blooded nature would allow him to bypass the thermal detection monitors set up on every security camera. Shinsou told him absolutely *nothing* about whatever quirk allowed 127 to disappear from his grasp like that, to dissolve into *nothing*.

He made another promise, but he can no longer keep it. Shinsou *needs* to tell him everything now.

And his students watching, looking stricken, need to *leave*.

He reminds them of that with a glare, but Shoji ducks his head and still offers the coat in his hands. Aizawa takes it from him, unwilling to argue the point, unsurprised that Shinsou pulls it from his hands and jerks himself into it with rough and angry tugs.

He's not surprised that Shinsou refuses to look at him after that, after his students sheepishly leave without another glance backwards.

"How did he disappear? Can he reappear from where he was taken?" Aizawa asks, because he's sure the call he's ignoring is important, and Shinsou still needs to be taken back inside, but he *needs* to know how at risk Shinsou is. If whatever quirk pulled 127 away could put him back on campus just as quickly.

"Boss' quirk. He can't," Shinsou answers between clenched teeth, the fury missing from his words and made too obvious for that. "Boss needs a vial of blood to pull someone back after their job is done, and now-"

Shinsou bends forward, his arm still pressed against his stomach. Aizawa knows he wasn't obviously wounded there, he wasn't stabbed, but the pained twist in his face that begins to break a still-healing scab over his scars makes him reach for his shoulder on instinct. "Shinsou-"

"Now if he'd like to stop *trying* to pull me *back* because it's not *working*," Shinsou's grimace and strain with those words seems to indicate that quirk is still doing something to him, that it *might* work and might explain how Shinsou traveled from the staff dorm into the snow.

Aizawa tightens his grip on Shinsou's shoulder, even if he knows it's illogical. But if Shinsou disappears right in front of his eyes, he doesn't know what he'll do. With another tremble through Shinsou's frame, Aizawa's ringtone goes silent, and when Shinsou's legs fold and he lands in the snow, it's silent enough to hear his laugh.

"Didn't take enough. Had one *fucking* job, and you fucked it up. You're so *dead*," Shinsou mutters, his arm pulling away from his stomach so he can run his hand through his hair, still quietly laughing. "Goodbye, 'big bro.' Second chances and all, you're just- you're so *dead*. Bet Memory won't do it."

The sight of his ward kneeling in the snow, wearing a jacket far too big for him, laughing more about a man who tried to kill him being dead than anything else that had ever amused Shinsou enough to huff or smile, makes Aizawa try to tug him up into standing. "You need to get inside."

Shinsou kicks out one leg and becomes dead weight, and when he finds that isn't enough to stop Aizawa, he jerks away from him just to fall. He twists while he does, and Aizawa can see the scowl, the glare in his eyes that he knows is deserved. Then how Shinsou's eyes gleam at his purple iris. "Why didn't you call me 'Hitoshi?'"

The monotone in Shinsou's deep voice makes it sound deeper, and the words reverberate through Aizawa's throat unnaturally. He tries with every inch of himself to close his teeth against the answer coming, something his mind is already turning static and numb to. "You might be a Nomu."

He feels sick to his core just to hear those words, something he refused to face with his mind was forced out of him all the same. The paralysis that comes afterwards, the hands he tries to make into fists to fight against have been severed of his control, and he watches the teenager in front of him stricken in confusion instead of rage, before he glares again. "Tell me where Eri is."

The sickness from the control turns to nauseating static inside his skull, what half of his mind he has is struggling to understand the words while the other half understands them completely. He wants nothing more than to end this sensation.

Shinsou turns his head to glare at the snow, a curl in his lip as something irritates him further. His mouth drops open to speak before it closes, a familiar sight that tugs through the numb and static to pull at his chest, before Shinsou pulls himself to stand and stare at Aizawa, a waning glare and the firmness of his frown the only traces of irritation.

Before the little shit pulls on his hand to dig a fingernail into the pressure point on his wrist below his thumb.

Hitoshi backs away once the control breaks and sensation floods Aizawa in full color, the glare gone and the frown turned further down at the edges, more like a guilty child. Or a frightened one.

Aizawa shakes his hand and curls it a few times, the ghost of pain singing a bit too clearly, and he has to look away when he sighs. "Eri is at the 1-C dorm with Bakugo and the others. She's safe. Hizashi is-" Probably the one calling him now, and was probably calling him before. "Worried."

Aizawa pulls out his phone, turning to keep eyes on his ward out of the corner of his eye because while he can't face Shinsou fully right now, he can't let him disappear either. By his own volition or not. "*Shou, Hitoshi just disa-fucking-peared-*"

"He's with me. He's fine," Aizawa says, and in the short pause that follows, he's sure that Hizashi isn't breathing judging by the pitch of his earlier panic. "We have a lot to talk about."

'Boss's' quirk, Shinsou's quirk. And how Hizashi will *not* agree to Shinsou being taken anywhere near Aizawa Shoga's 'home' in the slightest.

*

Even when they're back in the dorm, Eri refuses to let go of him, her arms wrapped tight around his neck and her legs wrapped around his stomach. "S' my fault."

"It's not your fault, Eri," 27 answers, his arms wrapped loosely around her. Yamada and Aizawa are talking in the living room, and maybe 27 should try to overhear what they're saying. They're definitely talking about him.

But Aizawa told him to pack for a few days.

27 closes his eyes, and lets himself hold Eri tighter, as tightly as she wants to be held by him. She was so *scared*, she was so much closer to The Miasma than he *ever* wanted her to be. 127 *saw her* and he threatened to-

He refuses to let himself think about those words. 127 better be *dead* now. "'Spoused to show you where to go, Zawa told me to. Zawa told me to stay there so you know where to go, and I didn't, and-"

"That's Aizawa's fault," 27 says, and he feels the anger vibrating inside his skin, has half a mind to go into the living room and deal it out himself. "Eri. I'm safe. You're safe. That was scary, and now it's over, and you're never going to have to go through that again. Okay?"

He bites his lip after he says that, after he *asks*, because that's a weapon now. One he can't control, shouldn't use. His words aren't his *words* when they're questions, they're *his. Nemoto's*. "Okay."

Eri's feet kick out from either side of him, a test kick. He forces himself to answer it with a smile she can't see, that he doesn't feel. He only feels the stretch of fresh scar tissue over old, familiar from when 10 would use his quirk and his new scars would just feel *odd* for a few hours. He would have to trace them with his fingers for a while before they started to settle and become his own. Become part of him.

Eri doesn't know what he's become, and he doesn't either.

"I need you to do something for me," 27 says, as he scans the room. So many little things he knew he was never going to keep, things he wants to keep with a selfish urge, wants to stuff them all into that stash box and somehow take it with him. The cat figurines, the books he hasn't even been able to touch. Things that he counted, he was in awe of, when he was stupid enough to think they were his. "I need you to keep him safe."

27 sits on the bed, careful of Eri's legs on either side of him, and pulls Mocha from the top of his pillows to tuck him against Eri's chest. Eri only lets go of him to wrap her arms tightly around his plushie, to look at him too seriously with her bright red eyes. He knows there's no one else he would trust with Mocha. "M' gonna protect him. N' you, Twenny. They're not coming back."

27 will do anything to make sure that doesn't happen. He tells himself that's the reason he should keep for going along with this. He needs to leave UA, because he's drawing danger here. Danger that will hurt Eri.

He hears Yamada talking louder, nearly shouting, before their voices go quiet and there's only loud footsteps down the hall. 27 tightens his grip around Eri because they can't do that *now*, they can't take him away from her this quickly. He doesn't know how to keep her from crying if they do that.

Another door opens and closes, and 27 is too relieved. Not yet, of course. He's going to be 'gone for a few days.' Yamada isn't happy about that, and that's too much relief in itself. A gift.

A gift he probably doesn't deserve, now that he's a 'Nomu.'

And he still doesn't know what that word means.

It's Going to Be *Fun*

Chapter Summary

After 127 was able to infiltrate UA and attack Shinsou, UA's security has been deemed compromised. Shinsou needs to go to a safe house, and Eri needs to remain close to Aizawa due to her growing horn and the traumatic events that unfolded mere hours ago.

Confessions in the mountains echo loudly in many hearts.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Mild sexual harassment (Touching a male student's nipple with the intention to unnerve them)

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa called his grandfather to ask if he and Shinsou could stay at his remote cabin in order to use it as a safe house without informing the Commission of Wardship Affairs that Shinsou had been attacked at UA. Aizawa did this without informing Yamada about his plans, which is why Yamada does not agree with the plan and isn't happy with Aizawa. When Eri was first rescued, she tended to speak more 'properly,' but has gotten used to speaking more like a 5 year old and using cutesy nicknames for other people. Eri refused to let go of Aizawa so that Aizawa could respond to where 127 was last seen, so Aizawa asked her to stay with Bakugo so they could 'know where to go,' trying to give her empowerment in a terrifying situation, but Shinsou was too injured to return to that spot once he was rescued. Ms. Joke has previously met Eri, and Eri quickly became friends with her. Shinsou used Brainwash mixed with Confession to ask Mirio 'What can you possibly do without your quirk?' which was a question that Shinsou didn't want to ask, but Mirio is taking as a blow to his confidence.

Yamada is perfectly fine with this. Perfectly fine.

His ward, who had recently been attacked and nearly killed on UA's highly defensible campus, was going to stay with a deranged and armed and incredibly homophobic alcoholic on the side of a mountain that's littered with bear traps and tiger pits. With no plumbing, no edible food, and hardly any contact with the outside world.

It'll be a nice little nature experience.

And Shouta, of course, was going with him to meet the man that did pretty much raise him, but he hates spending time with or even talking about more than his own *mother*. And Shouta *does not* like his mother in the slightest.

Aizawa Shoga was getting older, these reunions should take place sooner than later, so that there's no regrets or things left unsaid.

Eri, his sweet little girl Eri, absolutely *could not* live in a shack with three men who would likely be using jars and pots not for their intended purposes, and Yamada was in whole-hearted agreement on that. However, because Eri's horn was on the growing side and all of these very eventful events were definitely going to have an effect once she realized they happened, she needed to be pretty close to Shouta and Hitoshi in case of an emergency, which was why she was going to crash the Ketsubutsu training camp that had been moved to the base of that mountain in the matter of a few hours. With her favorite Big Three, of course.

Eri's never been camping, and hanging out with Mirio, Amajiki, Hadou, and Ms. Joke all at once was sure to be a blast. She'd definitely not devolve into inconsolable terror without Yamada there to help in the *slightest*.

And of course, because Shouta was supposed to live at the 1-A dorm for half of the weekend before this happened, and Yamada so conveniently had patrols scheduled during those nights that he decided he'd rather gargle nails than go out to, he was going to be chaperoning the little herolets. It should be fun, they should be absolutely rattled and terrified after yet another attack on campus, especially with Shouta, Hitoshi, and Eri being spirited away in the dead of night.

Especially because one of them might be the traitor that caused all of this, and Yamada still doesn't know which one it could be, if it is one of them. It's going to be fun not to give them any indication that he suspects that. Yamada has a *great* poker face after all, and if the traitor gets the tip off and they flee, it will absolutely be Yamada's fault.

Needless to say, Yamada was perfectly fine waiting in the parking lot with his arms slung over Hitoshi's shoulders, the urge to pull him into a hug and not let go and the urge to look through his backpack and make sure he packed everything far easier to focus on than anything else going on. Especially with how he still can't look at Shouta.

It's late, and both kids should be asleep. All the kids should be, especially Eri who's fighting off a good doze by kicking her little feet in Shouta's arms. Hitoshi should be tired too after Recovery Girl's quirk but he almost never is.

The Big Three have already packed but they're standing at a distance amongst themselves, Hadou yawning and bracing herself against Mirio's arm. Amajiki is standing between Mirio and Yamada's little family, and even if he's still a pretty wiry guy, he makes a good defense it seems. Mirio looks like he needs a good talk, but Yamada knows he can't give him one right now, and it probably wouldn't help in the slightest.

Yamada expected the police escort, and expects that Naomasa and Sansa are in it with no other passengers. He expected the big white van too.

He didn't expect to see Fat Gum driving that van, or that familiar abomination fashioned out of three different cars with different paint jobs to be tailing it. "Oh, Byte's here!"

Byte Sound parks behind Fat Gum and gives him a look, and those looks always say more than words or sign language can. She tries to look like she's been put upon, but he knows she doesn't mean it in the slightest. Not with that flash of a worried smile that comes over her when she looks at Hitoshi.

Fat Gum steps out of the driver's side, and he put that weight back on *quick*. Maybe Amajiki isn't impressed, he's probably seen the process with his ongoing internship, but Hadou looks less sleepy and more bug eyed, even if Mirio can't manage anything more than a weary smile. "Someone called a taxi? Well, you guys are going a little outside my jurisdiction, but some Sanuki Udon sounds great to me!"

Amajiki looks relieved, and doesn't hesitate to approach his mentor, even if he picks up the rest of the Big Three's luggage to have an excuse. But Fat Gum pulls him into an embrace that could become a tactical hold with a little more pressure, and looks like it is from Amajiki's flailing. That seems to be the invitation Hadou needs to make Fat Gum into an upright bed and pull Mirio into it.

"Great to see you guys!" Fat Gum says, with a clap over three backs that echoes a little too much in this deserted parking lot, before he looks up and spots the little apple of his eye. "And of course, our little Miss Eri! It's good to see you too!"

Eri is awake, wide awake, *way* too awake. Holding onto Shouta's scarf with her tiny little hand and she *totally doesn't recognize Fat Gum*.

And Fat Gum realizes that when he stops in his tracks, looking horrified for a second. "You don't remember me? Mr. Fat Gum! Looking a little more like the 'Fat' right now though."

Fat Gum chuckles with a slap on his belly, and Eri straightens up. Still too awake, but at least she's not at all on edge with that excited grin. "Mr. Gum!"

Fat Gum looks a little surprised, before his face stretches into an even wider grin, and if Yamada didn't know any better, maybe a few tears budding at the corner of his eye. Yamada hasn't heard the 'misters' or 'miss' or that timid, too serious way that a 5 year old *shouldn't* talk in a long time, but Fat Gum hadn't been around for that time. He imagines that Fat Gum is more awed by that change than Eri is of his. "Mr. Gum, or Mr. Fat. Whatever you want to call me, sweetheart."

"Gummy!" Yamada thinks those tears aren't just *budding* and the pro hero in front of him might *cry*. "Gummy, you didn't get to meet Twenny but Twenny is really nice too! And Twenny needs to try your tasty takoyakis!"

Yamada can't see the look on his ward's face, but he can feel the tension in his shoulders rising underneath his arms. He didn't know that Principal Nezu would call on Fat Gum to be an escort, and he imagines that Hitoshi isn't exactly enthused to be reminded about the 8 Precepts raid. "Of course, I didn't really get a chance to meet you, but we can definitely make up for lost time—"

"We're losing time as it is," Shouta says, because he's in one of *those* moods. A mood that will make him snap at a fellow hero who has volunteered to drive eight hours through the night to take him and his ward out into the mountains. A measure that's a little ridiculous, as much as this surly mood is, because *Shouta refuses to learn how to drive*.

And Fat Gum can wave that off with a shrug, with the intention to say something else to Hitoshi, but as soon as his mouth drops open Hitoshi decides those moods are *infectious*. He walks away leaving Yamada's arms hanging loose, and makes a beeline for Byte's car to pull the rear door open and throw himself and his backpack inside.

Yamada just watches it happen, because a teenage mood *cannot* be happening right now. Not when Yamada has to say goodbye to him.

For a weekend, he reminds himself, a weekend that's sure to have plenty of misery to go around for everyone, but it feels so much *worse* than that right now and he can't stop it.

Yamada curls a hand over Eri's sweet little head and fights the urge to plant a kiss there harder than he's ever had to before. "You're gonna have a fun time with these guys, little bean. I'll call you every day to hear all about it, and tell you how Fishio, Fishie, and Beanie are doing, alright?" Eri nods, those big red eyes too wide, and if she asked if she could stay home instead, Yamada might have to fight Principal Nezu with his bare fists to make it happen. "I love you."

“I love you too!” Eri replies, and it’s truly telling of how much else is on his husband’s mind that he doesn’t get a single look from that. Shouta hasn’t joined in the ‘I love you’ ritual, but given that it took a couple of years to make it a habit for him to say it to his *husband*, Yamada can overlook that. For a little bit.

With Eri getting settled into the van along with the Big Three who are probably going to fight over who she gets to sleep on, Yamada makes his way to his sidekick’s car to check in with one little listener he’s going to miss way too much.

A little listener who cracks the barest smile thanks to Byte’s *efforts* to cheer him up. ‘*Driver threaten to dump on road if he play song again. Play 4 times. Had to call taxi-*’

“Yeah, Byte’s giving you the run down on what *not* to do on those really long car rides,” Yamada says, trying to find a place where he can have his arm casually propped on top of the car but not look too stupid when he leans down to catch whatever glimpse of his ward that he can before he leaves for a *full weekend*. “But hey, you’ve got good company for this one!”

Hitoshi hasn’t seemed too tired yet, and Yamada knows there’s a very distinct possibility that he won’t sleep after what he’s had to deal with today. He won’t find rest, he won’t feel safe enough to try, and he’s being taken away from the one place that was *supposed* to be safe for him. Hitoshi looks at him with his head leaned back on the headrest, his eyes showing every inch of misery that comes with.

“It’ll be fun, you know? Fresh air, full of nature,” Yamada says, and he’s well aware that he can’t get his head through the window with his hair gelled up like this, but he’s too tempted to dive right into the backseat and tag along for the ride. “I’ll call every day, and Shou can tell me what you two are up to, and... Just be safe, alright?”

Hitoshi nods, and looks away like he wants that to be the end of it. He knows Hitoshi isn’t happy with any of this, and surliness is *quite* deserved at this point. But he wishes he could pull the kid into his arms and squeeze it out of him.

“Love you,” Yamada says, tapping the hood of the car for good measure when he catches the look in Byte’s eye from her side mirror. He hasn’t told her, she practically knows already, and he’ll deal with the good natured ribbing when he can *deal* with it. And he can’t deal with a single thing apart from how this is probably the hardest thing he’s ever had to do in his life.

He barely catches it, that sign whisper from a teenager who still won’t look at him. ‘*You too.*’

And he has to stand up before the tears start firing up, clapping his hands for good measure, good distraction. Shouta makes his way to the passenger side of Byte’s car, barely looking at him either. “Too crowded in the van?”

Shouta *does* look at him, a look he doesn’t like and refuses to look into. One of those looks that says ‘I’d rather do that, but I don’t trust the kid not to use his newly empowered quirk to make a run for it.’

And Byte looks *thrilled* with the company of those two in her car for the next eight hours of *fun*. “Have fun out there! Mountains, wildlife, creatures, oh my!”

He checks to make sure it’s Sansa and Naomasa who are providing the police escort, makes sure they have the appropriate amounts of caffeine for the journey. Checks again with the loaded van to make sure Eri is properly sandwiched between Hadou and Mirio, and that everyone is buckled in properly with their snacks and drinks in place.

And he tries not to read too much into the fact that there was another bench of seats in that van for Shouta and Hitoshi to sit on, but they already decided to ride in the car that would make the longer leg of the journey. “Have fun!”

Yamada waves and feels like this is going to be the worst weekend of his *life*.

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Aizawa would prefer that there would be no stops on this trip, but gas tanks unfortunately require that.

He would prefer that Shinsou get some rest instead of staring out the window, only seeming to alternate which window whenever his neck got sore. He would prefer that Shinsou sleep because he won't find the worn out cot that his grandfather probably still has very comfortable, he needs to sleep for the sake of his health, and Aizawa would be able to sleep if Shinsou did.

He would also be able to check on Eri if he could trust that Shinsou wouldn't try to unlock this car and run now that they're stopped at a gas station. “Do you want anything from inside?”

Hitoshi turns his head to face forward with a hard stare, something he hasn't done because he probably doesn't want to look at Aizawa right now, and he's still making an effort not to by staring into nothing. After a long pause, he shakes his head.

The greatest form of communication he's offered in the past five hours. Aizawa tries to stretch his legs in the cramped confines of Hizashi's sidekick's car, finding that his knees haven't straightened out during this entire ride and a hike up the mountain will be *very* fun because of that. “We won't stop until we get to the access road for the safe house. If you want to say goodbye to Eri, now is the time to do it.”

“Already did,” Shinsou answers, his voice rough from lack of sleep, lack of hydration, or lack of patience for this conversation. “Thanks for telling her it was her responsibility to keep me safe by telling her to stand there out in the snow. She's upset because of you.”

A barb he expected, and nods acknowledgement for. Shinsou was on edge about every aspect of this, and Aizawa expected that any words from him would be harsh. “I spoke before I understood the situation. She would have been more upset if she saw you before Recovery Girl's treatment.”

Treatment that worked well, despite the lack of rest. There's no difference in the scars already written on Hitoshi's face, but he hasn't seen the aftermath of his other wounds. “She'll be more upset-”

Byte Sound opens the door and tosses a bag into the backseat, a coffee for Aizawa and an energy drink for herself to replace the empty cups already in the cupholder. Then she grabs the aux cord for her sound system and tries to hand it to the backseat, only turning around to look when Shinsou doesn't take it.

“He doesn't have his phone,” Aizawa says, and despite explaining that it would be useless where they were going, he knows that Shinsou has enough reasons to be upset about that. Shinsou enjoys having possessions, he enjoys having his phone most of all. But that phone, along with Aizawa's, might be compromised by whatever methods were used to bring down UA's security system, and had to be left behind.

Byte gives him a look that looks more like an insulted teenager flabbergasted by this necessary security measure than the teenager it actually affects, and pulls the aux cord back to plug her own

phone in. *'My music. Basically Present Mic but better. My playlist gets best reviews.'*

She hands the phone to Aizawa with the implication that he's become the 'DJ,' but he finds a place to rest it on the console and at least close his eyes while Byte begins to drive again. He'll be able to hear Shinsou try to open the door or use his quirk while they're driving on the highway, and if he's not going to sleep, he at least needs to rest his eyes. He allowed himself to get carried away restraining 127, and he feels the ache despite the eyedrops.

"It'll be fun if Boss' quirk pulls me off the mountain and I die like that," Shinsou says, apparently far less interested in the music than he is in trying to get a reaction from Aizawa. Sarcasm, paired with the implication that death is preferable to this planned trip, is not a new reaction from a teenager under Aizawa's care.

"This mountain isn't steep enough," Aizawa says, because he measured the distance that Shinsou was pulled from previously and compared it to his memory of the surroundings. He wouldn't land close enough to the bear traps either. "Is there any warning before he does that?"

Aizawa glances in the rearview mirror to confirm that Shinsou had indeed escalated to glaring at him. "Must be *fun* to ask questions. I sure would like to do that."

Aizawa folds his arms and leans back in his seat as best he can, because that was a lure he wasn't going to tempt. Shinsou wanted a fight, and he wanted the escalation. But Aizawa wasn't going to give it to him.

"Oh, here's one—"

"*Don't*," Aizawa interrupts, because he needs to confirm whether his quirk can control Shinsou's, but he can't risk it while they're in a car with a driver who *might* be affected. And while it's tempting to use Byte as a test subject instead of his husband, as they were both deaf, he doesn't want the poor woman to be dragged into this anymore than she's invited herself to be.

"I *wonder* what my new owner is going to call me. That's always a fun question. Always exciting. *Shinsou*, one of my favorites," Shinsou says, crossing his arms and pulling his legs onto the other seats in the back. He'll either find this a more comfortable position, hopefully fall asleep, or try to kick Aizawa in the face now that it's more accessible. "*Shinsou*, the Nomu that needs to be dropped off the side of a mountain. I'm so *glad* that Now Music is the hero that was picked to keep me safe."

Byte Sound glances at Aizawa out of the corner of her too-wide eyes, her lips drawn in as she tugs off her headphones. Taking the opportunity to be completely deaf to this conversation. Aizawa *envies* that. "We are going to a safe house for three days, then returning to UA. This is all done in the interest of keeping you safe."

He hears Shinsou rustling the bag in the backseat, and he doesn't expect that he's partaking in any of the snacks or drinks. He glances back to see Shinsou move it behind himself, close to the door, then lay his head down to use it as a pillow. It's more than a little ridiculous.

"Hizashi would be the one escorting you, but it's a safe house he doesn't have access to," Aizawa says, a stripped down explanation of how his grandfather would probably attempt to kill him again, and Hizashi may have considered ending the old man's life in self defense, but he didn't voice that opinion. He just had a narrow eyed look that seemed like he was considering it. "He's unhappy with this, and obviously worried about you."

Shinsou struggles with the seatbelt before he finds a way to twist his body so that he's facing the

backseat, completely blocking out the rising sun and Aizawa from his sight. It's going well, at least.

This is still not the worst car trip Aizawa has been on to get to his grandfather's house.

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Amajiki took the passenger seat in the front without any argument, so that Eri could sit between Nejire and Mirio on the long drive. It's not just so he can be close to his mentor, to help with any directions or to turn down the music when Eri starts to doze. He just knows that Eri feels more attached to Nejire and especially Mirio, and she needs all the comfort she can get.

Amajiki doesn't feel bad about that small distance, how he's the least liked by Eri out of the Big Three. Possibly the entire rescue squad. He knows exactly why that is.

Mirio has said that he shouldn't have rushed ahead, but before he could go into whatever dumb reasons he had to believe that, Amajiki cut him off. Mirio's entire *purpose* in that raid was to rush ahead, to cut off and stall any escape that Chisaki was trying to make. Even before those changing walls came into play, they knew that Mirio was the best suited to pass through any obstacle to get to their goal - rescuing Eri and Shinsou.

Everyone had their purpose. Bubble Girl and Centepeder were supposed to stay on the backline, but with the appearance of Rikiya, the plan changed so that Team Ryukko was there to fight and defend. Bubble Girl and Centepeder stopped to manage the other yakuza, and then Amajiki volunteered himself to go against three of the Expendables, the elite force. To leave six known opponents up to the rest of his team, no matter the cost to stall them. His specialty as a hero is restraint.

But that's not all his tentacles can do.

Fat Gum put a choice in Amajiki's hand when he handed over the swordfish jerky, one he didn't use. It would have ended the fight quicker, if he had used it when the villains broke out of their restraints and made their intentions clear that they were willing to fight to the death. There's supposedly an escalation that he can use when he combines his tentacles with those swordfish beaks, he could *incapacitate* but there's a risk of lethal blood loss even with that measure. Villains aren't taken to the hospital as quickly as victims and heroes, which makes him more wary of using it.

He didn't use it. He found another option. He thought that he won, he felt *proud* to take out three villains at once like that, completely on his own. Until he realized he didn't win at all.

Eight minutes. They know when they started the raid, and when it stopped, but when they split up and the parts of the raid were compiled into a report on the operation in piecemeal, it's hard to be sure of some of the timeline. But Amajiki *felt* exactly when Mirio had been shot, and the difference between the beginning of his fight and that moment was about eight minutes.

He could have been there. He could have been the reinforcement clearing the way. He would have had to resort to drastic measures, but they weren't fighting villains that played fair. They were willing to die and willing to kill, and maybe they should have faced an opponent willing to do the same.

Mirio won't let him blame himself for his lost quirk either. Mirio says that the raid is over, and his future isn't. He just has to wait now.

Amajiki tries to wait, even when it's painful.

When they get to the training camp, three cabins on the edge of a cleared out field and barely defended by a wooden fence, Amajiki is completely unsurprised that Mirio takes Eri into his arms. Eri can use her legs to walk just fine, she's not exactly a toddler, but he knows there's a lot of people at UA that prefer to treat her like one. To treat her like the little princess that Amajiki can't deny that she is.

And she could probably use a bit more care like that after what had happened last night. And from the look of the people that are filing out or bursting out of those cabins, that care won't be coming solely from the Big Three.

Ms. Joke, as exaggerated as ever, is running through the snow with her arms outstretched, screaming Eri's name as though she's a mother newly reunited with her child. The students that have a right to this training camp are curious and following behind her, and Amajiki can't overlook how the blonde girl looks like she's stricken by Eri's cute appearance already. Nejire might find a rival with her.

But Amajiki can see that both Eri and Mirio can meet that excitement with weary smiles, as though the lack of sleep was the only thing that was affecting them. "Eri, my sweet child! You can meet my other children now, my little heroes-in-training! We can spend all weekend playing in the snow and chasing rabbits and-"

"Sorry for crashing on such short notice," Mirio says, blatantly ignoring that Ms. Joke's hands are grabbing around Eri looking for a trade off. He's using that grin that makes him look a little more oblivious than he is, and Amajiki realizes he's going to be watching heroes compete for the right to hold Eri all weekend.

"Ah, our apologies for making you believe an apology is necessary," one of the students with long black hair says, a red scarf so wide that it's almost a shawl draped over his shoulders. The blonde girl knocks an arm against his shoulder with a more excited grin.

"Itejiro, knock it off! You don't need to gush all over them just because they're UA's *Big Three*."

There's just something about the way she says that, the way her eyes cut and narrow at them, that reminds Amajiki this isn't *entirely* a friendly visit.

Ketsubutsu was a hero school that 'specialized' in smaller classes, but it was common knowledge that they just didn't have the budget for a large hero course. With the entrance exam being far easier, the standards arguably a bit lower, Ketsubutsu had a 'rivalry' against UA that was justifiable from all of those differences, and the resentment that was due because of that.

These students weren't even third years, they were just second years. They're not the students that their class faced for the Provisional License Exam. Their small class wanted to measure themselves against the best of the best at UA in this training camp, and maybe they owed them the opportunity in exchange for being here.

But the guy with shorter, fluffy black hair just sighs, and looks disappointed at his classmates before he lays a hand on the blonde girl's shoulder. "We should all be more than welcoming to these guys, and set aside those petty rivalries. The drive here isn't an easy one, and they've been through a lot."

Eri fidgets in Mirio's arms, almost disturbing Ms. Joke who seems to have settled for petting her head. That shorter haired guy walks forward, and from the way that the others watch him, he seems

to be the leader. Maybe the class president in some official way, but their class size seems too small to need that.

The Presumed Class President's face lifts into a wide and friendly grin, something that makes him seem a little more like Deku. Maybe even brighter. "But I'm sure they've endured this far, because they have very big *hearts!*"

This guy. Was *not touching*. Mirio's '*heart*.'

Mirio jolts back a bit, his face reddening and his lips twisting up as though he doesn't know how to react to that outright, *blatant* sexual harassment that this jerk did *right in front of his teacher*. It didn't look like he flicked Mirio's nipple, just touched it, but 'just touching' was just.... *Just....*

"Oh, a Vibration quirk!" Mirio says, trying to laugh it off, having to pull an arm away from holding Eri to hold Nejire back by her shoulder. A Vibration-

This guy vibrated Mirio's nipple.

"You know, the 'heart' thing makes you seem really fake, though. That's not really something that a normal person would say," Mirio says, trying to laugh it off with his hand behind his head, something he usually does when he's nervous. And he has a right to be, he's just been *sexually harassed* by some second year *punk* from a third rate hero school who didn't have the *right* to look at Mirio or *touch* him like that.

"Ha-ha! Yo-yo-yo, he called you out! He *roasted* you!" Ms. Joke says, pointing at her student and laughing and *not expelling him on the spot*. "Yo, you know, I enjoy roasting duck on an open fire...."

Something about that innocuous and completely random comment makes all of those Ketsubutsu students flinch, and the Sexual Harasser's weird squinty eyed grin falls off completely into barely restrained fear.

"I guess that means I like 'smoking quack!'" Ms. Joke says, with far too much confidence for that lame pun, but it's something that Sexual Harasser sputters at before he starts laughing. Laughing a lot. *Too much*.

Amajiki turns to look at the faint blue hue around the Sexual Harasser, how his eyes are too wide and pleading at Ms. Joke, and how the eager grin she was wearing before seems to narrow into something punitive.

Most teachers at UA don't use their quirks for punishment, and while Midnight could, it might be counter productive. But Amajiki imagines that a lot of them would envy Ms. Joke if they could see what Amajiki is watching with a bit too much glee, the embarrassing sight of this Ketsubutsu student heaving too-hearty laughs at such a *bad* joke.

It might be painful. But Amajiki doesn't care if it is.

"So, we can get some proper introductions out of the way! That's Yo Shindo, Tatami Nakagame, Itejiro Toteki, and Shikkui Makabe!" Ms. Joke says, and maybe she knows that she left an impression at their summer training camp two years ago because she doesn't introduce herself. Her students, excluding that Yo guy, add in their quirks, and when the blue faced Shikkui announces he has *Stiffening*, Amajiki starts to wonder if this class is aware of some...connotations with that. Mostly by the way that *Vibration* was introduced.

Yo has to keep laughing while the Big Three introduce themselves. There's a voice that Amajiki is

very familiar with, already trying to convince him that Yo is laughing at *him* before he even speaks up. It's something that he clenches his fist and tries to fight down. "Amajiki Tamaki, Manifest. I...can manifest parts of...anything I eat."

Saying 'manifest' almost makes it redundant, it makes him sound like he's bragging, like he thinks they're all stupid so he has to spell it out for them and they probably think that way anyway and they already hate them for being at UA and already know he's the weakest member of the Big Three-

"Togata Mirio, Permeability! I can pass through any surface, and I've got a lot of fun tricks with that! But, I'm not feeling like showing it off to you guys," Mirio says with a wink, with something so fake it's almost insulting that he called Yo out for that. Maybe they shouldn't get to know the full story, but Mirio shouldn't feel like they should be fed such a blatant lie. It's only going to make them more resentful.

Not that they're not already resentful, after that introduction before the proper one.

"Jeez, you already seem to think that there's some ulterior motive for having you guys around!" Ms. Joke says, waving her hand at that even though training with the Ketsubutsu students was *definitely* something that was going to happen. It's the only real explanation for why they were there, apart from the honest one. "You guys just drove through the night, you should settle in first! Get ready to have some fun out here, because despite how UA does their training camps? We're here to have some *fun*!"

Amajiki wouldn't believe it until he saw it, because these guys didn't look like they were expecting any *fun*. Even that Yo guy who falls to his knees to gasp for breath once Ms. Joke releases him only grins like that because he's waiting for *retribution*. And he's staring at Mirio while he does, which means retribution for the *retribution* will be coming from Amajiki.

"Ah, there's only two girls here, so are we going to have a big sleepover? A sleepover with no boys, but what's the other cabin for? Is it just for food and showering and stuff? That's *way* different from a UA training camp!" Nejire rambles on, and she's going to get along *great* with Ms. Joke, who's already beaming at her. Amajiki is already on guard at the implication that Yo is going to share a room with Mirio and *him*, and how he'll have to toe the line between criminal assault and *restraint*.

"Cold," Eri mumbles, kicking her legs which makes Mirio hold her a bit tighter and try to tuck her into his jacket. Fat Gum walks over with their luggage packed in his stomach since it would be too much to carry on his own, and Amajiki should have recognized that and helped him. But it looks like Fat Gum is looking at Eri and considering whether it would help to stuff her into a Fat Restraint too.

And unfortunately, neither Mirio nor Fat Gum are helping.

"S cold, and I don't like it!" Eri whines, and Amajiki is sure that everything is catching up to her now. She seemed tired, but too quiet during the drive, she seemed too quiet when they stopped for breakfast at a local diner, but all of that quiet was only going to delay the inevitable outburst.

And considering how Eri's outbursts could end, and that Mirio was holding her in his arms, Amajiki was torn between what he wanted to happen from it.

"I *hate* it!" Nejire whines, pouting and stomping her feet. She raises her hands in the air and twirls, making sure that *all* of the guys who *already* hate them are staring at her. "This place is *awful*, these guys are *awful*, I want to go home instead of being in this crummy place! And I'm *tired* and

hungry and-”

“You’re being *mean!*” Eri yells, leaning out of the cradle of Mirio’s arms to scold Nejire, and Amajiki appreciates that too much. He knows what Nejire is trying to do, but it’s making a scene, and Fat Gum already looks so worried about Eri’s bad mood. Mostly because he forgot to bring her any candy apples.

“Nope, she’s just expressing her feelings, and it’s completely understandable,” Ms. Joke says, her hands on her hips as she nods along. “A girl can’t keep that all bottled up, or else she’ll get wrinkles! So girls, let’s complain!”

“Wah, it’s so cold! I’ve got to carry all this stuff!” Tatami tosses in, even though she’s smiling at Fat Gum to take in Nejire and Eri’s things. Nejire takes Eri into her arms, joining a chorus about how it’s cold and they’re tired and they want to go home, and by the time that they’re halfway to their cabin, Amajiki can hear Eri’s little voice shyly join in.

Eri has been through a lot already, but just the long drive was enough for a little kid like her to be grumpy. And she still needed reassurance that it was okay to do that.

Amajiki would *appreciate* some reassurance from that Yo guy that he wouldn’t try anything, but when he tries to smile like he did before, to look so open and friendly like he *wasn’t*, Amajiki was sure that wouldn’t be the case. “Aw, what a good kid. We can show you two where you’ll be staying, luckily there’s enough room.

There’s not.

It’s almost worse than Amajiki imagined, and he knows that it’s selfish that he thinks that way. But the cabin that’s as far away from the ‘Girl’s Cabin’ as it can be, the Boy’s Cabin, doesn’t just have one room for all of them to cram into like he thought. There’s four rooms. Three taken up by the three male Ketsubutsu students.

He and Mirio would be sharing a room, with no one else there. *And one bed.*

“Ha, that is different from UA. There’s actually a bed!” Mirio says, and Amajiki can’t stop staring at *the* bed. The singular bed. With no one else in the room. No chaperone, except for Ms. Joke, who really wasn’t their teacher.

“Oh shoot, I left something in the car! Can you help me with that?” Fat Gum asks, a hand on his shoulder, and Amajiki feels like he could *die* of mortification because Fat Gum has *seen* there was one bed and he already feels dirty for all the things he tells himself *won’t* happen but even *Fat Gum* must think will happen.

Amajiki follows him to the van, knowing there’s nothing left behind in it, and almost wishes he could climb inside of it to go back to UA.

“So,” Fat Gum says, pretending that he’s rustling through the glove box for something he left behind. They didn’t put anything in there, and if he’s too embarrassed to look at Amajiki and *know* the awful thoughts he’s having, then he could just drive away before Amajiki dies of embarrassment. “It’s not my place for any judgement, but I want you to have this.”

This is what dying of embarrassment feels like. Amajiki can’t breathe, he can’t look away. He feels like he’s developing tunnel vision, how everything else seems to blur out. Except for the box of condoms that his *mentor* is holding. “That. That-that *that’s not necessary-*”

“Well, these things are... y’know, it’s not just for protection, I’ve read a lot of stuff about...” Fat

Gum is going to kill him, he's going to murder him by accident and Amajiki will just feel *horribly guilty* the entire time he's dying at this rate. Fat Gum doesn't see that at all, probably because he's looking off to the side like he doesn't want to look at Amajiki right now. "Wait. Have you still not told him?"

"No!" Amajiki blurts out, too loud, he *knows* it's too loud, he knows absolutely everyone is looking at him right now. Nejire is going to see the condoms, *Eri* is going to see the condoms and have *questions* and he knows Aizawa might kill him but Present Mic *definitely* will.

"Oh, jeez," Fat Gum tosses the condoms back into the car, and Amajiki hopes that this is over. That he's survived another brush with death. But it *isn't*, it's clear in the way his mentor's eyes are so wide and soft, how he rests a hand on his shoulder. "Tamaki, I thought you said you were gonna-"

"I *was*," Amajiki answers, still a bit too shrill.

Last night, he was going to confess to Mirio. He knows that graduation is a few months away, and for too long he thought he could put it off until then. That it might be better not to say anything until there was an escape already there, just so he wouldn't have to share the same dorm floor with the guy he *confessed* to but would absolutely tell him he just wanted to stay friends. Even if they wouldn't be friends if that happened.

But things are happening before then, preparations are being made. Mirio was already deciding between apartments in Mustafu, and before Amajiki made any decisions himself, he just needed to *know*. Even if it's awkward later, he doesn't want to feel like he let this chance slip by like a coward.

Fat Gum sighs, and claps his hand on his shoulder a few times, almost patting it but it's just a little too heavy to call it that. "Look, even if things are a little awkward with the close quarters, I think you should stick to your guns and let him know. The sooner the better, because this could have a big effect on your career, and you need to take it into consideration!"

Amajiki knows, he knows it's a big risk. But Mirio is worth taking it.

Fat Gum just smiles at him when he finally nods, and he gets another clap that almost makes him fall over. "I think you're worrying over nothing, kiddo. No one can do that as good as you can, of course! But Togata's a good egg, and I think you're working yourself up without taking that into account."

"I am pretty egg shaped!" Mirio calls out, walking closer but he's at the tail end of the van right now and Amajiki needs to make sure the *condoms* are out of sight. He doesn't know what Mirio has heard, and it's probably too much already, but if he's *seen* those condoms Amajiki is sure he'll have a panic attack and die in Mirio's arms and feel *worse* about all the things surrounding that. "Need any help?"

"Nope! Nope, we've got it, I think," Fat Gum says, and he won't say what he's 'got,' which means that Amajiki has to explain it, which means Fat Gum is setting him up for this. "You guys enjoy your little trip in the mountains! I'm sure it's going to be a lot of *fun*!"

There's a way that Fat Gum says that word. That word sounds like something it *shouldn't* be, can't be, absolutely *won't* be and the fact that his *mentor* is saying it makes the entire thing *worse*.

But when Mirio just stares at him with such a pure and bright expression, that easy smile, it makes everything so much more *unfathomably* worse.

Amajiki forces himself to go back to the room to unpack, settle in. Ignore the singular bed. Mirio has fallen asleep on his bed before, they used to have sleepovers as children. This is a perfectly normal situation that Amajiki is making into what it isn't. It's just a bed. A bed that has no intentions, no implications that Amajiki is putting on it. It's just a *bed*, and they're just going to sleep on it. And because they *have* to sleep on it, it would be much better if Amajiki didn't say anything-

"So, big career move?" Mirio asks, making Amajiki startle and drop his toothbrush into the sink. He looks to see Mirio has his back turned, laying his clothes out on the bed before he sorts them away. Amajiki can only imagine what kind of smile he's wearing, something that's supposed to hide what Mirio really feels, but never works with Amajiki. "I mean, Fat Gum's definitely going to give you a sidekick spot, but it sounds a bit bigger than that."

"I wouldn't take it," Amajiki says, almost feels like he's reminding Mirio of something he should already know. "Osaka's a three hour train ride, which is fine now, but not after-"

"But you're just gonna move there, right?" Mirio says, turning around with the best 'I'm confused, because this should be obvious' smile he can manage right now, a bit too wide and open, too much teeth. Too much like just saying that hurts him, and Amajiki doesn't want to take that for something it's not. "I mean, after you graduate, you can go anywhere you want! Pick any place. There's no reason to stick around Mustafu."

"I want to," Amajiki says, before he really thinks about it. This isn't how the conversation was supposed to go, now it's going to sound like Amajiki is some stalker boyfriend putting the weight of his career on Mirio's shoulders, and it wasn't supposed to *sound* like that. "What I mean is-"

"Mustafu has a lot of heroes already though," Mirio says, the smile is gone but he still looks confused. He knows that Amajiki knows that, it's tough to get a spot in big cities or well known ones like Mustafu, and competing for even a sidekick position there is difficult without any connections. "That... doesn't really make any sense for you, Tamaki."

"Maybe it doesn't," Amajiki says, leaning against the door frame to convince himself that he's fine, this is a normal conversation with his best friend. He tries to brush his hair behind his ear, tries not to feel like the bed is *staring* at him now. He just tries to imagine that Mirio will just look at him and shrug, and not get angry, not feel awkward. He looks at Mirio and accidentally tries to imagine him in his underwear to make this easier and it *absolutely doesn't help*. "But you're... You make me not... You're worth...."

He wrote out *seven pages of different confessions*. He made a *flowchart* of everything that could happen, highlighting the good ways Mirio could take it in bright yellow. He planned out *everything* that he could but he didn't even *consider* that *singular bed*.

"I like you!" Amajiki finally sputters, and he feels so cold afterwards, like those words held all of the warmth he had in his chest. Like he's blotting out the sun, right now, as he stands there, and he knows there's 43 ways that he'll never feel that warm or see that brightness again. "And I want to stay in Mustafu."

He only catches a glance of Mirio when he forces himself to look, and it's not pretty. Mirio just looks shocked, shocked means he doesn't feel the same way, he feels *completely* the opposite way, he's absolutely ruined everything and they *still have to share that bed*. "Tamaki, you... You can't just hold yourself back like that."

Amajiki can blame the bed for the *very unbecoming* way he took those words at first, before he realizes what Mirio is actually saying.

Mirio is staring at his clothes, his shoulders slumped and his eyes turned too downward, too *dim* for the sun that he embodies. That he outshines most of the time. “You don’t have to stick around and take care of me, and you don’t have to... say things like that, that you don’t mean. I’m going to be fine, and you’re going to do great things in Osaka.”

Amajiki stares for too long. *Far* too long. Before he realizes that Mirio is an *idiot*. “Do you think I just confessed... Because I think you’re weak and I need an excuse to stick around you? That weird... really weird- *why?*”

Amajiki isn’t sure if he’s waiting for Mirio to realize how ridiculous he’s being or realize what he *said*, but he honestly can’t force any more words out of his mouth until Mirio *gets it*. He *confessed* to the guy and somehow he turned it into.... *What?* “I mean, yeah, I am weaker without my quirk. I know you don’t want to say it, but it’s true, but you don’t have to worry. There’s plenty of heroes in Mustafu, so I don’t need you to... protect me, or whatever.”

Mirio. *Could not* be this stupid.

This definitely wasn’t on Amajiki’s flowchart. There’s a *reason* it wasn’t on his flowchart, because everything from Mirio admitting he felt the same way for a while and sweeping Amajiki into his arms to flipping the table in a rage because he somehow decided that Amajiki being gay was disgusting, *all* of those things were more understandable than Mirio suddenly becoming this *stupid*.

“Mirio,” Amajiki manages, even if he has to hide his face behind his hands. Even if he has to pretend he’s just talking into a dark room with no one around in order to say it. “I’m not *confessing* to you to protect you, I’m confessing because I *like* you and-and I’ve liked you for a long time, and....”

He had ideas, before he was faced with one of them. The Singular Bed that is mocking him even now, even when he can’t see it, is plenty of evidence that Tamaki *could not* move in with Mirio after graduation. He thought it would be fine, it would be an easy step after living in the same building and practically in each others’ at UA. It was a sensible escalation. *It is not*.

“I don’t want to be that far away, if you... feel the same way.”

Amajiki is handing Mirio the ball, the keys to his own demise. There’s *no way* that Mirio could take that the wrong way, that he could twist it into another thing it’s *not*. The flowchart is at hand now, Mirio should answer with one of those many scenarios and Amajiki has planned for his next response for most of them. He’s imagined what most of them look like.

He didn’t plan for the fingers brushing his ear at all, that was *not* in his plans (maybe three of them, at most), and when he pulls his hands away to look the way that Mirio looks so serious and so *embarrassed* at the same time wasn’t something he planned on, nor the determined look in his eye, and definitely not the-

The kiss was included in two outcomes, and Amajiki tries to stop thinking about the one where Mirio kisses him then laughs that it was all just a joke or that he wanted to try it and has now sworn off men forever.

The kiss is so soft, yet it feels like so *much*. *Mirio’s* lips are on his, and he’s felt Mirio’s hand on him before, even felt the way that Mirio is cupping his cheek and how his fingers card through his hair, but not like *this*. This feels so different, like Amajiki is filling with light and nearly unreality, that this has to be a dream.

Then someone clears their throat. And the world spins into a nightmare.

He sees Nejire standing in the open door, and only has a split second to think about how they *should* have closed or locked it, before he sees *Eri* standing there and he has to press his face against Mirio's chest to hide. *Eri*, pure sweet *Eri* had seen him kissing Mirio and she'll tell Aizawa and Present Mic and they will both *definitely* kill Amajiki for tainting her like that.

"You're... you're *recording*?" Mirio asks, a strain in his voice, and Amajiki spares a quick glance to see that Nejire was *holding her phone out*. That she was definitely, without a *shadow* of a doubt, *recording that*.

"Yep! It's your first kiss, right? That's gonna be *great* to play at your wedding," Nejire says, smiling like an airhead and giving them a thumbs up like an airhead and once again Amajiki *wishes* he never let Mirio talk him into letting her sit with them at lunch on their first day at UA. He had. No idea. It could come to *this*.

Eri walks closer to them, and Amajiki doesn't like how he's suddenly started thinking of this as some kind of *sin*, but he can blame the condoms he *still* can't stop thinking about when he almost wishes that she could step away from them instead of looking up with those pure, wide eyes. "Can I come to your wedding?"

They've only *kissed*. *Once*. Mirio hasn't even *told* him that he feels the same way, he's only kissed him, and now they're talking about weddings, his *mentor* tried to give him *condoms*, and Mirio laughs nervously and curls an arm around his back. And Amajiki almost wants him to snap his neck with his arms. "Of course! Can't have a wedding without the perfect flower girl there!"

Wedding. That... possibly means that Mirio feels the same way.

Amajiki knows that despite everything that feels like *far* too much right now will take a while to sink in. To really realize what had just happened, that he confessed and Mirio *kissed* him and feels the same way and they... They're probably in a relationship now? They're dating, possibly?

Amajiki presses his face just a bit harder to Mirio's chest, trying not to smile like an idiot. Maybe he was worrying over nothing, something that he's always been the best at doing. Something that Mirio knows better than anyone that he does, but never faults him for it. He was the one who pointed out flowcharts as a way to help with it.

And maybe he won't laugh too much if he keeps the flowchart he made for the confession, just.... *In case* there's a wedding, at some point. They really shouldn't rush into things.

Amajiki feels *Eri* wrapping her small arm around one of his legs, and looks down to see that she seems happy for them both, hugging both of them as best she can. She looks up at Amajiki and smiles so brightly, with one of those 'pure beams of sunlight' smiles that she had to learn from spending so much time with Mirio. "I'm so happy you love each other!"

It's really just 'like,' maybe, because 'love' is a pretty big word. A word that Amajiki feels, but he can't possibly think that Mirio feels that way. Yet. Love is something that grows, something that builds over time. Love is a third date word, and they haven't had *one* date, and that's... *That's* really rushing things.

But Mirio still not saying anything to that, still just *blushing* so much that his ears are bright red, makes Amajiki think... they've spent practically their entire lives together at this point. This is new, but in a big way, it's not.

"Thanks, *Eri*," Mirio says, returning her smile with one of his own. Amajiki doesn't think he can talk right now, that he's already said so much and still feels so much. He could honestly use some

time to sit and stare at the wall and *process* things, but he's not sure he'll have time or space to do that. Until tonight. When they face the Singular Bed with all the changes that have happened.

"Mirio," Eri says, pulling her arms away to properly hold the stuffed cat that had been tucked against Mirio's leg. She has one of her serious requests, that are usually things that aren't serious. She might want to apologize for being a bit grumpy earlier, but when she holds out the stuffed cat, it doesn't seem like that. "Can you keep Mocha safe? M' sposed to, but... I can't. He needs a hero."

That wasn't Eri's stuffed cat then. Amajiki thought it looked a little familiar, but he recognizes it after Mirio does. It's Shinsou's cat.

Amajiki sees the look on Mirio's face, and he can practically hear all the things that are going through his mind. He curls an arm behind Mirio's back and wants to argue against *all* of them, all the things that Mirio hasn't said but he knows he still thinks about. Things that Shinsou *forced* him to say, things that *Shinsou* thinks about Mirio. And how much that hurts Mirio to know that.

Amajiki wasn't there when Shinsou asked Mirio how he could *possibly* defend him from that intruder, but if he was, he would have shouted down reasons that Mirio himself might not believe. If he was there, he could have ended that fight, he could have kept them both from getting hurt. But he wasn't.

But he's here, here to remind Mirio of what's true when Mirio himself believes in lies.

"There's no better hero to keep Mocha safe," Amajiki says, taking the plushie from Eri's hands to press it against Mirio's chest, to force him to take it. Mirio *is* a hero, quirk or no quirk, he *could* have defended Shinsou if he was given the chance. If no one else believes in Mirio, not even himself, then Amajiki will.

Amajiki will inspire that shaky smile that comes when Mirio curls his hand around that plushie, when he nods and tries to make it wider for Eri's sake. "Yep, I can keep this little guy safe during our trip! You don't have to worry about that!"

Amajiki knows that it might not have been the time to make his confession, not when Mirio was so tangled up in other things. But they've been tangled in their own issues, and sorted them out together before. Amajiki can wait, but maybe it's more courageous not to. To have everything out in the open, because the hand stroking Mirio's back hasn't changed. The voice reassuring him of everything that's true, that Mirio finds himself blind to, hasn't changed one bit.

And maybe, having a plushie in protected custody will make the Singular Bed a bit easier to face, knowing that *nothing* can happen before its time with that stuffed animal in the room.

*

Aizawa sees a snow covered rock that looks perfectly inviting for him to freeze his ass on, and pulls off the poorly defined trail to take another break, and enforce one for his ward.

Shinsou honestly shouldn't be doing as well as he seems to be on this hike, hardly recovered from the attack and with two hours at most of sleep during the car ride. But he's recovered in other ways, more long term ones. Shinsou is still thin, but the barest hints of adolescent youth are beginning to fill his face out a bit more, his body is less skeletal and more like some of his more gangly students on their first day.

Shinsou rolls his eyes when Aizawa shrugs off his backpack to find that their water bottles were

half frozen, and the lunch that Hizashi had packed was probably affected as well. He hands Shinsou's half of these rations over, having to shake the bento box with a bit of insistence. "Once we arrive, there's likely not going to be food like this. Military rations at best."

Aizawa Shoga described himself as a hunter, and that might have been true in the past. But the old man probably didn't check his traps regularly at his advanced age, and despite the snow offering the basest attempt at preservation for the meat, Aizawa wouldn't trust it.

Shinsou takes his lunch with another sullen look, picks at the edges of it long before he eats anything. The lunch is too cold to be truly enjoyable, but Aizawa takes the appreciation for his husband's cooking more heartily knowing that he's never forgotten the taste of those boiled MREs.

Shinsou has eaten barely a quarter of his food before he puts the lid on it again, leaning back against another rock as he sits in the snow. He crosses his arms, and Aizawa finds himself tempted to start counting down until he gets another smart remark from a kid who honestly has no other means to express how unbearable he finds this. This time, whatever Shinsou finds for antagonizing him is amusing enough for him to snort. "You're really spoiled."

That word has never applied to Aizawa. Especially given that his first task upon arriving to his grandfather's shack will be to dig out a new outhouse pit. He's sure the old man hasn't been able to dig one out himself in nearly a decade.

"I used to think Eri was spoiled, after Overhaul first bought me," Shinsou says, and the food in Aizawa's mouth turns rancid as he realizes that Shinsou has never referred to Chisaki with that name. With the name that the mobster *wanted* to be called. "I think I cried the first time I ate jell-o. At The Miasma, you get oatmeal soup, twice a day if you're lucky. Even when we had oatmeal at the 8 Precepts of Death, it wasn't as watery."

Aizawa had imagined that food had been scarce in Miasma's compound, a privilege even. 'Twice a day, if you're lucky' probably had a more personal meaning to Shinsou, given that he probably wore a mask that needed to be unlocked for him to eat. "Every day?"

Shinsou nods, still looking into the surrounding wilderness rather than at Aizawa. "Every. Day. They must buy a lot of it. I guess you could find them like that."

If this case breaks on finding unusually large shipments of oatmeal mix being delivered to a location that has no need for it, Aizawa will *eat* his hero license.

Aizawa isn't sure if he should share that with Hizashi. They were aware that both wards probably hadn't encountered proper nutrition, that it was a *miracle* neither of them hoarded food once the opportunity presented itself. With how much importance Hizashi places on food as a means to provide for those he cares about in deeper ways than the biological, he would probably find himself a wreck to know how Shinsou had eaten before he was rescued. He would probably find their usual cooking times more meaningful, and break into tears when he remembered that Shinsou *willingly* ate oatmeal prepared by Hizashi.

If this is true. Shinsou wouldn't be the first teenager to exaggerate in an already displeased state, and a single source of nutrition, as scarce as it seemed to be with the implication it was withheld, *should* have killed him before taking his training into account.

But Shinsou should have been killed long before this point. Aizawa imagines that he was born with far more than nine lives to be able to get this far.

Aizawa sees Shinsou startle, his eyes going wider and his hands scrambling against the snow to pull himself out of his miserable slouch to his feet, and Aizawa stands to look at the threat, his capture scarf already rising.

Only to fall when he sees a *very* familiar sight. “It’s a deer.”

A deer that Shinsou was still holding his stolen knife in front of him to defend himself from. Aizawa hadn’t seen him take it - *again* - but the military issue blade he found a bit too cumbersome for his costume wasn’t something that Hizashi asked Shinsou to pack. He hasn’t taken the knife from the kid since it was the first thing he stole after arriving at UA, his first matter of business seemed to be to get proper defense for himself as a measure of safety, but Aizawa probably should have taken it back before now.

And he should probably explain what a deer *was*. “It’s a serow, a herbivore. It eats grass. It’s not going to approach us, or attack.”

The long haired beast only continues trudging through the snow, glimpses of it visible behind the treeline. This one walked alone, like most do, but Aizawa has seen them paired up just as often. Sometimes in family groups. “I’m not stupid,” Shinsou says, tucking the knife back into its sheath which was tucked inside his pants, only the clip visible. “I know what a herbivore is.”

Shinsou was likely going to learn a great deal about the animal kingdom out here. And he seems to have some interest in doing so.

When Shinsou sits back down, he watches the deer, his eyes slowly ceasing to be so narrowed and displeased. He almost looks relaxed enough to feel the exhaustion that Aizawa had no doubt was below the surface to keep spurring this sour mood on, before he tilted his head to the side.

“Ugly,” Shinsou decides, if it seemed like it wasn’t a confident vote. Aizawa huffs and nearly laughs, because he’s had that similar debate in his youth. The *noble* serow was definitely an interesting creature, a mixture of a goat and a deer with tiny horns that seemed to push it closer to the ‘ugly’ category. And yet, it was still hard to make that decision.

“Looks like my grandfather,” Aizawa says, which was his eventual outcome on the issue. The white flared out fur on the underside of the serow’s neck to resemble a beard, its short and boarish stature - if its eyes could look a bit more like a goat, or a bit more unhinged, Aizawa might have tried to introduce the wandering creature as his relative.

The silence of the winter wilderness answers him instead of any thoughts Shinsou might have on that. Aizawa packs everything back up and continues on with the hike, knowing they’d soon approach two of the biggest dangers on this outing. The traps that Aizawa Shoga thought were perfectly legal trespasser deterrents, and the old man himself.

Aizawa keeps aware of his surroundings, trying to find the tell-tale signs of those hidden traps, but that makes him aware of other things. The rustle of some small creature on the ground, too quick to point out or identify. Birds also call out and fly too quickly, but out of the corner of his eye he can see Shinsou flinch at times with the noise. It would be unfair to call him a ‘city slicker’ when he was probably only barely more familiar with city life.

Aizawa spots a slightly more rare sight when he catches a flash of red fur to his right, a pair of red foxes that were tussling on the ground, chasing each others’ tails before one reared back and pounced on the other to distant growls.

Aizawa takes on his new responsibility as a nature guide with only a small degree of apprehension.

“Foxes. They’re also skittish.”

Omnivores seems to be a fact that might invite contention.

He sees Shinsou stop, observing the sight with more blatant wonder than he’s seen so far on this hike. Most children take regular trips to zoos to see these animals, as different as they are in captivity. Aizawa wasn’t one of those children, he grew up with these creatures at the edges of his grandfather’s shack, calling out loudly in the night. In the traps he had to help the old man clear out at an early age.

Shinsou also wasn’t a child who saw these animals in captivity, but he still looks like a child with his awe in seeing them for the first time.

“Fox faced bastard.” Or, Aizawa could stand corrected. Shinsou was still indeed a teenager.

With a yelp, one of the foxes decides the game is no longer fun and darts away, only to be pursued downhill. Aizawa tugs on the strap of his backpack as he continues to lead the trek, noticing that Shinsou’s stare is lingering on him, waiting for some answer to that. “I don’t believe I’ve ever been called that before now. My face isn’t very narrow-”

“I *meant*-” Aizawa hears Shinsou huff, and he can imagine the eyeroll, even if he doesn’t see it. “I *don’t know* why... that’s insulting.”

Aizawa spares a glance over his shoulder, seeing frustration in Shinsou’s scowl. Seeing that the kid was asking an *honest* question in the most convoluted way possible, in a way that was easy to misinterpret. And Shinsou probably knew that.

Shinsou continuing to avoid asking questions to this degree, especially with that pause, was evidence to an assumption that Aizawa already had. Shinsou couldn’t control his quirk.

“In old legends, fox spirits are tricksters, beings that you can’t trust,” Aizawa explains. “Someone with narrow eyes or a sharp face who seems to be deceptive would be referred to as a ‘fox faced bastard.’”

Shinsou says nothing to that, simply following Aizawa through the snow. Aizawa keeps an eye out for a roosting owl in the tree branches, as much as he’s looking for those twigs and split bark that are signs of danger. “Like *logical* deceptions.”

It’s not a question, and one that Shinsou answers for himself.

“Delete Faced bastard,” Shinsou mutters under his breath, and Aizawa is beginning to wonder why the silence of wilderness isn’t exactly *silent*.

Just in time to see that first marker for the range of traps. A Y-shaped stick jutted out of the snow, beneath a bear trap that would be rusted and more dangerous as a result. Half-hacked limbs would mark the spiked pits, three deep gouges in the trunk of a tree for leg snares. *Perfect* for guiding a ward who was already distressed enough to talk so much.

Aizawa stops and shrugs off the backpack, listening for another irritated huff. He knows there’s no remedy for this situation - absolutely *everything* that could set off his ward has happened in quick succession in the past 24 hours. He was attacked and nearly killed, nearly taken back to his previous captors on UA’s campus which was meant to be his safe haven. He had that mask forced on him again. He’s been uprooted with little warning from familiar surroundings, his possessions have been taken. He’s been separated from Eri and Hizashi, and forced into close quarters with Aizawa.

But Shinsou has usually broken his silence in moments of severe distress, and these biting comments are a sign that if Aizawa doesn't put him *slightly* at ease, he could bolt and trigger a trap. And Aizawa can think of few worse outcomes. "I'm aware that you're not happy about this situation. It's completely understandable," Aizawa says, looking at Shinsou's stiff posture, how his gaze is focused on the backpack on the ground instead of attempting to meet his eyes. "But this is temporary. Once we get to the safe house, you'll be able to talk to Eri through the radio. Before we get there, we have to get through the defensive measures, and you'll need a clear mind to do that."

"Perfectly clear," Shinsou says, his eyes cutting across the snow in front of them, as though he's trying to see those 'defensive measures,' and doesn't see them at all. "So we can keep going."

When Aizawa doesn't move, he gets an eye roll that Shinsou's head tips to the side with.

"If you're angry about the Delete Face-"

"I'm not," Aizawa says, still unsure how to say it when Shinsou didn't seem to want to recognize it himself. "You're on edge, and if you panic, you will get hurt. So we're going to stop here until you're ready to move forward."

"I'm ready," Shinsou says, further proving that he's not.

"Hizashi has noticed that you talk when you're on edge," Aizawa says, forced to say it. Forced to recognize what a saving grace that could have been if Shinsou were alone when he was attacked, that he had some way of defending himself with his quirk if nothing else. If only he could have used that to his benefit instead of making the situation more dire for himself by forcing Mirio to leave.

Shinsou tucks his hands into his pockets, staring at the snow around his feet. His shoulders rise, and with an exhale, everything spills out. "I've been able to talk since I got sick. It doesn't mean anything."

Aizawa nearly *swears* the snow beneath his feet turns to ice. "You've been able to talk... for *two weeks*. And you haven't?"

Shinsou digs the toe of his shoe deeper into the snow, a nervous fidget that's too easy to recognize from a child being scolded. Even if that's not entirely Aizawa's intention. Shinsou sighs again, this time turning into a mocking sound. "Yep, and you didn't notice at all. I could have Brainwashed anyone I wanted to while your back was turned. Couldn't do your little 'test' with Now Music if you didn't know."

Beyond Shinsou *pretending* to be mute when he wasn't, for an extended amount of time like that, and insinuating that he had ulterior motives to do so, Aizawa doubts that he did. He imagines that Shinsou hadn't used his quirk during that time, or else he would have seen some sign that it had put Shinsou on edge, after discovering how it had changed. "That 'test' is a requirement for your wardship with Hizashi. The Commission of Wardship Affairs needs proof that you can't use your quirk on him."

Instead of just digging into the snow, Shinsou kicks at it, turning his head up to look at the sky. "Great. So after this 'temporary measure,' you're going to make me use my quirk on him." Shinsou's head tips down lazily, a half-lidded stare becoming one of the better visages of sullen disappointment that Aizawa is quickly becoming adjusted to. "Only, it's not my quirk anymore. Whatever I ask, he'll answer, and I can make him say something *really* fucked up just to be the cherry on top of getting kicked out-"

“*Then*, I suggest asking him something that *isn't* ‘fucked up,’” Aizawa says, and knows that Shinsou’s quirk mutating like this complicates the matter *completely*.

It wasn’t something Aizawa considered often, but The Commission would have had no way of knowing whether Shinsou’s quirk was ineffective with Hizashi or not if Shinsou only *pretended* to try to use it. In the few instances where Shinsou did use his quirk, it was difficult to say if each time he was able to consciously control it, or if he simply allowed his quirk to take hold once he asked a question.

They would have tested it before The Commission sent a representative to witness it, and Aizawa had considered making sure that test would pass. If Shinsou had forgotten how to control his quirk, or never had that level of control in the first place, Aizawa could make sure that Shinsou would have a choice when he would demonstrate for The Commission. A choice that Aizawa was willing to trust with Shinsou, even if it was dishonest.

A choice that would be harder to give, now that Confession *could* take that away from Shinsou.

Only practice and training would tell, and Aizawa now needed Shinsou to do that. “We’ve gone to great lengths to hide all of this from The Commission. That gives us time to know what we’re working with, how your quirk has changed.”

Aizawa shifts so that he’s fully facing Shinsou. So that he’s an easy target for his own quirk.

“Ask me a question-”

“*No*,” Shinsou nearly shouts, his voice almost breaking like a much younger adolescent. “*Hell* no, you can’t make me do that.”

Great, if Shinsou wasn’t distressed before this, he *definitely* was now. “If you can’t control your quirk, you need to learn how-”

“It’s not *mine*,” Shinsou argues, seething and glaring down Aizawa with a hand raised up, unconsciously signing ‘Stop’ when he turns to look back down the trail, and Aizawa accepts that this isn’t the time or place. The revelation is too new, and Shinsou isn’t ready to accept it. Even if he will need to do so in time.

“Fine,” Aizawa says, and hopes it is. He’s supposed to report incidents like these, and he never has. He should have filed a report when Shinsou took control of Midoriya the night he tried to escape, and Principal Nezu should have filed a similar one. Neither of them did, but any of the members on staff could report to The Commission of Wardship Affairs.

Any leak could put Shinsou’s wardship in jeopardy, and possibly his life now that his quirk has mutated in a way that the Hero Commission would be *very* interested in examining.

Aizawa turns to face the trail ahead, but sees a squirrel dart in front of the trap marker. There’s only a split second where he knows what happens next, what he’s seen often enough, but he barely hears the metallic creak before the squirrel jumps away, and the trap triggers with a snap that nearly catches the animal, but doesn’t.

But it caught his ward off guard. “*Wha-t* are you willing to do to keep me safe?”

Aizawa can’t even turn around to face his ward, already paralyzed as his throat forces the words out of his mouth. “Break the law, risk my hero license, see my grandfather for the first time in nine years. Anything to keep you safe, and keep The Commission from taking you out of Hizashi’s custody.”

Aizawa expects the paralysis this time, the static that fills his head and makes it difficult to think. It's difficult to even feel connected to his body at this point, now that he's lost control of it. He fights against the urge to fight against it, because he knows it's useless. He has to wait until Shinsou releases his quirk's hold or breaks it, and he tries to hold on to the thought that he needs to watch the traps ahead, that somehow watching if Shinsou presses forward will stop him from getting hurt from those traps he's barely aware of.

Instead, he hears Shinsou pacing behind him, the crunch of snow marking his footsteps. Instead of worrying that Shinsou will walk ahead, he's worried with each footstep that seems to walk away that Shinsou will attempt to flee from this. He could get lost in the woods, and Aizawa has no idea if this control will break in time to keep Shinsou from freezing to death. Or himself from meeting that fate.

He hears Shinsou approach, then hears the rustle of fabric, a sharper noise of nylon. He hears the fabric being flared out, hitting the snow, and realizes that Shinsou has taken out his *sleeping bag*.

He hears a grunt, then two crunches on the snow. He wonders if Shinsou is attempting the barest means of being considerate by taking off his shoes before zipping himself inside the sleeping bag. In the silence that follows, there's the barest sigh, and Shinsou must have been feeling cold for a while on this long trek.

Aizawa is also cold. *And he'd like to get to his grandfather's house to remedy that.*

Time drags on, and Aizawa realizes the distinct possibility that Shinsou is planning to fall asleep out here, leaving Aizawa to develop frostbite that *might* eventually break his quirk's hold. He doesn't know what he'll do at that point, but there's certainly a temptation to trap Shinsou in that sleeping bag, carry him to the shack, and keep him trapped there for the entire weekend in hopes that it will make any part of this venture easier.

Eventually, he hears another sigh. "Great." Whatever Shinsou mockingly calls 'great' about this, Aizawa *agrees* wholeheartedly. "By the way, I'm not enjoying this."

He hears the zipper, and only has a moment to wonder how Shinsou is going to break the control given that it seems he can't do it himself, before there's something cold and hard smacking into the back of his head.

Aizawa turns to look at one of Shinsou's shoes resting on the snow behind him, before he hears the zipper again and sees his ward attempting to *roll* himself down the trail in the saddest escape attempt Aizawa has ever seen.

Aizawa sighs, picks up the shoe, and throws his capture scarf to wrap around Shinsou to stop him. Once the scarf goes taut, he hears a grunt and sees Shinsou bend around it, the end of the sleeping bag kicking back and forth. Aizawa walks forward and picks up the other shoe, tying the laces around the straps of his backpack before he shoulders it on. Then starts to reel in his 'catch.'

He purposefully made sure to place the capture scarf in a way that even if Shinsou tried to unzip himself and escape, he wouldn't have enough room to shimmy out of it. He looks at his ward long enough to confirm that's the case, unfortunately catching another look of sullen defeat on Shinsou's face, before he bends and hefts the kid up to be braced on the back of his shoulder, holding onto the bottom of the opening of the sleeping bag where the zipper rests.

Shinsou drops until his feet reach the bottom of the sleeping bag, and Aizawa glances back to confirm that only the black knit hat and a few wisps of purple hair were visible now. He imagines there's quite a glare behind that growl. "Let me out."

“You seem cold,” Aizawa says plainly, kicking the trap out of the way as he spots a leg snare up ahead, far to his left. Even with the added weight, this will probably make for a quicker journey.

Even if it won’t be as silent.

Shinsou huffs and kicks, likely trying to find the ground. If he notices he could make a nuisance of himself by digging his feet in against the snow, he at least doesn’t use it immediately.

“You never wear gloves.”

The padded black gloves that were far more sensible for this hike, that Shinsou probably noticed now that one was keeping him trapped in the sleeping bag, was an odd thing to comment on. Until Aizawa realized it was a question. “Not when I’m around Eri.”

It was an easier thing to avoid when the temperature was milder, October’s chill being pleasant. But Aizawa had made up his mind in October, when that fear and trepidation was still so present in Eri at times, when he was making every effort to reassure her that he was *nothing* like Chisaki. Even when the temperature started dropping in November, despite all of the changes that have happened since December began, he had made up his mind. It might be illogical, but he wouldn’t risk it. “Because she always holds your hand when you don’t.”

Aizawa fights a grin, because that might have something to do with it. And that grin is an easy thing to fight when he sees what’s in front of him, crouched knee-deep in the snow with a crossbow that should honestly be too heavy for the old man to hold. And it seemed to be by the way his arms and the weapon were shaking.

“Took too damn long, thought I’d find you in one of those traps! City boy like you probably got lost out here,” Aizawa’s grandfather grumbles, still holding the crossbow like he’s ready to use it. Aizawa would *rather* he didn’t. “Where’s that ward business you were talking about?”

Aizawa lifts the sleeping bag up a bit in answer, and he can feel Shinsou grabbing at the lining to pull himself out to look. He can hear the tearing inside, and he has to remind himself he has another sleeping bag at home. “Thanks for having us.”

Aizawa Shoga scoffs, letting the crossbow drop to face the snow. Reminding Aizawa that such pleasantries aren’t a part of how he was raised. “Sure as shit is short notice.”

Short notice, and a long, uncomfortable stay awaits them.

Three Generations Under One Roof

Chapter Summary

Aizawa will be living with his grandfather for the first time since he was 14, after nine years of no contact after Aizawa Shoga disapproved so violently over Aizawa and Hizashi's engagement. While his most pressing issue is Shinsou's safety and peace of mind, new developments quickly arise to put Aizawa's own mental health in peril.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Bug mention

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa used to live with his grandfather for extended periods of time when he was a child, as his mother was paranoid that Aizawa would use his quirk on her and temporarily blind her. In the previous chapter, Shinsou attempted to escape by getting inside Aizawa's sleeping bag and rolling down the trail, and Aizawa stopped him from escaping or getting out of the sleeping bag by carrying him within it. Eri's sixth birthday is coming soon. Shinsou has started calling Chisaki 'Overhaul' recently, since he was attacked at UA. Shinsou was attacked on Friday the 13th. As Aizawa and Shinsou's phones were left at UA, since they could be hacked and compromised, the only means of communication they have are through Shoga's HAM radio. Shinsou and Eri have made a habit of telling each other that they love each other, but Aizawa hasn't told either that he loves them, even when Eri tells him that she does. Eri's horn is growing, and in the event that she does have her quirk build up and release, Aizawa will have to be there in case she can't control it. Eri saw Mirio and Tamaki sharing their first kiss in the last chapter. After the attack at UA, Aizawa told Shinsou that Shinsou had 'told him nothing, and that will change.' Shinsou does not know what a Nomu is beyond how he qualifies as one, since his quirk has mutated with Confession, and he knows that he will have to use his quirk on Yamada because he's Yamada's ward, and Yamada was assigned to be his hero because Yamada's deafness might mean that he's immune to Shinsou's quirk. Shinsou picks mock hero names to mock people, such as 'Delete Face,' which is a name that does have merchandise for Eraserhead. Aizawa told Shinsou that the serow they saw on the hike looked like his grandfather. 127 threatened to kill Eri before he was taken down at UA. Shinsou has only requested one song from Yamada's radio show, and it was a song from the album that Jirou's family made, that Yamada trashed on his show and caused Jirou to hate him. Yamada will be watching Class 1-A at their dorm this weekend to cover for Aizawa's dorm shifts.

Aizawa Shoga and the American Unabomber have a great deal in common with each other, but Aizawa has always been a bit bitter about the fact that the Unabomber lived in a much better cabin.

Aizawa Shoga's current residence cannot be referred to as a 'cabin,' and a 'shack' can be a bit too kind. Aizawa hadn't been born yet when his grandfather decided to cash in his pension earned

from being a factory foreman and retreat into the mountains, but he imagines that Aizawa Shoga showed up with various pieces of lumber barely meant for his intentions and set out to make it work.

There are planks that clearly need to be replaced, the spacing between rotted wear and serviceable lumber is evidence that the shack has been rebuilt in piecemeal for decades. The spaces between the boards shows the blue tarp that lines the walls in the winter to trap in the heat from the wood furnace inside, tarp that is removed in mild springs and autumns, but might be put back up in summer to defend against an invasion of bugs. If the old man feels up to it.

Aizawa gives a withering glance to the outhouse, before he forces himself to check the stability of the roof. The old sheets of tin metal that were barely weighted down by rocks seem to be replaced with corrugated steel sheets, and angled upwards to a point. It actually looks like a roof, which is surprising.

“Y’done gawking?” Shoga asks, a twitch of his head that’s neither a shake or a nod but entirely dismissive. He shoulders open the door of the shack, an *actual* door that he picked up somewhere, long ago. Aizawa used to be oddly proud that he had that door when he was a child, even if there was nothing to catch on the bolt or latch. Shoga invites them inside with a rough jerk of the crossbow in his hand, and Aizawa doesn’t even consider the usual pleasantries on his entrance. Attempting to shake off the snow from his boots is considerate enough.

But he still finds himself staring at a *mat* on the floor, in the doorway. Rough brown bristles barely worn, perfect for cleaning off the bottom of a shoe. Certainly *new*, and certainly not something that his grandfather should have. It had to have come from a store, and everything that requires a brief visit to civilization was brought up to this mountain *decades* ago.

Shoga grunts, and Aizawa forces himself to step inside, taking some comfort in how little else has changed. The same tarps lining the walls, still creased from where they’re folded up for months on end, weighted down with stones lining the bottom and rusted nails next to the ceiling where they’re hooked. The black wood furnace with its smoke stack too short to reach the ceiling, a dryer foil taped to the top of it and angled into a hole in the tarp instead keeps the room from filling with smoke. It causes too much wear on the wood outside, and those foils are burned through more often because of the angle, but that’s an argument Aizawa has never won.

Wooden crates are stacked and scattered along the walls, collecting various pieces of junk that might serve a purpose one day, or multiple purposes they’re barely useful for. The same worn table is in the center of the room, the HAM radio rests on another in the corner, on top of a compact generator that rests on the floor. His grandfather at least spent enough money to have a reliable solar-powered source of electricity before he swore off all other forms of technology, and even if he could replace the wood stove as a heat source for an electric heater, he hasn’t. But what looks like an electric blanket is folded up beside the generator, something that’s definitely *new*.

There’s some wear in the floorboards as well, and the tarp that sections off Aizawa’s old room is tattered and shredded. Some of those tears look intentional, and that makes Aizawa realize that he shouldn’t be looking for projects to help improve his grandfather’s living situation. The old man chose this life, and he doesn’t appreciate any threat to his supposed self-sufficiency.

And an attempt at a proper greeting might be in order, now that Shinsou is kicking in the sleeping bag, trying to get loose.

Aizawa sets him down to stand on the floor and starts shrugging off his backpack, hoping that it won’t take too long for him to be able to feel the warmth of the stove when he starts peeling off layers of his winter wear. “This is Shinsou Hitoshi. This is my grandfather, Aizawa Shoga.”

Aizawa Shoga takes a moment to glance at Shinsou, before making his way to the ‘kitchen’ surrounding the stove. There’s no meat on the hooks meant to preserve it outside, but a lot more MREs stacked in the corner than usual. Aizawa Shoga picks up a pot from the assorted kitchenware lying on the floor, and Aizawa can’t stop wondering why so much of it looks *new*.

“Don’t make trouble here,” his grandfather commands gruffly, his usual greeting. As much as the smell of that wood smoke and those words are nostalgic, the changes here are unnerving. His grandfather especially has always been old, always been a bit short, but his long white beard and hair looks more sparse. His face bears more wrinkles, seems thinner. *Everything* about him seems thinner and weak, especially the shake in his hands that used to be the very image of strength that Aizawa grew up with.

Shinsou stares at his new surroundings and a great deal at Shoga, who seems to be playing quite a gracious host when he dips the pot into the nearby water barrel to presumably start making lunch. A boiled MRE, but Aizawa isn’t sure if he won’t find the taste nostalgic. “A heavy debt, old man.”

Shoga stops before he sets the pot on top of the furnace, a hesitation that doesn’t make sense, and neither does Shinsou’s words, until Aizawa realizes there’s a very noticeable difference in Aizawa Shoga’s right hand compared to most people’s. And it’s something that Shinsou’s previous circumstances would lead him to assume certain things. “It was a factory accident-”

“*Who the hell did you bring here?*” Aizawa’s grandfather demands, his voice deeper and more threatening than it should be at his advanced age. The crossbow he had politely placed against the wall is picked up with his three fingered right hand, aimed with his left at Aizawa’s ward, and balanced with some difficulty due to those two fingers that have always been missing at the last knuckle, for Aizawa’s entire childhood.

Aizawa didn’t want to explain the specifics of Shinsou’s circumstances, not his history. But his grandfather is staring down his ward while wielding a weapon, and the old man’s previous claims that he found the company of criminals better because they were ‘more predictable’ seems to have been a bit of bravado on the old man’s part. “Shinsou is familiar with the yakuza, but-”

“No *shit*, who the hell do you work for?” Shoga demands, the crossbow shaking so much that if he did pull the trigger, it would be unlikely to hit Shinsou at all. “Marutomi-rengo? Kochiya-Kai?”

“Shie Hassaikai,” Shinsou says coolly, sounds too much unlike himself with that confidence. Too much like someone who believes that. “You’ve been away for a long time, Elder. Those families are long gone.”

“Shie Hassaikai,” Shoga repeats, leaning the crossbow against his shoulder so he can use his left hand to set it back down. “Never had trouble with them, and they wouldn’t send a snot nosed kid like you out here for underhanded vengeance. Too honorable.”

“Been out for a *long* time,” Shinsou mutters, staring at the singular piece of decor that has always hung up on a tarp or on the wooden walls. A framed painting of the god of war, Hachiman, in a traditional inked style where the armor-clad man rides a white horse forward, wreathed in flame with a completely blank expression. It was just an oddity, maybe the old man trying to repay the Shinto monastery based further down the mountain that was willing to provide food for him as a way of giving charity.

Something that couldn’t have been a sign of *this*. “The... machine accident... cut off your fingers.”

Shoga huffs, shaking his head, but pointedly doesn’t look at Aizawa before he returns to watching the pot boil. “Too old to believe in stories like that, Shouta. Bet you still believe I got bitten by a

cricket on my elbow too.”

Aizawa had long since sorted out that it was an odd lie to cover up the fact that his grandfather had surgery there, the stitches healing into a long scar with smaller tracks crossing over it. But his grandfather, the man that practically raised him, that was far more involved with his upbringing than his mother was, was saying.... That he was a *yakuza*.

“I paid my debt, and I got out. I don’t want to hear anything about that, no *Elder* business,” Shoga growls, his long white eyebrows drawing closer to his eyes when he stares down Aizawa’s ward to make his words have more meaning than were spoken. “A ‘ward’ ‘sposed to be away from that junk anyway. So I’ve heard.”

Aizawa doesn’t know who he’s heard it from, as he doesn’t think he said that when he called last night. But he sees his ward walk over to the low table to sit, pulling off his knitted black hat to place it on top. “Shie Hassaikai is basically extinct, but I never paid back my debt properly as severance. The current head still owns my allegiance, freely given.”

Eri was *not* the current head of a *mafia*, despite Shinsou’s words and Hizashi’s teasing. “You’re not *bound* to a five year old-”

“Almost six,” Shinsou argues, his eyes a little wider than usual, his eyebrows drawn up. Not entirely surprise, but he seemed oddly *pleased* with this turn of events. “I don’t think you know how it works, but I took sakazuki from Overhaul. I’m bound to the head of Shie Hassaikai until death or severance of that, and since Overhaul didn’t release me before he died, I would have to broker that with Eri.” Shinsou pulls off one of his gloves, flaring his fingers out as though to show them off to Aizawa. “And I don’t want her to cut off any of my fingers.”

Then he *was* showing them off. And Aizawa had a lot to think about with that. With everything that just happened.

“Six year old head, and an *active* gangster you brought to my doorstep,” Shoga says with a nod, before he bends and reaches for a *very* familiar bottle. “Suppose you don’t want this tea, then-”

“Shinsou is *not* active, he’s *16*, and you’re not going to give him that,” Aizawa says, because the last thing he needs is to keep his ward from underage drinking. “And you *have* tea?”

Aizawa Shoga has only drank two liquids as far as Aizawa knows - sake, and water. Sake far more than water, *far* more, and *tea* made as much sense as the floor mat. “I have *tea*, it’s cold as shit outside, and if you want any you’ll sit down and shut up about it.”

Shinsou’s eyebrows raise a little higher, he seems entirely too amused about the prospect of Aizawa obeying his grandfather’s command, and Aizawa wants *none* of this. “Where’s the shovel?” His grandfather turns to stare, his usual method of asking for clarification. “The outhouse.” Aizawa’s usual method of clarifying, using as few words as needed.

Shoga raises a hand up just to drop it. “Forget that, it’s... dumb kid did it. Stupid thing won’t leave me alone. Now sit down, you’re wearing through that spot.”

Aizawa moves to sit down, those familiar words worrying about the state of those wooden boards still ringing in a body that’s far outgrown that kind of obedience. Shinsou seems *entirely* too amused by this, and Aizawa is unfortunately going to bear the full force of that twitching smirk when he sits in front of him, so that he’s between his grandfather and his ward. And the closest to the crossbow.

And now that Aizawa is sitting down, he can't look away from the floor mat. "This 'kid' fixed the roof for you?"

He hears his grandfather huff and grumble. "Wasn't broke in the first place." Aizawa's distinct memories of having to dump buckets full of water into the well behind the shack during summer storms begged to differ. "Already ate, so fend for yourself."

Aizawa doesn't feel hungry yet after eating Hizashi's packed lunch, and Shinsou still has most of his portion still packed in his backpack. But given that Shinsou's curiosity was a much easier thing to stomach than this too pleased *smirk*, and he should be introduced to the meals he'll be getting starting tonight, Aizawa reaches behind himself to pull out one of the MREs.

The same silver-metallic plastic surrounds the 'meal,' but the font on the label has changed. And with a slow blink, Aizawa realizes that this is quite an upgrade from his grandfather's usual fare. "The 'kid' buys your-"

"*Shut up* about the *kid*," Shoga grouses, and Aizawa will let the old man have his secrets. They seem to be good for him, from the roof to the barest pieces of civilized life leaking through into this shack. He doubts his grandfather will ever abandon this way of life, he'd rather die out here than do something sensible like moving down the mountain so he can get adequate food or medical care for his advanced age. Or even take down his hazardous traps.

But whoever that kid is, Aizawa is grateful for them. Aizawa wants better for his grandfather, and possibly better than he deserves. Better than Aizawa is honestly willing to give him.

Aizawa puts the MRE on the table, and notices that Shinsou stares with an eyebrow raised. He seems oddly expressive now, to go along with his sudden revelation that he's not mute and hasn't been in *weeks*. "Type 1, Number 13. Chicken and two sides of rice. Always make sure to chew the gum that comes with it."

As curious as Shinsou seems with his eyes locked on the plastic package, turning it over in his hands, Aizawa is glad he doesn't try to ask about the gum. He doesn't want to explain it. "Hm. Never really had a 13. Un...lucky."

The pause is unnatural, and the attempt at such a joke is something that Aizawa hopes doesn't become a habit. But when Shinsou glances down, his fingers gripping the plastic too hard, Aizawa remembers what day it is. What day it was, when he was worried about an omen that came true in the worst way, the way he least expected.

"All of these are very unlucky," Aizawa says, trying to make a joke of his own. Trying to break his ward out of whatever thought or memory that was trying to take hold of him, and he succeeds even if Shinsou's head snaps up to look at him with too-wide eyes. "Especially the Sardine plate. Type 2, Number 1. I still can't eat that fish-"

"Ya wanna *complain* the whole time about how *awful* it was that I fed your sorry ass?" Shoga snaps, picking the pot up just to drop it. At least not throwing it, yet, but Aizawa doubts the old man has the strength to. "Stop being ashamed of where you come from. I heard fish oil is good for some stuff. You're *welcome*."

And those sardines were certainly *oily*.

Shinsou hums, still looking at the package, but with a more sedated interest. It's really not that interesting in the first place. "There's a Number 10."

A sudden interest in ‘numbers’ bodes as well as this habit of referring to Chisaki as ‘Overhaul,’ or how easily Shinsou had slipped into some role of being a willing member of a mafia. But Aizawa has heard enough about ‘Ten’ the healer to justify answering that question. “Two types, duck stew or stamina bowl. The stamina bowl is one of the better rice meals, and both come with two sides of rice. Neither are bad options.”

Shinsou nods, seeming somehow pleased with that. He flips the seam on the back of the foil and finds the directions on these newer and improved rations, eyes just a bit wider in the same sad curiosity. “ ‘Snap along seam and allow 15 minutes to cook.’ “

“Only tried it once. Might be better than boiling,” Aizawa says, still not sure what he was trying to find when he *willingly* picked up that ration nearly a decade ago. Whether it was a slight difference or just that his tastebuds had become adjusted to better food, it wasn’t what he was looking for in that moment. He threw the meal away, but developed an affinity for the jelly pouches that were on sale next to it.

“Cool,” Shinsou mutters, but seems embarrassed afterwards by that near-compliment, placing the package back down. He only glances at the radio, but that seems to bring it to life, two clicks coming from the speakers to indicate that someone was trying to make contact, but unwilling to give their name.

With two possibilities, Aizawa found himself hoping that it was Eri, even if he knows that his husband will also try to use this as a means of communication. He just doesn’t want to get into that with his grandfather in the room.

“Been doing that for hours. You give someone my frequency?” Shoga asks, but Shinsou seems to piece out what that means without explanation, rising to dart across the room, still staring at the knobs and buttons when Aizawa crouches down beside him.

“Aizawa and Shinsou,” Aizawa answers, holding the button down for the receiver, and holding his breath hoping for one of two voices that he wants to answer.

“*Eri!*” Eri answers, seeming to think that this was part of a fun game where she needed to introduce herself with her name. Aizawa can hear distant giggles through the static, what must be Ms. Joke’s amusement. “*Are you guys okay?*”

“Yeah,” Shinsou answers, forced to when Aizawa angles the receiver towards him, to give Eri the reassuring sign of life. “You’re okay.”

“*Okay and having fun!*” Mirio answers, laughing at perhaps some shyness on Eri’s part from the other end of the frequency. “*We made sure to eat breakfast and lunch, and we’ll be having a blast down here with all the snow and new people to meet.*”

Aizawa isn’t entirely surprised that Shinsou backs away once he hears Mirio’s voice, but he doesn’t retreat entirely from hearing Eri’s voice. “I’m sure that Ms. Joke will be a good host, but let us know if there’s any trouble.”

“*Roger!*” Mirio says, and Eri repeats after a brief pause. There’s another pause, where Aizawa imagines that Eri has found little else to say, now that her worries about them have been satisfied. He imagines he won’t get one of her full ‘reports’ until this weekend draws to an end, and they can be reunited properly.

“*I love you,*” Eri says, a little shyly it sounds. As much as her initial amazement had to excite her about this radio system, it seems to be waning, and Aizawa has no doubt that she’s not entirely

herself with all that has happened in the last 24 hours.

“I love you too,” Shinsou says, after taking the receiver from Aizawa’s hand. Aizawa holds his hand out to take it back, and though he hesitates, he already knows what he needs to say.

“If anything happens, I’ll be there. We’ll be able to answer at any time,” Aizawa says, and he hopes that it won’t come to that. Eri had to be moved on this venture just in case of emergency, and as much as he wishes she could be closer, his trek down the mountainside would have to be a fast one if worse came to worse.

“*Okay! We’re gonna have a big snowball fight, and Mirio said we’re gonna win! So it’s okay if you can’t help,*” Eri says, and he recognizes with a pang in his chest that she’s still confused about this. “*And Emi says she loves you and wants to marry you. Oh, and Mirio-*”

“*Oh, yep! We’re gonna have a lot of fun, but we’ll call if there’s any problems! Stay safe!*” Mirio says, a quick dismissal. An *odd* dismissal, but Aizawa tries to reason with himself that it’s not worth checking out in person. He certainly can’t leave Shinsou and his grandfather alone for anything less than the most dire situation.

“Hmph, some ‘Emi’ girl,” his grandfather grunts, ‘pouring’ tea by way of dipping the cups right into the pot on the stove. And Aizawa would rather avoid any part of that, at *any* cost.

“Eri,” Shinsou corrects, and Aizawa breathes easier with that misunderstanding he can use as a shield. Shinsou leans back on his hands braced behind him, probably wondering exactly what Aizawa Shoga was doing as he stared. “The head of Shie Hassaikai. Though you’ve forsaken the way, should she ever ask it of you-”

“I’ll give. Just to shut you up about it,” Shoga grouses, before he bends with a sigh again and tries to find that sake bottle. “Make it official and everything-”

“*You will not,*” Aizawa interrupts sternly, resisting the urge to fall on his back and ignore this was *apparently* going to be a habit. His grandfather trying to find some flimsy excuse to drink by way of his ward, who was trying to impress his grandfather by acting like a gangster.

Of all the things he expected to have to deal with on this trip, *none of this* was part of it.

*

27 waited, and it seemed like Aizawa was waiting too. Despite the cramped quarters, the *nothing* to do other than counting the stones lining the walls, 27 had no reason to want to venture outside into the cold unless it was necessary. After that hike, he’d had more than enough of it.

27 laid on the floor in front of the radio, counting how many times the little red line would pass ‘100’ on the dial that went up to 1000, monitoring some part of this device. Eri called, just to make sure that they had arrived, that they were fine.

Yamada said he was going to call too. Every night.

Aizawa and the old man sit at the same table, drinking that same tasteless, bitter tea. Aizawa is back to his usual habit of melting into the floor whenever he’s allowed to sit still long enough. The old man just grunts every so often, then takes a drink. It’s the most awkward conversation 27 has ever had to witness.

Counting. Waiting. A singular room he can’t escape, and despite the company, he doesn’t find it different enough in that regard. He feels the blood boiling and itching under his skin, almost

waiting for Bug to grab him and drag him out for training.

“I’m getting tired of waiting,” 27 says, his words far too loud in this silence. He sees the old man look over, a dark scowl like he’s insulted. Aizawa just looks like he’s barely awake, and he’s not at all interested in what 27 has to say. Only how to make him shut up. ‘*M-I-A-S-M-A. Told nothing. Will change.*’

Aizawa looked so serious when he said that, *furious* like 27 had never imagined he could be. And yet, the bastard wanted to ignore him after dumping him out into the wilderness. Even a few rounds of torture for information extraction might be a good distraction from this waiting game.

27 stares at the ceiling, instead of the radio dial. He’s not waiting for anything in particular, when he has *no idea* what will happen to him next. Just vague things, vague threats. He’s a Nomu now, and that means something. Something that Aizawa hates. Aizawa said this will only last a few days, to keep him *safe*, and then he’ll be forced to use his quirk on *Yamada* and 27 can only *imagine* how badly that will go. Every question he asks warps into what he doesn’t want to know, the answers that *no one* wants to know. And now he can’t even break the control himself, like a *child*. He can’t even remember when he was that ill-trained.

“We’ll check the traps,” Aizawa mutters, his voice gravely from being woken up. He’s a horrible interrogator, and 27 is almost insulted by his lack of professionalism. Aizawa shrugs his jacket and gloves back on, which presumably means that 27 should get off the floor and get dressed too.

He’d rather just lay on the floor, let the wood dig deeper into the back of his skull. He’d at least feel closer to warm if not quite, and he could ignore how heavy his body is.

But 27 pulls himself up, because he won’t miss anything from that silent radio, and pulls on the jacket, hat, and gloves before he shoves his feet into his shoes. The top part of the shoe wrinkles and digs into the top of his foot, but he can’t bring himself to do anything about that mild discomfort.

After Aizawa opens the door and walks out, 27 follows and feels the cold air slapping him in the face like it missed him. The snow falls in thicker clumps, and 27 can’t imagine any that he would catch would be like those snowflakes that Eri likes to draw now.

The sun is setting, an orange hue falling over the ground, and 27 can’t help but remember how the sunset looked yesterday. How it seemed to match with the dress on Eri’s Sailor Moon doll that she was playing with, while she waved the doll around to turn snow villains into snow bunnies, while Kota’s Deku doll would just smash them.

Maybe it wasn’t worth the effort of sculpting them into bunnies. Maybe they just should have been smashed.

Aizawa just keeps walking, like there’s actually some purpose or patrol they’re supposed to do. 27 would rather be done with this farce, just tell Aizawa the complete *nothing* that he knows so he can get the shovel out and bury him already. The old man might be crazy enough to forget he was ever there to begin with.

“Delete Face-”

“There’s a place further ahead,” Aizawa says, and 27 imagines it’s a place comfortable to sleep in with all of Aizawa’s energetic spirit on display. His shoulders are slumped forward like always, and 27 follows him, watching the snowflakes gather on his long dark hair. It looks like dandruff. “You could stand to be a bit more creative.”

That's only a challenge, and 27 fights not to take it as an insult to his pride. "Eradicate Brain. Destroy Skull."

"Hm, I would have liked that one," Aizawa says, taking this far too lightly. Like 27 is just a kitten nipping at his fingers, amusing because it's not hurtful. *Yet*. "Hizashi picked-

"I heard. You were *so* invested in being a hero that you couldn't be bothered to pick your own hero name," 27 says, because he can imagine it. Aizawa probably spent all his time in school like he does now - sleeping, and doing the bare minimum when it's forced out of him. "Must be nice to do that."

Some kind of hellish *bellow* seems to want to punish him for that statement, 27 flinches and finds himself hunched over, as though he were waiting for some kind of Bull quirk to rush him from the woods. Instead he sees something worse, Aizawa turned to look at him over his shoulder, his face blank as usual except for a raise in his eyebrow that seems too amused. "A serow. That's what it sounds like."

And it sounds *nothing* like Aizawa's grandfather, just like it doesn't look like him. Aizawa looked a great deal like him though. If Aizawa were starved until he shrank inside his skin, and Yamada never forced him to shave or trim his hair, he'd look *a lot* like his grandfather.

27 has no idea what his own grandparents look like. Maybe he looks even more like his grandfather than he does his mother. Maybe he should be able to picture what his grandparents look like, now that he's seen a picture of his father and has a fresher memory of his mother's appearance.

But when he thinks of what they should look like, all he can see is 10. And as much as he hated even thinking about 127 succeeding in bringing him back to The Miasma, he would at least know if 10 is still alive or not. People can only live so long, older people are closer to a more 'peaceful' death.

If 10 is dead, 27 hopes it was peaceful. He hopes that just once, the old man found peace.

Aizawa stops, and 27 doesn't know what sets this place apart from any other. There's a tree that stands apart from the treeline, some snow covered bits of wood around it. There's an outcropping of rocks, boulders stacked like a primitive entrance with smaller rocks that seem to be purposefully stacked on top of it.

Aizawa makes his way to the rocks, and 27 can see there's a small cave dug out from it. It doesn't look natural, and he realizes it isn't when he can see faded etchings scratched white into the surface of one of the boulders that supports the side. Aizawa sits down in front of that one, as though to hide it, and an argument to take some shelter from the snow is only loud inside 27's head.

He sits, but not that close. He sits in front of the opposite boulder, enough that there's barely relief from the snowfall, but he doesn't want to be that *close* to add discomfort on top of what Aizawa wants to talk about. He'd rather find some place where neither of them see each other, he doesn't feel Aizawa's stare and he doesn't have to see any way that his face changes.

"How many Numbers are there?" Aizawa asks, and 27 finds that he can stare through him. He can look at Aizawa's chest, where his arms are folded, and feel like he's not seeing Aizawa at all.

"Infinite numbers. There's even a negative infinity to show all of them," 27 says, to not answer Aizawa's question even if he asked for that question in the first place. He thought that was interesting when he learned about it, that all positive numbers can be written just by putting down

'0 to infinity.' That all negative numbers are 'negative infinity to 0.'

He wonders if dead Numbers are negative ones.

"It changes," 27 says, even if he feels the air too cold on his throat, as though he would rather sign these things than say them. That's a weakness that Aizawa will spot, become suspicious of. He doesn't know whether he wants this game to end earlier or not. "Maybe 40 at most. 12 at least. People... die a lot."

It's a rule at The Miasma, that Numbers aren't 'people.' When Numbers talk to each other, they're supposed to only call each other by their number. Not 'he,' not 'she.' Boss, Memory, and Bug would say 'it' or 'the asset,' but 50 would never talk that way to him. She would call him 'kiddo,' or 'buddy' when they were alone. 127 would call him 'little brother,' because he was the only Number who could get away with that.

127 had Bug's quirk used on him, on his *face*. Bug would brag that she could kill someone like that, that she *had* and she *would*. And 127 is dead now, but not by 27's hands.

"Is it common for a Number to be trafficked? Or sold?" Aizawa says, like he thinks 27 doesn't know what 'trafficked' means. Like he doesn't know what *exactly* to call what happened to him.

"Never. Until me," 27 says, and he makes a mistake when he thinks about *why*. His wrist burns, the scars beginning there sting. Three sessions with Bug before he was sold, when he must have only been 12 years old. Wear and tear too quick, he just couldn't *learn*. There are so few like him that are taken in young, and they burn out quicker, usually finished off in a training accident so they don't cut into anyone else's job market.

"You might be lucky, then," Aizawa mutters, too quiet for words that ring too *sharp* inside 27's skin. He's *lucky*? He's lucky to have these scars? "We suspect that Miasma may have changed their strategy. That they're working with some of the most dangerous villains on record."

Boss is supposed to be more careful than that, but he only barely considers longevity compared to profit. *Memory* is actually supposed to keep him more careful than that, but she might be dead.

27 has never considered it, but 127 might be the last Number that he knows that was alive until yesterday. It might only be Boss and Bug, and only new faces that 27 never wants to meet. "Have you ever heard the name 'All for One?'"

27 starts to shake his head, but it's a lie. "Chisaki. Not them."

Aizawa must be starting to see it, the fraying in the lies 27 didn't have to say to hide behind. They think he's so *useful* to the investigation, that he's the key to bringing The Miasma down. He tried his best to forget *everything* after he was sold, everything about them, and it's been more than three years since he was truly there. *Everything* might have changed, and he would be completely useless. "I wonder if the old man tore it down."

27 looks up to see Aizawa staring at that tree, and it seems like everything about him is sharper only because 27 hadn't been looking at him properly. His beard is already longer than it should be, a little more like a proper beard rather than sparse bristles. There's an odd look in his eye, even if he isn't properly looking back at 27.

"I built a treehouse out here, when I was younger," Aizawa explains, pointing at the bits of wood that stick out of the snow, that now have an explanation. "My grandfather and I haven't spoken in years due to a... disagreement. About Hizashi."

27 imagines that Yamada's loud rambling voice and his near-constant smiles would probably irritate the old man who seemed to seek misery wherever he could find it, much like Aizawa. It seemed to run in the family, and only makes Aizawa choosing to live with Yamada even more odd.

But Aizawa pulls his legs a bit closer, sitting up straighter, and that discomfort seems to mean it's something else. "About marrying Hizashi, specifically. Against all logic, the old man seems to believe in 'traditional marriage.' He was angry then, and I imagine Hizashi trying to call his frequency won't end well."

"So, he needs to die," 27 says, not entirely aware that the words are slipping out of him. Aizawa turns to look at him almost like he's shocked, and 27 isn't sure how he can explain it. He *knows* Yamada doesn't need to talk to him every day, he knows there's a *slim* possibility that Yamada will talk to him after this 'temporary measure' is done, after he's forced to use his quirk on him.

He just feels like he wouldn't feel so irritated if Yamada would keep his word and call him.

"He's... old. Bothering you," 27 says, weak *weak* lies that he can't even bring himself to say to Aizawa's face. He's staring at the wrecked treehouse instead, and maybe he should try to look angry at it. Angry on Aizawa's behalf.

He's not, because the treehouse looks like it would look stupid if it was properly on the tree. This little 'cave' looks stupid too. Whatever reason he had to drag 27 out to this place was probably stupid too. "I can put up with it. The old man... likely won't be around for much longer, anyway."

Aizawa still sounds uncomfortable with that, like escaping that uncomfortable disagreement isn't enough to outweigh wanting the old man to live. Like there's something about a person that Aizawa clearly doesn't like that makes him still want him to continue on in this life.

27 felt like 127 deserved to die, when he was faced with that choice. Even when that choice was in his own hands. And now, now that he has to sit with the very real possibility that 127 *is* dead, he feels like he doesn't deserve it. Even if that means that 127 might try to kill him again, might succeed, 27 can't bring himself to *want* that.

Unless 127 means his threat against Eri. Then, he definitely needs to die, and he should *hope* Bug does it instead of 27.

"You've never killed anyone?" Aizawa asks, but it barely sounds like a question, and more like a question that 27 used to ask. When that used to work to avoid using his quirk.

"Promised 50 not to," 27 answers, and her name sounds like an admonishment. He *thinks* she would have accepted it. She wouldn't be happy, she wouldn't be *proud*, but she would have just understood. He had to kill 127 to keep everyone safe, including himself, and the weight of that action is nothing compared to what could happen through *inaction*.

He wishes he could just know, that he could just ask. "Have you ever... come close to that?" Aizawa asks, and there's a way his voice changes after the pause, like 'come close' has another word he doesn't want to say.

27 doesn't want to say it either. "With 127. Tried to. Wanted to."

He *wanted* to hurt 127, so much that he felt like nothing would be enough. Every hiss that 27 earned with a blind movement of his blade felt weightless, he felt *angry* that he couldn't see the wound. He wanted to tear 127 apart, and no matter how he fell and no matter what he looked like when he could no longer use his quirk to camouflage himself, 27 wasn't sure if he would ever see

enough blood to *stop*.

He doesn't know what that makes him. A murderer who simply didn't have the strength to commit the act, but a monster all the same, the stain hardly lighter for it. A monster, like a Nomu seems to be.

"That's understandable," Aizawa says, two quiet words that don't make sense, that Aizawa clearly doesn't believe from the way he stares at his own hands, barely folded in front of him. It's still so odd to see him wearing gloves. "To be angry, after being hurt. To want to defend yourself to that degree. To feel it's justified."

"It's not," 27 says, because he knows this itch under his skin that won't freeze, that won't go away, is a punishment for it. He feels like he's still holding that knife, midswing, but he can't finish him off. "Killing someone takes something you can't get back."

Aizawa doesn't answer that, for a bit too long. 27 follows his still hands to his chest to his face, how *tired* Aizawa looks despite something odd in his eyes. Something that looks like a question Hitoshi *doesn't* want to ask. "That kind of situation doesn't follow reason. It's... it can be more overwhelming because of that. Because it's different from how you usually think, or act."

27 looks at the capture scarf, always looped around Aizawa's shoulders. He's held that scarf in his hands, felt the difference where it's fabric and how it's *not*. How sturdy it is, and how not even the most desperate fingers could rip it away from where Aizawa placed it to wrap around someone. Aizawa had it around 127's body, and his neck.

And he could have snapped 127's neck with just a pull.

"You want to know where they are," 27 says, trying to think from Aizawa's perspective. If he were hunting down The Miasma, if he were stupid enough to do that, the most burning question in his mind would be where to find them to face them in person, on their own ground. "I don't know where that is. Not an address or city."

"I expected that," Aizawa says, not the words 27 expected to hear. "Whatever you remember about the surrounding area would be helpful. What kind of building it is." Aizawa is asking questions without asking them, and 27 doesn't want to answer them if they're not asked. "How they do business. If there's a way we can meet them, pretending to be a volunteer or someone seeking to hire them."

"Memory," 27 says, and forces himself to shrug. "Handles that. I don't..." He doesn't know how she does, the singular thing that Aizawa *wants* from him is something he's admitting he doesn't have. He's useless, and he can't even be angry that Aizawa put that expectation on him, because he's benefited too much from it and he wants to *keep* it.

"That's fine," Aizawa says, his words too strange for 27 to know what they mean at first, and he has to look again at his face to see that nothing has changed. That maybe he means that, even if it's a lie. He doesn't want to know the truth anyway. "You... don't know anything about the Nomus. How they... come about."

"I am one," 27 says, repeating what Aizawa told him. Asking a question, really, but it's one he doesn't want Aizawa to recognize. "Because of..."

Aizawa doesn't seem to want to answer it either, his folded hands curling before they straighten, before he pulls himself up to stand, trying to brush the snow out of his hair. It's pointless. "We've seen Nomus that can choose to utilize one quirk or another. It might be possible for you to do that

too.”

Nomus have multiple quirks, then. 27 has never heard of that happening, except, maybe he did. Maybe during the worst quirk training sessions with Chisaki, but 27 doesn't remember those so clearly. He knows Chisaki would have been interested in that, in fashioning the quirks he hated so much but needed into more devastating tools for him to use. Fusion was something that Chisaki practiced beforehand.

But never like he did during the raid. “My quirk... doesn't seem to be effective with that. Not that I've practiced a great deal.”

Nomus are rare, then. Nomus are something that the heroes are interested in, and that's why they're interested in The Miasma.

And why Aizawa is still interested in him.

27 stands up, even if it doesn't make a difference. Aizawa's idea of training isn't the usual way. Even when 27 was supposed to be training with his quirk, he still had to focus on hand-to-hand combat with other Numbers. Maybe it would help if Aizawa did that. “Nemoto... could use his quirk in different ways. He could make someone answer a question he prepared, or he could just... let the question come to him. Whatever that person didn't want to answer.”

Aizawa nods, tucking his hands into his pockets. “It's hard to say which came first in his quirk development, but probably the latter. Is there any difference you've noticed?”

“It's more annoying-” 27 stops, trying to tuck his hair back under his hat or at least behind his ear. He's not sure if it's worth voicing this childish complaint, something he felt far harsher than before he tried to say it and that anger seemed to freeze. “When you ask questions.”

Aizawa looks towards the tree, but it looks like he's rolling his eyes. “That could be a number of things.” 27 wonders how he could remind Aizawa that he's also a Number... of things, but he can't figure out anything that wouldn't sound stupid. “When I activate my quirk, ask me a question. Concentrate on how your quirk feels. And if I answer, try to learn how to end the control yourself. I'm not a fan of having shoes thrown at my head.”

“My feet would get cold,” 27 points out, but he doesn't want to think of what happens after that point. Not when he's too stupidly hopeful that this works. Aizawa turns to him and activates his quirk, his eyes glowing red and his hair floating. Just floating, not straight on end, which might mean he's not pushing himself. *Did Yamada tell you he wasn't going to call?* “Why do you think I'm irritated by hearing you ask questions?”

“It could be a new quirk compulsion, an itch to use your own quirk that you're repressing because you've rejected your quirk again,” Aizawa answers, a forced monotone barely different from his usual way of speaking. There's no change in his face to show whether he's uncomfortable with this. “Or you're irritated with the investigation, despite how you asked me to come out here.”

Aizawa's eyes glaze over white, his arms bending more once they're relaxed but his hands are still tucked in his pockets. 27 knows it's unprofessional, but he turns around and kicks the snow in front of him. *Of course*, he'd rather forget the investigation like Aizawa *promised* him he could. His only chance of that actually happening would be to find out whether being a Nomu is more important to the investigation than being a Number.

27 closes his eyes, trying to feel where his quirk rests. He always imagined it like a string, but now there's *nothing*. He knows that's because he doesn't control his quirk, it's not *his* quirk. A ghost of

Nemoto probably holds Aizawa under now, in a place that 27 doesn't know to look for.

He knows it's not because he's cold, or distracted. He just can't find it.

27 turns around to face Aizawa, before he bends and picks up a handful of snow to mold into a ball. He's due for an interrogation. And target practice.

Aizawa blinks and spits like the snow got into his closed mouth, even if it covers the bottom half of his face. He rubs it off and glares at 27, but 27 just shrugs. "Not a shoe."

Aizawa has nothing to say to that, and once the snow is off his face, he activates his quirk again, this time his hair stands on end. It makes him look angrier.

Why do you want to know about Nomus? "What will happen if The Commission finds out about my quirk?"

"They'll want to study it. They'll take you away. To a lab." 27 sees Aizawa's eyebrows twitch down, his face warps for only a second, trying to fight this quirk. "I don't want to know what will happen after that."

White. Glazed white eyes, pure stillness. 27 feels it in himself, when he knows what that means.

Like *Eri*.

What Chisaki did to Eri, with his tests, when he harvested blood and bone from her body, he did that so he would *understand* how Eri's quirk worked. How to use it. He thought the heroes wanted to know that too, but it's not the same. They won't hurt Eri like that, they seem to want her to know how to use her quirk for herself, and for Mirio too.

But with him, it's different. They don't *care* about him like they care about Eri. He'll be in that chair, they'll run those tests. On his body, and he's only felt the muted fear from Eri what that will feel like. He wanted to take that pain on himself, once.

But only to keep it away from Eri. And he won't even see Eri once they find out.

And he knows Aizawa can't lie to him.

He feels his hands shaking, and it's not from the cold, his breathing is too quick and he feels like he needs to *run*. He can't run away, not from this, not from his own *quirk*. After *everything*, this is how it ends up? This is what he deserves?

"Hitosh-*shit*," Aizawa swears, balanced on one kneeling leg while his other seems to be unwilling to move, still straight. *Hitoshi*, he's *Hitoshi* now. But he's *not*, he's a *Nomu*, and Aizawa said it himself.

"*Fuck* you," 27 says, forcing the words past the catch in his teeth. He *doesn't* have the mask, he turns to look at Aizawa looking *stupid* crouched in the snow. He feels like he could kill him, he feels *terrified* that he could. He feels like he's ripping apart and bleeding into the snow, and he just *wishes* it could end.

Aizawa pulls himself to a kneel, then to stand, his hands raising up like 27 is a *threat* to him.

"We're done-"

"We're *not* done," 27 says, rubbing a glove across his face hard enough to hurt, for each clump of snow to burn on his skin. He drops his head to look at the sky, unable to *look* at Aizawa right now,

and he can't stop from laughing. "We're *not* done, you need to know *everything*, that's all I'm *fucking* good for and how *fucking* lucky is it that I'm like this?!"

"Shi-" Aizawa stops, and 27 looks, only to see his hair falling back to his shoulders. Aizawa must have tried to use his quirk, but his eyes aren't red or glowing now. Glazed over and white.

Aizawa's quirk had some effect this time, maybe. His words were his own. It was almost like his own quirk, just a question being enough, but even when Hitoshi tries, he can't feel a *string* to control his own control. There's nothing but a *blur* in his mind, a smudge he can only feel from being *wrong*. 27 breathes out and closes his eyes, trying to feel for it, before he realizes he doesn't want to.

He thinks he should take advantage of Aizawa being forced into stillness like this, until his gut turns at how much he *doesn't* want to. Even for freedom, even for his own life, he feels sick from just the thought of it.

27 feels cold relief afterwards, something that feels lukewarm after that, before he tries to tell himself not to think about it. If Aizawa could do that, take away that part of his quirk, strip Confession out just enough. He wants to believe that.

But he drops his hands, because he still doesn't want to talk to Aizawa. "Follow me."

27 is grateful that they didn't travel too far, that they didn't go too far into the woods. His body seems hollow and too heavy, he feels too much like the ghost that haunts him as he makes his way back to the shack. He would probably get lost all the same, but the stars and the moon are so bright out here, and sometimes he nearly stops just to stare at how many *stars* there are.

He's read books that use the phrase 'More than the stars in the sky.' Someone probably tried to count how many stars there were. Far more stars than there are numbers. Or Numbers.

He hears that stupid bellow again and it startles him, for a moment he hopes that he dropped his control. But looking over his shoulder confirmed that Aizawa was still following him with whitened eyes, forced to do it.

27 hesitates for just a step when he sees the shack come into view, but ignores it. He doesn't care what the old man has to say about this, or what he thinks. 27 knows he can take him down if he needs to.

"-I'd like to start off this special little show with a special little shout out to a few of my favorite listeners who are tuning in. Or not tuning in, but I hope they're tuning-" Yamada's voice is unmistakeable, and 27 stops in his tracks as soon as he hears it, like a wall of too many things he can't name has hit him.

The old man scrambles to turn off the radio, and 27 rushes forward to stop him. He hasn't decided how, but when the old man seems satisfied to pull away after flipping the switch, 27 just turns it back on.

"-Baby Shark, to open and close. Just like those little hand dances! Ba-by Shark! Doo-doo-doot doot!" The old man hisses and glares where he seems crumpled up on the ground, and 27 meets that dominance display with a glare. He's not going to turn this radio off, even if Hitoshi has heard this song a *million* times.

Then the old man looks at Aizawa, still standing just past the open door, and looks back at 27. "The *hell* did you do to him?!"

“My quirk,” 27 answers, lowering himself from a crouch he doesn’t need to rest on his heels. He doesn’t need to move fast to threaten this old man, even if he looks angry, he can’t *threaten* 27 now. “Brainwashing. He’ll do anything I tell him to do now. *Anything*.”

The old man raises his eyebrows before he huffs, finding something amusing in that threat. “Shit, that’s... that’s a *quirk*. *Hell*, Shouta never tells me anything.” The old man looks between Aizawa and 27, as though he’s trying to figure out which one will attack him. Neither, as long as he behaves, and 27 might leave this to his own hands instead of making Aizawa feel guilty for it. “He doesn’t have a clue what’s going on right now, right? Bulb’s completely out of the socket?”

27 nods, slowly. Even if he won’t use Aizawa as a weapon, the old man can think he will.

“Good,” the old man decides, oddly. His voice gets quieter as he nods. “You tell him about this and I’ll pickle your goddamn fingers and *eat* them, I swear I will.”

27 finds himself shocked, at the colorful threat he wants to use as soon as possible, and how this old man seemed to have something he wanted to hide more than he wanted to keep his pride.

27 looks back at the radio, remembering what Aizawa said, and realizes how little sense it makes. “Tell him to close the damn door then, he was raised better than that!”

27 does, and Aizawa obeys, before 27 orders him to sit at the table. The old man watches out of the corner of his eye, as though he’s not entirely convinced that 27 won’t use Aizawa to attack him. Or he’s just this wary over a *stupid* secret being revealed. “You listen to Yamada’s show.”

The old man scowls at him, hard to tell by the way his white hair covers up so much of his face, before he glances back at Aizawa and seems to settle into a more comfortable sitting position. “You tell him and you’re *dead*, you got that?”

27 sits down fully as well, crossing his legs. Grampa Shark is singing now, before the hunt starts. “You got angry after they decided to get married.”

The old man glares again, what 27 can see of his lips puckering up like he’s tasted something awful by hearing those words. 27 could *try* to force him to answer honestly, but he’s not sure what he’ll be forcing him to answer. “I don’t know who the *hell* you are to know that, but you can mind your own business. Sure as hell could learn how to do that from Shouta.”

Learning things with, or from Aizawa, never bodes well. 27 decides to ignore the old man, since he doesn’t want him to know. He wonders if Yamada is going to pick a song for him.

The old man grunts, and he needs to shut up, but he won’t. “I was there for the kid when his mom was... having her spells. Maybe that was all my fault, but... punk could’ve told me something. Not just showing up here and leaving, not saying a damn word about... any of that. Could’ve-”

“Shh,” 27 hisses, because he hears what he expected, a record scratch instead of a commercial break. Maybe it’s the song he plays for Aizawa, maybe it’s something else. Hitoshi hopes it’s not that stupid song from that Seken Suns album. He *hopes* Yamada knows he didn’t really like any of those songs, he just wanted to force Yamada to make amends with the hero student that hated him.

“We’re still working on translating those lyrics, but I think we’ll have it down in no time! Doots and doo’s and doot-doot-doots,” Yamada says, and even if something sounds off about the sound. Maybe it’s just the radio, but Yamada’s voice sounds somehow more muted than it is when he listens to the radio show at the dorm. “*This one goes out to my favorite, and a little bit of a picky*

listener. Almost had to take the group vote for Nyan Cat."

"*You're welcome,*" a familiar voice says, with its familiar cold sarcasm. Jirou was on the radio now. Jirou was probably sitting in the seat that 27 usually sits.

"*Oi, that's what-*" There's a weird bleep that 27 can't figure out, even if he's still confused why Bakugo was at the radio station too. "*-would-*" Bleep. "*Want, weird-*" Bleep. "*Cat addict.*"

Byte Sound doesn't like having to censor people on the radio show, and it sounds like Bakugo will be getting on her bad side. "*But we hope you like this one!*" Midoriya says, and *why* was Midoriya at the radio station too?!

"*Thank you, guest stars of UA's Class 1-A,*" Yamada says, but it doesn't sound like he's really thankful. "*For the listener this song is for, my favorite listener, who I hope is still listening, I think you'll like this band, and like this song. And I hope you know the same stars are shining over all of us tonight. Hoshie by Sajou no Hana!*"

Yamada didn't call, but. He said all of that. He hopes he's still listening.

He's playing this song. For him.

Hitoshi feels the same way that he felt looking at those bright stars as he listens to the words, as he realizes they're for him. On that 'national stage' on those 'big time airwaves,' Yamada is playing a song to reach out to him. And he feels smaller with that, like the music and this gesture is so much bigger than he is, that it could crush him. And he feels the words pull in his chest hard enough to stop him from breathing, as much as he felt like those stars were too pure for him to touch, instead of just being so far away.

He wonders what Eri thinks of this song. If she thinks of him too while she listens to it.

"Who the hell are those punks?" The old man asks, but he could just *shut up* and go back to grunting instead of being so loud.

"My students," Aizawa answers, and he *shouldn't*. 27 turns around to look before he thinks of it, but Aizawa is still sitting at the table, pulling his gloves off of his own free will. Not under his control. "Hizashi is in charge of them for the weekend, so he's probably doing the radio show from the dorm. The control broke a few minutes ago."

27 wonders if Aizawa has more to say about it, why it would have broken in the first place. If hearing music was enough, or feeling the itch under his skin that hasn't settled in so long finally disappearing.

Or if it was just getting an answer to the real question he wanted. Hearing Yamada's voice again, even in this place. "*So, tell me whatcha think of that, my favorite listener. And to the listener who has listened to me for the second-longest ever, the only listener who has listened almost as much as my mom, and probably wishes he could be a whole lot like her in the hearing impairment department because of that, you know this one. Lovecats!*"

27 hums, wondering if Todoroki will accept that Yamada and Aizawa are married now that Yamada has all but said it. That song wouldn't go out to anyone else.

The old man grunts, hissing between his teeth when he pulls himself up off the floor, walking over to his crossbow. Maybe he'll actually check the traps, since he and Aizawa didn't. "American *bullshit.*"

That's not a nice thing to say about Aizawa's song, and it's *not* bullshit. It's a nice song about cats, even if the singer sings about them in a kind of weird way. Like the cats are actually people who like drinking cream and licking themselves clean.

Hitoshi doesn't hate this song, and he doesn't like it either. But he appreciates that it's familiar, because Yamada almost always plays it.

Right Person, Right Place, Right Time

Chapter Summary

Shinsou and Aizawa attempt to share the same room in Aizawa Shoga's shack, which makes for late night conversation and early mornings. Shoga shows Shinsou the traps that provide security for his shack, to terrible consequences. Yamada tries to cope with his situation, being alone at UA in the company of 1-A.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Animal cruelty and death (the lizard is unharmed, the deer... less so), Ableism in regards to ADHD, Bug Sessions

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa captured 127 in his capture scarf when 127 attacked UA, and Shinsou recently realized how deadly the capture scarf could be. Shinsou has a habit of digging his nails into his Bug scars when something reminds him of the Bug sessions, or the dark room torture. When Shinsou first arrived to The Miasma after being sold, he was kept in a pitch-black room and only taken out to test whether he would not speak, and would respond to the name '27.' During the hike to the shack, Shinsou was startled by a species of deer known as a 'serow,' which Aizawa identified while he was trying to be a bit of a nature guide. Aizawa told his grandfather that he and Shinsou would check the traps, when Shinsou offered to tell Aizawa more about The Miasma, and Shinsou is pettily reminding Aizawa that he lied about that to his grandfather. Yamada is watching the 1-A dorm this weekend in Aizawa's place, and ran his radio show with the hero students as guest stars. Yamada and Aizawa have known Iida Tenya since he was a child, since they're friends with Iida Tensei. Bakugo has referred to Present Mic with his hair down as 'Flaccid Mic' frequently in his POVs. The UA traitor's identity was revealed to Nezu after the attack, and the arrest will take place this weekend. Kaminari has ADHD, and has struggled academically with that, and Yamada has previously expressed frustrations that Kaminari won't accept any help with that. Yamada has previously mentioned in Now! That's What I Call Music that an unnamed news anchor questioned whether he was really deaf if he ran a radio show, and that Aizawa had blackmail material on her. Aizawa was incredibly disturbed to see the scars on Shinsou's stomach, knowing that while the ones on his arms were long, the scars there were circular, meaning that whatever caused those scars had caused deeper internal damage. 50's legal name is Furokage Mizuki.

Aizawa was 8 years old the first time he tried to be a hero.

October's chill was harsher in the mountains, and he was on one of his many 'vacations' from his mother, wandering the forest with a stick in his hand and a mind made up to avoid his grandfather and his unfinished correspondence education project. He saw a lizard at the base of a tree, not moving, and after earning an irritated twitch of the tail after a few pokes, realized the creature was going to die if it wasn't rescued from the cold.

He made his way to his grandfather's shack with the lizard tucked under his jacket, quiet prayers whispered under his breath and promises to the lizard that it was going to be okay. Looking back, he can see that he missed a fair bit of field triage and that he could have found a better way to carry it. His grandfather seemed to be in a better mood than when he left, surprisingly courteous to find a box for his 'new pet' and allowed the wood furnace to be lit, but only if Aizawa chopped more wood for it.

Aizawa watched and waited for more signs of life, breathing easier as the lizard seemed to, as he saw it adjust its feet. And he squealed at the top of his lungs when the lizard thawed out enough to lunge at him. He has a distinct memory of it hissing even when he knows now that species isn't able to.

His grandfather marched heavily to the stove and grabbed the lizard, shouting about 'gratefulness' with mumbles less clearly defined. His anger was all that Aizawa could hear as well as the slurring in his voice.

Aizawa heard a thunk after the old man stepped outside, stomps that followed, and Aizawa couldn't bring himself to look at the walls outside for the next few days. And when he did, he was nearly moved to offer a prayer of gratitude that it wasn't stained red, and that the lizard had been able to get away, even without his protection.

Heroes don't act in search of gratitude, which is not what drove Aizawa to save that lizard. Heroes don't act out of loneliness either. Heroes act for a myriad of personal reasons, but one should unify them all - 'it's the right thing to do.' They are the right person, in the right place, at the right time, with the right training and skill for what is at hand.

But that's just theory. Application is always messier.

"An informant for The Miasma infiltrated Shie Hassaikai," Shinsou says, his voice a stark difference from the sounds of nature outside, a near constant noise since night fell and Aizawa insisted that he try to sleep. Unfortunately sharing the same room. "*Once*. Overhaul killed him to deliver a message. *Overhaul* protected me better than *you*."

Shinsou seems to want to make this a habit, nipping at Aizawa's nerves in search of a response he wants. Aizawa can't believe he was on *good behavior* in front of his grandfather.

"You could have snapped his neck, but *oh no*, the *Hero's Mantle*. Hero *syndrome*." Aizawa was once so moved that Shinsou paid attention in his class. "If my dear big brother 127 didn't mess up taking my blood, I'd be dead right now. Existing Amplifier would lose his job-"

"Why *big brother*?" Aizawa asks, because if Shinsou wants to talk, he clearly wants a conversation. It might be relevant to the investigation, but Aizawa honestly doesn't give a damn. He'd rather get some *sleep*, but he needs *quiet* to do that.

Shinsou does go quiet, but only long enough that Aizawa hopes he's decided this game isn't fun anymore. "27. 127. You're not supposed to be stupid, but maybe I haven't been paying attention."

An easy and predictable insult. Aizawa is almost disappointed. "You're supposed to be asleep."

Aizawa tugs a hand out of his sleeping bag to rub at his eyes, the ache from using his quirk still not fading. There's only a slight chill from what the tarp lining the walls can't catch, but the brighter moon and stars only illuminate where the tarp is worn thin. The darkness and the call of owls and fox chirps could lull him to sleep like nothing else.

If only he could hear them.

“You’re *supposed* to be a hero. *Protecting* your so-very-important witness. Of course, now you need more information because you can’t do your job. It’s so *convenient* that we’re out in the middle of nowhere so that no one can hear me scream. Of course, I got over that. Break my bones, burn me, drown me, *kill* me. That one just makes me nauseous, and you’re not anything like Overhaul-”

“Stop calling him that,” Aizawa says, turning his head to try to see the outline of Shinsou on the oddly nice futon his grandfather provided in this darkness. He can see a shoulder, that Shinsou’s back is turned to him. “You can be angry that I wasn’t there. You could *reflect* on the reasons why I wasn’t, after you forced Mirio to leave when he was trying to defend you-”

“To get *killed*,” Shinsou hisses, a bit too loud, and Aizawa doesn’t want to invite his grandfather’s attention to this petty spat. “Sure, you want his death on my hands. Fitting. 127 uses knives. If he left me behind, you’d think I killed him myself.”

“I wouldn’t,” Aizawa answers, without hesitation. After the initial shock, he knew exactly why Shinsou used his quirk on Mirio to make him leave. Even if he didn’t appreciate it. “I know you were trying to protect him, but Mirio is a trained hero. He had the situation under control, and if you left, you would have been able to alert me sooner.”

The problem with turning those situations over and over to find better outcomes, is that there’s still too much chance at play. Aizawa still had to overcome USJ’s lockdown in order to get outside, and though Mirio was trained, he was trained to fight to compliment a quirk. He knew how to counter invisibility quirks like 127’s, but there was a great deal of chance as to whether he *could* when he wasn’t suited for the situation.

Mirio wasn’t the target, and whether that would have fared better for him or worse is left to another turn of fate that didn’t happen. Aizawa would like to move past it, do better going forward, but he knows that his ward will not forget that night for a long time.

Aizawa notices that Shinsou has been too quiet for too long, something he thought he would be overjoyed with before now, but something prickles at the back of his neck and makes it seem unnerving. He rolls on his side, and sees that nothing has changed about Shinsou. Nothing that he can see from his back, except for the fingers he notices are clawing into his own arm.

Dark....

Aizawa nearly swears, pulling himself from the sleeping bag to stumble to the corner of the room where their bags were set. Aizawa finds the flashlight that Hizashi insisted that he bring, that Aizawa found completely unnecessary but was unwilling to put up a fight, and turns it on to actually look at his ward.

Shinsou was curled into a ball, his arms wrapped tight around his legs and head ducked down, *shaking*. Too much like Eri would when she was first placed with them, when she felt nothing but terror and couldn’t trust that fear with anyone around her. Whether Shinsou was trying to provoke him in order to hide his own terror, or to just beg for a familiar voice with those barbed words, Aizawa should have known.

Shinsou only said ‘dark’ in that interview, but Aizawa made himself familiar with certain tactics that might have been used to achieve Miasma’s goal. A child who firmly believed their name was ‘27.’

The age he suspects that those tactics were used, soon after Shinsou was sold, was something that he forced himself to only see as a number. He didn't want to imagine Shinsou at four years old, trapped in a dark room and shaking like this. But now he sees it.

Shinsou sees the light in his hand, looking up with too wide eyes, the scars on his face were a familiar sight before this moment, but somehow they seem fresher. They seem more painful.

Aizawa places the flashlight on its end to point towards the ceiling, set between their two sleeping places. He glances to see that Shinsou is still staring at him, but not shaking. "You can tell me when something is bothering you—"

"It *doesn't*—" Shinsou curls back around himself, stopping himself mid-shout. Aizawa no longer sees a young child trembling in the dark, but a teenager who still fears it. Who sees himself as a teenager that shouldn't be afraid of what *isn't* a childish fear for him. "I'm not *scared* of the dark. Eri isn't either."

Eri might not be, but Aizawa and his husband never took that chance. Especially Hizashi, who included no less than 10 nightlights in a *very* long shopping list as soon as Aizawa asked for his opinion on the matter. "Eri didn't experience what you did."

Aizawa imagines that Eri has never had the chance to fear the dark like another child her age would. Darkness was a lonely thing for his childhood, in some ways unique, but in others it wasn't. Most children are alone in their rooms at night, but Eri wasn't. The only protector she ever knew was always with her, Shinsou was there for her.

And Aizawa can imagine that no one was ever there for Shinsou.

Aizawa pulls himself back into his sleeping bag, resting his arms on top rather than zipping himself back in. He imagines despite the light, despite the silence from Shinsou, he's still not at ease. Despite what Aizawa has learned from those tactics, how white torture like that has driven stable adults completely insane, there's nothing that he's learned that could help Shinsou right now. Nothing that he's learned.

But there's one thing that Hizashi told him. "This used to be my room," Aizawa says, feeling the callouses on his fingers catch on the yellow nylon when he absently flexes them.

Hizashi said that talking to Shinsou seemed to help him calm down sometimes, just talking about pointless things. Distraction. Possibly something to do with his quirk, and how it relies on conversation.

"I had a cot in that corner. A bucket for clothes that needed to be washed." The change for a futon and the addition of a large jar that might be the old man's attempt to give them a 'guest bathroom' are rather grand gestures of hospitality from his grandfather. "Not much else. Even though I spent most of my childhood here."

"The Eld... he said something about your mother," Shinsou says, and Aizawa struggles to appreciate Shinsou not referring to his grandfather as a respected *yakuza*, when he knows that statement is a question he'd rather not answer.

"My mother and I didn't do well with living together," Aizawa answers, carefully. He's aware that there are similarities between himself and Shinsou, that for a myriad of different reasons, their quirks caused a strain in the relationship between mother and child. Shinsou Ui claimed she tried to give her son to Social Services after he developed his quirk, for his own well-being. Aizawa's own mother would never risk that. She would never see the situation for what it was. "We argued a lot."

Constantly. She thought that being out here would reform me.”

You need to stay with your grandfather for a while, you need to learn not to do that. He doubts that his mother truly thought that helping his grandfather hunt game, forage, and live off the land as a squatter with all the laborious work that entails would stop him from taking off his eyepatch that was meant to keep him from using his quirk.

She likely just wanted a ‘vacation’ from him, and called it reformatory for her own pride. It was, if just for the fact that his grandfather never forced him to wear that damn eyepatch.

“Didn’t work,” Shinsou says, slowly uncurling his legs as a shield, even if he’s still speaking to a wall instead of looking at Aizawa. “It won’t work for me either.”

Aizawa rolls his eyes. There’s no wonder that Shinsou gets along *far* too well with his grandfather, given that they both have an irrational and immovable seam of paranoia stitched in their spines. But Aizawa is relieved that he’s convinced Shinsou that his goal for this venture wasn’t to torture or kill him for information, just ‘reform’ him in some way. “Probably not, given that you’re terrified of deer.”

“A *serow*,” Shinsou argues, obviously testing his new vocabulary. “Some crazy guy in the woods told me that. You should watch out for him when you’re not checking the traps.”

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled. Crazy woodsmen and those bloodthirsty serow,” Aizawa answers, fighting a grin when he hears an irritated huff, and sees out of the corner of his eye that Shinsou has rolled himself on his stomach, face turned into the pillow to likely follow a juvenile instinct to smother himself. Aizawa is pretty sure that means he’s won. “Any other terrifying animals you’d like to see?”

“The Loch Ness monster,” Shinsou grumbles, muffled into his pillow. Aizawa finds himself confused at first, before he realizes that Shinsou probably only knows that creature from Eri’s frequent Sailor Moon marathons. He’s not sure how to let him down gently. “I’m *joking*. You really think I’m stupid.”

“I don’t,” Aizawa answers. “It’s just new to you. New experiences.”

Aizawa watches Shinsou curl his arms under his pillow, something more comfortable, but still hiding his expression as well as the dark room did before the flashlight was lit. Aizawa doesn’t know if that’s cold comfort, to acknowledge that Aizawa knew as well as Hitoshi did that he was out of his depth here. That he would probably be completely at home in an organized crime ring, but in the real world, he was completely ill-equipped. But not stupid. “They live next to the sea... not the mountains....”

The quiet mumbled words seem to promise that Shinsou will fall asleep soon, and Aizawa will take that assumption as an excuse not to answer him.

If the news that the Loch Ness monster doesn’t exist needs to be broken, Aizawa will gladly let Hizashi be the one to tell him.

*

Yamada was having a great morning.

Aside from the paralyzing fear that Eri was in inconsolable terror every second and Hitoshi might have been eaten by bears without his knowledge, Yamada was having fun looking after the little 1-A herolets. They were rattled, yes, and they kept asking where Eri and Hitoshi were and if they

were okay, which Yamada had to answer with non-specifics and confidence that he didn't feel in the slightest. But they made a pretty good playlist for him, and working from the 1-A dorm kept him from any memos informing him what his station manager thought about the changes, which only made the idea of having an independent broadcast more tempting.

HAM radio broadcasts are interesting, and Yamada has dabbled in it a bit when he was younger. It's so interesting, that just dialing into a certain frequency can let you talk to people all over the world. So handy, and Yamada can see why Aizawa Shoga decided to do away with landlines and cell phones to just use that.

And it's just so interesting that his sweet loving husband of nearly 10 years *didn't give him the radio frequency for his grandfather before he left his phone at UA to go incommunicado.*

Maybe it's unfair for Yamada to blame him for it, he knows that as rattled as he was, Shouta was too. But Yamada didn't think to ask, Shouta didn't think to tell him, and Yamada can't get over how *shifty* Principal Nezu looked when Yamada asked if he had that information. He definitely has it, since he's somehow found out where exactly Aizawa Shoga has been living off the grid, when that's exactly what people who live off the grid don't want.

Yamada tries not to think about how Principal Nezu has a vested interest in making Hitoshi talk about Miasma, and how sudden isolation, especially after a traumatic event, can make people 'open up' about certain things a bit more easily. And he tries not to think about what Shouta is doing now, if he's ignoring how absolutely shaken Hitoshi is to do the 'rational' thing to keep him safe, when Yamada knows that Hitoshi is *scared*. He's scared, he's terrified, and there's not a *thing* Yamada can do about it because even when he gets Hitoshi back home, he can't find the words to apologize for fucking up the *single* thing he was assigned to Hitoshi to do.

Yamada was supposed to keep Hitoshi safe from Miasma, and they attacked him. And there's nothing that Yamada can do to take that back.

After a night of barely sleeping well enough to call it that, Yamada takes a brisk shower and makes his way downstairs to make sure the little herolets have a community breakfast this Sunday, even if none of them feel up to cooking it.

Even if he doesn't feel particularly up to cooking it either, since Hitoshi has made it a habit of cooking with him for every meal. But Yamada makes his way to the common room to see quite a few more herolets downstairs than usual, almost all of them.

Not surprisingly, Sato is the only one in the kitchen, but at least it looks like Kirishima, Ashido, Iida, and Midoriya are sitting rather *strategically* around Bakugo, who has his hands folded up around a coffee mug like he knows that. Bakugo is another herolet that's talented in the kitchen, but his palate tends to be on the unbearably spicy side when he's in a foul mood.

And Yamada is pretty sure that all of them are in a mood, despite any polite smiles returned or any odd gawking, which is a little given since he hasn't had a dorm shift with these guys in a while. They're probably much more used to Shouta rising at the crack of noon. "Good morning, herloets! Wakey wakey for some eggs and bac-y!"

Yamada doesn't get much response, even if the kids seem *pretty* awake, but when Yamada strolls up to Sato's side and starts pulling his hair into a ponytail to work on those eggs and bacon, he realizes it. Most of these kids have never seen him with his hair down and unsculpted, and it might be rocking their worlds a bit.

Jirou, the sweetheart that she is that has absolutely *not* made him regret giving her his personal

number, sputters a giggle at something, but when Yamada turns his head over his shoulder, he sees too many wide-eyed stares and too-tight smiles. It's something he hasn't seen since that girl with the Accuracy quirk stuck a classic 'Kick me' sticky note on his back during class. Yamada was going to brush that off as a bit of harmless delinquency, but Shouta expelled her as soon as Kayama told him about it. Which was *great* given that the student was in Kan's class.

Yamada just turns around, and starts wondering if he woke up with some such sticky note on his back when he hears a few more giggles, which cut out as soon as he turns around again. He knocks some eggs into a pan, but he knows he won't be able to work his magic until he knows what the punchline is, so he turns around to see Sero kicking Kirishima from the couch across from him and trying not to laugh. Iida looks a particular shade of white while he tries to play the Responsible Class President, and Yamada imagines that's pretty complicated when he's sure most of the other students don't know Iida has seen Yamada with his hair tangled in a ceiling fan before.

"Okay, what's so funny guys? Is there something on my face?" Yamada asks, rubbing his mustache which has usually been his husband's sarcastic answer to that question, and too many tight grins are shaking their heads and trying to keep this little joke from his ears.

Except for one herolet who's not having such a happy morning.

"You're flaccid," Bakugo says flatly, which makes Ashido try to cover his mouth with her hand and Kirishima turn a bit whiter and deer-eyed, and it makes *a lot* of sense.

As does the horror that comes over these kids, because while sexual innuendos are *hilarious* at their age, it's probably not appropriate when directed at an authority figure like him, and *definitely* not appropriate to let him know about it. Shouta has expelled for *far* less.

But, Shouta's not here when he's dicking around in the mountains, and Yamada can take a good joke. And roll with it. "Oh yeah, my hair's down! I've gotta give it time to rest, it's not healthy to have it up and ready for action all day every day."

Aoyama chokes on his sparkling water, and Shoji is looking a little red-faced where he's sitting with all six arms crossed. Yaoyorozu doesn't seem to get it, glancing at Todoroki who seems to be in the same boat. When Yamada catches Uraraka leaning a little closer to Asui and sees that Asui seems to catch that there's an explanation to be had, he turns around to avoid any sign of *that* little study group.

"So, seven sunny side up but four firm and three runny, eleven scrambled, tofu scramble for one?" Yamada asks to make sure, and while Koda tries to tell him that he can handle making his vegan option, it's really no trouble to just heat up some tofu and break it into chunks. Even if the kid won't mention it himself and just pick around any food that's not in line with his diet, Shouta caught on to it before the end of the second week and made it a personal mission for Lunch Rush to advertise his vegan options a bit more clearly on the menu. "Coffee brewing, OJ squeezed, Sugar Rush himself is laying out some honey and buns, so *we've* got ourselves a *grrrreat* start to a *beautiful* day!"

He's laying it on thick, and it's not just for their sakes. Even if it's plenty for their sakes right now, since Principal Nezu and a couple police officers are going to be making their way to the traitor any minute now. Yamada has his phone at his side, on standby if there's any trouble just like everyone else on staff, but he hopes he's not called into it.

Even knowing what that person did, what they did *specifically* to put Hitoshi's life in danger, Yamada just wants to turn a blind eye to it so that maybe it can hurt a bit less.

Yamada tries to get the other frying pan out of Sato's hands, but Shoji is the dark horse that keeps Sato from making practically the entire breakfast spread by pitching in on the meat station. Bacon, sausages, it's hearty if not healthy and practically dripping in comfort food. And it's an unspoken truth that everyone could use that right now. "14, 15, 16, I'm missing a few herolets down in the nest, and Uraraka, you're not flying out just yet!"

Uraraka flusters a bit and tries to shake off her attempt to ditch as an attempt to get an unnamed *something* from her room, but with the students missing in the headcount not exactly being in her social stratosphere, as far as Yamada knows, he sends her to the table with a sharp whistle and a wag of his spatula, before he lets the herolets dig into the first serving.

"Sounds like it's time for a wake-up call from the Alarm Clock Hero himself!" Yamada says, jogging up to the staircase to collect some strays who at least need to show their faces long enough to tell him to piss off.

The three missing are on the third floor, and with a bit of deliberation, he heads over to the girl's side to get the missing lady from the trio - Miss Hagakure - up and at 'em. And if he sees that a certain *someone* from the boy's side was already in her room, he pays no mind to it, given that this meeting didn't happen last night or else he would have gotten an alert for it. Even if he's *dying* to tell Shouta just to see him die a little inside at the very obvious implications of that, and how Shouta's probably going to be roped into watching that teen drama play out over the next two years.

With Hagakure and Ojiro heading down at an embarrassed sprint for breakfast, Yamada heads over to the boy's side to meet his final challenger. "Yo-yo-yo, got some sunny-side up to charge up that Chargebolt!"

Yamada hears a thunk, which is always promising, before a messy-haired Kaminari shows himself and shows off an impressive collection of open textbooks flung on the floor. But if those under-eye circles are signs that there was little sleep to be had last night, Kaminari doesn't show it with that thousand-watt grin. "*Good morning, teacher! Thank you for egg!*"

Yamada can appreciate the effort, because 'baby words' like 'the' and plurals like 'eggs' are pretty easy to forget in the morning. "*Good morning to you too, Kaminari! Looks like you've been hitting those books 'til they're knocked out!*"

Yamada throws a few shadow punches for effect, but he doesn't overlook a little bit of nervous panic dawning on one ambitious herolet's features. It seems there was a little plan to impress by going fully fluent in English while Yamada's in town, and translating off the fly is pretty tricky. "*Yeah, yeah, hero work! Work hard! Fight on!*"

Yamada doesn't even know if he shows any sign of it, because Kaminari pulls a wince all on his own, a defeated sigh escaping one *defeated* looking kid. "Hey-o, you're doing great Kaminari. It's the weekend and all, you really don't have to--"

"But I'm not *stupid*," Kaminari insists, and that's really not needed because Yamada knows that and he's never *thought* that. But it looks like this is a little crack under the pressure that's probably been a chip for too long, and Kaminari casting another glance at those textbooks like he *really* wants to punch them is just *disheartening*. "It's... just seemed easier when I was looking at it, I *really* was studying--"

"Yeah, I know you study, kiddo," Yamada says, because he *knows*. He knows the kid is kind of a mess about this stuff, and he's honestly surprised that Kaminari *is* letting him know that he tries, when he usually settles into the 'Oh, I'm not trying at all, I really don't care that I've got the lowest

grades in class' routine.

Maybe that's an easier face to wear, but it's the hardest to deal with on either side of the teacher's desk.

"If you're looking to work on your English, I'm *absolutely* the right tutor, and we can have a little sesh after breakfast to catch you up. We can try out that timing method I was reading about! Have you ever tried that? Make your brain wire in for just five minutes, and then that bad boy won't want to look away from those conjugations!"

Weary, bloodshot eyes that wouldn't look out of place on Shouta's face look up at him, with a frown to match. "That's not really working for me. Bakugo tried and... Y'know, I just need to get over it? This is UA and all, and-"

"And UA is *fantastic* about academic accommodations when they're *used*," Yamada says, grinning so much that he can practically *feel* the pain in his cheeks. Kaminari has *never* filed for those accommodations, even when Yamada and other teachers have practically shoved those forms in his face. Everyone got a copy of his Middle school record, it was from a good enough school and Kaminari did well *there*, but the dip from B to D can't all be written off on how UA is notoriously difficult.

"But I'm going to be a hero?" Kaminari says, quirking his eyebrow like Yamada has just told him that accommodations are only for Gen Ed kids, and Yamada *hopes* it's anything but what he expects. "Like, I don't want to have it easier when being a hero isn't going to be easy. This is the place to just get over it, you know? It's just school."

Yamada honestly finds himself speechless. He pulls one hand behind his head to pull at his ponytail, the other drumming his fingers on the doorframe. He's been aware that this is a thing, but to hear it like that.

It feels like he's looking at his 8 year old self.

"So, you know that's not a problem, right? You've already earned your provisional license, they're not going to yank that back just because you have an attention disorder, right? There's just...." Yamada pulls his hands together in a clap, because he can't even pick a *single* way how that's *not* a problem when there's *too many*. "Kaminari, are you taking any medication?"

Kaminari doesn't say it, but that glance to the side and smallest shrug makes Yamada's gradebooks both sing and *groan* with the wasted time and potential.

"And, I'm going to assume that you *were* before the start of this year, because that entrance exam has told a very different tale from what we've all seen since," Yamada says, unspooling a mystery that he has been beating his head against the wall to figure out, because he only *considered* this but didn't want to believe it could be that *easy*.

A bigger, moodier shrug answers him. "Yeah, it's been harder, but I just need to try more-"

"You *need* to give yourself the best *place* to try, not spend all that effort fighting against it," Yamada says, and he could *throttle* the kid if only to pull him into a hug afterwards. "So, you know I'm deaf, right? Pull these hearing aids out and I've got no audio, just visual, and it'd be pretty *stupid* if I tried to go into a fight without hearing anything, right?"

Kaminari's lips purse up, eyes a little wider before he nods, a bit slowly. That might be news, and that might be a *teensy* bit of blow to his pride. It'd be nice to believe that all of his students admire

him enough as a hero to get the basic fact sheet about him, but it's honestly *never* happened.

"And that's something that the Hero Commission definitely knows about! I've got specially made hearing aids for when I'm working, to make sure they don't just pop out in the middle of a fight, which you know would be really bad, and a pretty big risk," Yamada says, because the foam fitting has to be changed out frequently to make sure that doesn't happen, because it *has* happened. And it wasn't fun. "But that's not stopping me from being a hero. I need hearing aids, but I can still do my job, and there's no shame in that."

The herolet looks like he's plenty ashamed, for the wrong reasons, and that just makes it easier to see a kid who didn't have his hearing aids fitted properly and hated to ask to sit closer to the chalkboard. Who thought he should just get better at reading lips, because he didn't want to ask to be treated *special*.

"There's a big difference between what heroes look like on the big screen and how they are, kiddo. It's not like we're less strong, but we're only stronger when we're ready to fight," Yamada says, and he *aches* to let Kaminari know names behind that fact. "We all need support equipment, and I... guess I don't understand how this is any different."

Kaminari pulls a hand to rub his elbow, he looks like he *might* get it, but Yamada still wants to know that poisoned seed that started this. "It's just different, because.... Heroes are just supposed to be like that, y'know? The strongest, the smartest...."

"The *best*," Yamada sums up, because he works at the *best* hero school in the country and he knows that all his students are the *best* for what they want to do. "Are only the best when they're the right people, with the right skills, doing the right job, in the right spot, and you do *not* have to force yourself to be something you're not to fit that mold, kiddo. You're going to be an amazing hero, and you're going to be a much happier hero student when you've got the right support equipment for the job. And we're going to get that set up *today*."

Yamada will print off the forms for all of his coworkers, get that staff meeting done at lunch, and have *everything* in place for Tuesday to be the start of Kaminari's new academic career. He'll drive the kid to the soonest available appointment to get back on his medication, and take him out for ice cream afterwards.

And if Kaminari looks like he's unsure about that, he's going to have to get over that quick, because Yamada has made his decision about it, and it's *final*. He *cannot* let this kid go into his second year like this.

"So, that interviewer lady was wrong about Best Jeanist retiring because he was, like, depressed and stuff?" Kaminari asks. He *genuinely* asks.

And Yamada can't fight the hug coming on, so he pulls the sparky little devil against his chest and tries to resist the temptation to give him a noogie. "Kid. Don't listen to her. She is... *literally* the worst person alive, and on television."

Yamada *thought* he had a vendetta about the anchor from channel 8 before, but he's pretty sure Shouta needs to ruin her career now. Now that she's given one of his little herolets so much grief, so much shame, and made his job as a teacher so much more *difficult*.

Yamada is still smiling like he's not contemplating murder at all as he watches his little herolets eat their fill, to wander off to their rooms or make plans to have a little trip off campus to blow off some steam with retail therapy. Yamada just tries to not feel jealous when there's a crepe shop he'd like to visit, a few places that might make missing his family a bit easier to bear.

Yamada has figured that holding a little voluntary English tutor session might be distracting enough, and even if attendance might be disappointing with ‘voluntary’ and ‘on a weekend’ in the mix, taking some herolets under his wing sounds like a great use of his time.

But when Principal Nezu texts him with a name, with a question as to where that herolet was, Yamada can hardly believe it.

He just made a sunny side up egg for the *UA traitor*.

*

“*Hey little bro.*”

27 jolts up, his hands searching for the knife, for the snow, his jaw clenched tight.

He finds soft fabric under his grasp, he sees the blue tarps around him. He turns his head to see Aizawa, the light of the flashlight drawing sharp shadows from his nose, from his jaw. 27 can see his teeth from how his mouth is parted, how he’s sleeping that deeply on his back. 27 stares, long enough to start counting how many seconds go by. How long it will take until he forces himself to move, to kick Aizawa or something if he doesn’t wake up.

To realize that Aizawa wasn’t going to wake up, and didn’t have to. It was a dream, even if it seemed real. Even if he could hear that voice so clearly, 127 rasping in his ear. He knew exactly where the knife was even if he couldn’t see it, that it was raised to kill him.

27 tries to force it out of his mind, forcing himself to kneel, to run his hands through his hair despite how his fingers tangle easily. He’s not going to wake Aizawa over this, it’s *stupid*, Aizawa won’t be able to help him. He’ll just want him to go back to sleep.

27 feels his eyes fall closed, he feels himself slump forward, but he stops himself. He can’t sleep, he can’t face that again. It’s too much, even if he aches to rest.

27 pulls himself to his feet, and walks to his bag set against the wall and feels the fabric of his other clothes but for a moment mistakes it for Mocha. Mocha isn’t here, and that’s another selfish ache inside his chest. It’s *stupid*, and Mocha wouldn’t help him either.

He pulls the picture from the bottom of the bag, something that he knew he would need. Something that he wouldn’t risk losing. He took the two pictures he refused to lose, even if everything else was stripped away from him, but he needs this one more.

27 rubs at his eye, his eyes so dry and the skin around them feels looser, his hands feel half-numb too. 50 just smiles at him, the same as ever. Her wide brim hat, her long green hair like a veil around her shoulders. *Bad dream, kiddo?*

He runs a hand through his hair, just like she would if she were here. He wishes he could find more words to twist into her voice, he wishes she was just *here*. He knows she would keep him safe, and make this darkness just fall away into safety. If only he could imagine her quirk being the darkness that surrounds him.

27 feels his head tip down, his eyes closing again, and he puts the picture back in his bag before he grabs his jacket from the floor. He can’t fall asleep again, but he still wants to find some way to escape this pull and buzz under his skin, and he knows how to do that.

He doesn’t let his gaze linger on the old man’s bed next to the fire, and he can’t tell if there is an old man under that tangle of blankets. He walks carefully, to avoid waking either Aizawa, but the

door closes more noisily than he meant to behind himself.

The sky is gray with early morning, the sun hasn't risen yet, or it hasn't grown powerful enough to force its way through the thick clouds. A haze of fog creeps through the trees, and there's no snow falling from the sky. 27 breathes out and sees a plume from his breath, his hands already stinging from the cold, but he lets his eyes fall on a place on the ground and walks over to it, before he lets himself fall backwards.

The snow crunches and seems to squeal against his jacket, but everything goes quiet soon enough. 27 forces his eyes open just enough, just to watch the fog from his breath and imagine each tree in the forest doing the same to create that fog. To just breathe, to just rest. To just live, when there's no point to it.

27 forces his eyes open enough to stare at the sky, knowing that it's close to 5 AM. If his job was extended past its usual time, he would see glimpses of this, the sky growing steadily lighter and brighter but he never stayed out long enough to see the sunrise. He was pulled back before then.

He feels another twitch in his gut, but it's too weak for him to work up the panic for it. He just lays his hand on his stomach and wishes he could laugh, that Boss was still trying to pull him back. 127 had a syringe, he was supposed to fill up another vial with his blood to replace the one Chisaki stole. Maybe he didn't take enough, or maybe it was broken.

Maybe Aizawa broke it when he captured 127 with his scarf.

27 feels exactly what he wanted to find in this snow, in this quiet. The cold that surrounds and accepts him is molded to his shape, and he could lay here forever. Just staring at the sky until he freezes to death. Thanks to Aizawa.

Hey kid.

27 hears 50's voice, distant and blurred before those last two words, before he forces his eyes open and winces at the sunlight. Wincing at the shadow over his head. "I've got a damn *bed* for you, ungrateful punk."

27 winces again at the smell of the old man's breath, something he's unable to avoid with the geezer crouching over him, and he resolves to never get close enough to smell it again. 148's breath was at least somewhat fragrant like the sweeter notes of a corpse's smell is. "Don't want to sleep."

The old man huffs, running his hands over the top layer of his threadbare jackets. 27 still wonders which mafia took his two fingers off. "Good. Help me do some work out here, since you ain't sleeping out in the snow. Some looney bin Shouta dragged up here."

27 pulls himself to sit, though it's harder to pull himself to stand. His hands sting where he feels them, and they look red and swollen. As he follows the old man into the woods, he tries to blow on them to thaw them out, but it hurts.

"Young for Shie Hassaikai," the old man grumbles, the end of his crossbow dragging in the snow. The old man talks a lot, except when Aizawa is there. "Pretty banged up for them too."

27 spares a glance at his hands again, like he doesn't know exactly why the old man would have noticed the scars there. Then he sees the old man lift a hand to scratch the side of his cheek, still not looking at him, but 27 knows what he means. "I wore a mask before I was sold to them. To keep me from talking."

The old man turns to look at him, and he seems terrified for some reason, before he turns to start shaking his head. “*Shit*, that sure isn’t the Shie Hassaikai I knew.” 27 has heard that things changed a lot when Chisaki succeeded in his coup. That it wasn’t for the better. “That’s your quirk, huh? Talk to people, they do what you tell ‘em to.”

“Sure,” 27 says, and he enjoys too much how he can answer with guarded anger in his words. A threat in a singular word, to warn the old man not to ask more about it. That’s impossible to do with just sign language.

“Hmph, that sure is one that would get you in trouble,” the old man grumbles. He hears that serow calling out in the distance, and it sounds different somehow. He stops before he turns to the left, walking that way for some reason. “Watch your step. My grandson’s ‘sposed to keep you out of trouble, eh? Doing a right shit job of it.”

“Basically,” 27 agrees, even if he’s not entirely sure of how much he means that. His eyes nearly fall shut again, the cold air making it seem too tempting to just stop walking and let the snow take hold of him again, every step that he forces himself to take seems like it’s rocking him further towards sleep.

“Probably because you’re doing a shit job of that ‘ward’ business,” the old man grouches, tossing a glare over his shoulder. His eyes look just a little crazier than Aizawa’s, but the glare is so similar it’s startling. “My grandson’s a damn fine hero. Stop making trouble for him.”

27 narrows his eyes at the noisy, *stupid* old geezer. “He asked for it. I *didn’t*. You could learn to mind your own business, Elder.”

The old man scoffs, and 27 sees a curl in his lip showing his teeth before he looks ahead again. “Told you to cut that shit. Paid my debt and I got out, I don’t want to hear that word again from you.”

“Must be nice,” 27 muses. ‘Getting out.’

That’s impossible for him now, even if Chisaki is gone. The Miasma has only made their intentions to kill him clearer, and even if Aizawa could keep him safe from them, he’s a *Nomu* now. Now, The Commission wants to dissect him, and they will as soon as they find out what he is.

And since The Commission will force him to use his quirk on Yamada to see if his quirk will affect him, his days of freedom are incredibly numbered.

And he wishes he could find that funny. As a Number, his days have always been numbered, but somehow he’s forgotten that.

That loud bellow startles him this time, because it’s closer. Because there’s something in that pitch that sounds like a pained scream. The old man swears and steps carefully between two trees, taking too wide of a step, and when 27 follows, he sees the animal much closer than he ever has before.

And he sees blood drowning the white of the snow around a bear trap that’s mangled the animal’s leg. “Damn thing’s supposed to know where these traps are, I don’t move ‘em anymore. Stupid....”

The serow is breathing hard, its mouth opening for another low cry. It’s in pain, it has to be.

The old man lifts his crossbow but drops it, and starts patting down his jacket. “Shit, you’ve got a knife? Gonna have to carry it back to the shack too. Dress it-”

“No,” 27 refuses, when he realizes what the old man means. “Hell no, this is- you’re *doing* this to these animals, and it’s-it’s *fucked up*, you’re *fucking* crazy-”

“Shut it!” The old man is yelling at him, glaring at him. “You can cut that yuppie shit until this stupid thing becomes a hot stew. If you’ve got a knife, hand it over. Damn thing’s gonna die slower or quicker, you make the damn call.”

27 steps back, a hand pressed over the knife clipped to his pants to make sure the old man can’t take it, before he hears a cord being dragged and the old man swear, and the world flips into a blur with his ankle becoming a blinding point of pain.

27’s side hits a tree trunk before gathers himself enough to breathe, to open his eyes. He’s strung upside down by his ankle that’s captured in a loop of rope, and the pressure is making the pain worse. “*Goddammit*, I told you to watch your step!”

27 glares at the old man and tries to bring an arm out to hit him now that he’s moving closer, but the movement makes him swing on the rope and he hisses between his teeth as the pain flares. It feels like a break, and he feels like he’d like his foot to break off at that point so he can get down.

The old man crouches down, and 27 turns his head painfully to look down and see the old man pick up his knife that had fallen out. *His* knife, that the old man is touching with his three-fingered hand, that he’s going to use to *kill* that deer.

“Hey, stop! Don’t-” 27 sucks in another hiss when he tries to make his arms move the way he wants, to swipe the knife out of the old man’s hands, but he can’t see where he is from this angle.

“Shut it, you stupid-” The old man glares and seethes at him, he holds the knife like he might use it on him, now that he knows 27 can’t fight back properly. Dissect him. Cut him open, dress him like dressing game, like *this guy’s looking like a dressed deer after what we did, but he still won’t talk. You’ll help us out with that, won’tcha kid?*

“Stop,” 27 says, barely hearing the break in his voice when he can’t open his eyes enough to know whether he’s talking to Honzo or the old man. He feels his chest moving too quickly and his throat screaming in pain at the cold air being roughly dragged over it, more than he’s aware of his own hands moving and reaching pointlessly for the point that he’s bound.

But eventually the panic dies down just enough, his arms drop back down without the strength to fight, and he’s slowly pulled out of the numb buzzing inside his skull by Aizawa’s voice.

“Shinsou!” Aizawa sounds like too many things, angry and worried and it’s almost foreign enough for Hitoshi to almost mistake him for someone else. Aizawa is looking for him, and Aizawa will see him like this. He kicks out his leg trying to get free without thinking and regrets it with another pang lacing down his leg, his eyes squeezed tight, and he hears the deer utter a weaker bellow.

“He-here! Over here! He-*help*,” 27 isn’t sure if he’s loud enough, if he *can* force enough air inside his chest to call out for help. He hears the deer crying out louder, and the sound drags on. 27 screws his eyes shut so he can’t see what’s happening to that deer, how the old bastard must be killing it, until he feels pressure around his calf and bends up to fight it.

Only to see Aizawa looking down at him, his long hair seems longer as it fans out over his shoulders. His hands are wrapped around 27’s leg right under his knee. “Breathe.”

There’s just a firmness in Aizawa’s gaze, how his frown deepens, that makes 27 think he means ‘breathe out,’ a trick that he learned quickly to keep from screaming. 27 breathes out and fights to

hold that in his chest until Aizawa lifts him by his leg and the pain in his ankle flares white, bright enough that it's hard to notice that Aizawa squeezes his leg harder to move a hand up to the snare, but he notices when his hand barely brushes his shoe and that pain flares again. "*Fuck.*"

Aizawa slowly lowers him to the ground, crouching next to his foot, and 27 brings his hands next to him in the snow and folds up his uninjured leg to make sure he can get away if he needs to. Aizawa's hand starts pulling his pant leg up. "You spend too much time with Bakugo."

27 wants to find some retort to that, wants to voice this burning offense at everything from thinking that 27 hadn't learned worse swears from Rikiya to how Aizawa's grandfather was a goddamn *lunatic*, but Aizawa gently pressing on his ankle makes him flinch. "Broken. The deer-"

27 turns his head to look but what he sees makes him still. The deer was panting, laid out against the snow and past the point of fighting, but the old man was standing there with his arms at his sides, eyes glazed over. The knife dropped on the ground. "You shouldn't have been out here-"

"*You* shouldn't-" 27 bites off words that don't make sense. He wants to blame Aizawa for this but he can't find any reason to. The heat boils under his skin and itches, and he feels so *cold* that he hates that he decided to go outside in the first place. He can't look at Aizawa, but he stares at his ankle and frowns. "Don't kill it."

A weak plea, probably nonsense. He has nothing to offer Aizawa in return, no reason to make him agree to it. It might be kinder to kill that deer and end its suffering, but 27 can't stomach that. He can't find it anything less than unbearably cruel that the deer was forced into this situation when even the crazy old bastard had no use for it. Aizawa just sighs, harsh and irritated. "Shouldn't have taken you out here."

27 digs his hands deeper into the snow, chasing the sting from that. Trying not to flinch. Of course Aizawa regretted it.

"*He* shouldn't have," Aizawa says, barely less irritated. Far more tired, when he pulls himself up to stand. 27 turns his head just enough to watch out of the corner of his eye as Aizawa approaches the deer, giving his grandfather a wide berth as he passes him.

The deer gives a loud groan when Aizawa gets closer, trying to warn him away, but Aizawa steps on something that makes a loud creaking whine, and the deer struggles against the snow to right itself. 27 can see how mangled and bloody its leg is, but the deer manages to keep it bent to avoid using it as it stands. It walks forward, then turns around and jogs away, slowly but it escapes.

Aizawa turns around to look at him, that same deep frown, and 27 finds himself envious of the deer. "Do *not* leave like that again. You are here, at this *safe house*, to stay *safe*. Am I understood?"

"Can't exactly ru-*un*," 27 winces, making a mistake of trying to pull his other leg closer, aggravating the break. "Run off right now."

Aizawa rolls his eyes up, staring at the sky for an absurdly long time, before his arms move out just to drop at his sides. "We'll have to see if the old man has a splint or not. But you're right, you won't be running off anytime soon, since Recovery Girl isn't exactly in walking distance."

Aizawa rubs his eyes, and 27 thinks this is probably the most irritated he's ever seen Aizawa. He wondered what would make him angry, and he never imagined it would be breaking his own leg.

Aizawa glances at his grandfather, before he walks towards him and picks up the knife to tuck the

handle into his pocket, before he walks back to 27. “Try to work on letting the old man go on your own while we go back.”

27 huffs, sure that will make for an even more fun walk while he tries to find a way to stand up without irritating his injury, until he realizes that Aizawa is crouching too close to him. “Fine, I’ll-hey!”

Aizawa’s arms are already under his knees and behind his back, 27’s hand clenching in the fabric of his shirt when he’s lifted up, unsure whether he should try to fight his way out of this hold. “You can’t walk like this. Just...” The underside of 27’s knees, his back, his side where he’s touching Aizawa doesn’t sting, but he feels an uncomfortable buzz that he wants to escape from. He can feel the sigh in Aizawa’s chest before he sees it in a plume of fog that’s *far* too close to him. “Put up with it until we get there.”

27 grinds his teeth, because he *doesn’t* want to put up with it. But he doesn’t have much choice in the matter, since Aizawa probably won’t put him down. At least he can ignore Aizawa’s instructions and he won’t know about it.

Maybe Aizawa walks slower because he wants to make 27 find a way to release his control over the old man. Maybe it’s because 27 is suddenly heavier than he expected. 27 has been carried around by Yamada a few times, and Mirio once, and it makes him wonder if they’re just far stronger than they should be or if 27 is so much lighter than he realizes.

Then again, 27 has been flung across a training room enough times to know that he’s pretty weightless.

After they reach the shack, Aizawa turns around to shove his back against the door, and just the escape from the cold is almost smothering, making every inch of 27’s exposed skin prickle. Aizawa kicks the door closed, and carries him closer to the fire, putting him down on the edge of the old man’s filthy blankets before he stands up and starts poking around some wooden boxes stacked against the wall.

“The control?” Aizawa asks, and 27 busies himself with looking at the fire, watching the wood chips crackle and burn, holding his still reddened hands up to it.

“I can’t feel it the same way,” 27 admits, even if he doesn’t want to. It feels like a better trade, or at least that’s what he convinces himself it is. This slow turn in the pit of his stomach tells him it’s different, it’s something to do with the ghost of Nemoto haunting more than his quirk, but telling him that it’s wrong to lie. Confession and everything, it’s even turning on himself.

Aizawa just hums. “I’ll deal with him later, then.”

The way Aizawa shoves that box back into place seems to promise that the old man won’t like the way that Aizawa deals with him. He turns around with something in his hands, what 27 can recognize as fabric but it seems like there’s something else. 27 just stares at the fire, and tries not to count all the ways he’s irritated Aizawa or how Bug would ‘test’ whether he’d really gotten injured during training.

Aizawa sits down next to his broken ankle, and 27 bites down on his inner lip to keep himself from saying anything. “If you’d rather....” Aizawa stops, and 27 waits, trying not to look, but just the slightest pressure from Aizawa touching the bottom of his shoe makes him flinch. “Put up with it a bit longer. This would be difficult for you to do yourself.”

27 bites down a bit too hard when Aizawa pulls his shoe off after pulling out the laces, and winces

when his fingers touch his ankle, pulling off his sock. 27 only looks when he feels something cold pressed against his skin, and sees a flat piece of metal held against his ankle, Aizawa placing a ruler on the other side. He holds both with one hand before he picks up some bandages, glancing up at him.

"I'm not angry at you," Aizawa says, something that he says often, but 27 feels like this has to be the time he's lying to him. "I was worried when you weren't here. And I'm honestly impressed that you manage to get injured so often, every time my back is turned."

"Don't turn your back on me, then," 27 says, and he's not sure how much he means that, why it feels like he means it more than he wants to. "Could stab you there."

Aizawa looks up at him from where he's winding the bandages around his ankles, his bloodshot eyes are red enough to make it look like he's using his quirk. 27 regrets saying anything. "That's not very convincing given your concern for the deer."

"A *serow*," 27 corrects, because he just can't keep his mouth shut. He should be quiet, he shouldn't be irritating Aizawa right now, not when he's holding an ankle that he could snap into a 90 degree angle more easily than he could before. But he likes that word for the deer, ever since Aizawa told him its name.

"A *serow*," Aizawa repeats, the corner of his mouth turning up in a smirk. "I'm even less convinced that you would do that."

Aizawa winds the bandage down until he pulls it under the bottom of his foot to give him some support there. 27 did that for Eri a few times, after she became so curious about shoes. Chisaki never gave her a pair, but she used to try to wear his when she was younger.

"You need to sleep," Aizawa says, in a quiet, odd way, a way that 27 hates hearing. "Three hours, maybe last night. Two the night before. Hizashi said you were awake early the night before that--"

"I don't need to. I'm not tired," 27 says, even if the warm fire makes his body betray him. He wishes he could roll his ankle to ignore the worn weight of his bones, how much effort it's taking just to hold himself upright on his arms. "I know I'm going to see him again if I sleep."

Aizawa glances up at him, tucking the end of the bandage under to keep it secure. 27 just watches his hand hovering over his ankle, his blunt fingers hesitating before they pull away. He knows that Aizawa is staring at him, but he doesn't know what he wants to hear, or if 27 can say it. "Tell me something that reminds you of UA. Of Eri, or Hizashi."

Something that he can recreate, Hitoshi imagines. Something to cling to as a lie to convince himself that 127 isn't real, and isn't going to kill him if he hasn't been killed by Bug. Some thin veil to cover his eyes to the reality of his situation. "There's nothing here."

Eri isn't here to demand that he make a snow angel. Yamada isn't here to invite him to help make breakfast, on a stove that they don't have and with food that isn't here either. This place is a safe house and only that, isolation that is supposed to provide safety and cover.

27 wishes that he could believe it's safe, but he knows it's as temporary as any lie that Aizawa wants him to believe in so that he can sleep, and stop bothering Aizawa.

"There's nothing," Aizawa repeats, leaning back, braced on his arms. "But you still need to sleep. "You're going to start hearing things if you keep up with this."

That's good, because 27 isn't afraid to start hearing things. To start hearing 50's voice again.

Aizawa leans forward again, he should just make up his mind instead of startling 27 when his mind feels so muddled and everything is too sharp. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

Aizawa reaches out his hand, but 27 looks down at the bark dusting the side of his jacket, brushing it away. “Hit a tree. It’s fine.”

27 knows when he’s injured, he knows bruised ribs, broken ribs, shattered ribs, and he doubts he’s even *bruised* with how thick this jacket is padded, but Aizawa’s hovering hand and his lingering gaze snaps at something behind 27’s eyes. Calling him *stupid*.

27 pulls his jacket off, then his shirt, staring at the fire but staring through it. He can practically feel how much distance there is between this place and UA, the hours that it took to travel here by *car* and how difficult it would be to make that distance on foot, especially now.

“Pick a scar,” 27 says, because he doesn’t have to look to know that he’s not injured, that Aizawa should see he’s not even bruised even if he *can* see anything that isn’t scars. 27 waits, waits for whatever conversation Aizawa wants to have, whichever story 27 *might* remember. There’s too many of them now.

Instead, he sees Aizawa moving out of the corner of his eye, he can see a flash of black fabric. He glances and catches a flash of Aizawa folding his arms across his bare chest. “Pick one.”

27 glances again, and with the way Aizawa’s arms are folded, he can see the most interesting one. 27 doesn’t let his gaze linger, but he can see knife wounds, he can see burns. He’s never seen that many scars outside of what would peek out from under Miasma’s uniform, on hands and necks and faces, and he knows from his own body what ways most scars are laid down on skin. There’s one he can’t identify. “Elbow.”

Aizawa is too quiet beneath the crackling of the fire, and 27 knows this is just a game to him. He can decide not to play. “Decaying quirk. Disintegrated my skin, blood vessels in seconds. It would have spread if I didn’t cancel it.”

‘*Spread*’ seems to mean that if it wasn’t specifically Aizawa’s quirk being used on it, Aizawa’s entire arm would be gone in minutes. If he survived that long, something far more vital would be next, his chest or his head.

“I was protecting my students,” Aizawa says, even if he says it quietly.

Aizawa told him about a nightmare that he has often, one he started having after he was trying to protect a group of people but he was knocked out by a strength enhanced opponent, and didn’t know if they were safe until he woke up. He doesn’t know if that was the same situation, and for some reason, Aizawa didn’t want to tell him that he nearly failed to protect his students.

As though he didn’t want 27 to know he might not be able to protect him. 27 has known that.

“50 died,” 27 says, tapping the shortest scar on the arm closest to Aizawa, and he doesn’t need to look away from the fire to know which one it is. “First time training with my quirk. Unlocked my mask. I took control of 98 and 65. Tried to escape.”

Take me safely out of the compound. That was what he asked for, what he commanded. What a *stupid* kid, pulling that stunt in front of *Bug* during training.

“8 hours,” 27 says, even if it barely feels like he’s saying it. He doesn’t remember exactly, the first time was the hardest to remember. He hadn’t learned how to properly panic in the restraints, to not thrash so much, to just let his eyes close and his chest heave and try not to *think* about why the

walls were so red. The conversations he heard in the hallways about whether it was paint or *not*. “First real job, after I was numbered. It was a setup. I tried to run. First time with Cherry and...”

Blossom. 27’s jaw snaps shut at that, his hand squeezing tighter when he remembers to move his fingers to the second scar.

“8 hours.” 27’s hand moves to his neck, and even now he can’t remember when Bug removed them. He was just so sure with every inch of progress after those maggots crossed his collarbone that it would be *it* for him. The end. Just a dream of freedom. “Sold to Chisaki. 12 hours-”

“Shinsou,” Aizawa says, just the suddenness of his voice sounds like a reprimand, just the way he leans forward seems like a threat.

“Right, your *favorite*. I *messed up* with a client,” 27 says, his voice foreign to his own ears, his fingers shaking when he can only stand to touch the edges of the scars on his stomach. His eyes squint from the fire, from the smoke it seems, and he rubs at his nose just as an excuse to pull away his hand. His nose is dripping and wet. “Bodyguard job. He nearly died. Decided to see if I’d die too. Leave it to chance-”

“Shinsou, you don-”

“*Tell* me I’m safe,” 27 demands, looking away from the fire to stare at Aizawa, to pin him down and *force* him to tell a lie instead of truth for a change. He stares and he can’t even tell what Aizawa looks like right now. “Every time I’ve *tried* to get out, *they’ve* been there. I’m *not* getting out! As soon as-”

27 turns away, hands making useless fists, as though he could fight it. As though he could even *try*, a broken ankle making it difficult for him to stand, the pain an easy weakness for anyone to recognize and take advantage of. He’s *weak* and *useless*.

“As soon as your back is turned, they’ll take me back. Strapped into the Red Room. B-Bug’s maggots.” 27’s fingernails drag against the wood, the barest sensation he can feel, and he wants nothing more than to make Bug’s job easier for her. Start tearing his own scars open again for her. He just can’t move his hands.

“I’m not turning my back on you.”

27 squints as his vision blurs, he can’t believe that in the slightest. He *knows* Aizawa doesn’t care, he wants one simple thing from 27, and 27 has only made it this far because he hasn’t given that up. He’s dragged this stalemate out long enough, he’s irritated Aizawa this far because he’s been allowed to. But that’s coming to an end, his days are numbered.

But he drags himself to look at Aizawa, to believe some placid lie that’s supposed to settle him. The firm determination in Aizawa’s frown, the way his eyes pin 27 down makes him at least believe that Aizawa doesn’t want that. For whatever reason. “They will *never* touch you again. You will *never* go through that again. You *have* escaped.”

Escaped The Miasma, *maybe*. Only to be dissected by the heroes instead. “They’re going to turn me into Eri. Cut me apart because I’m a Nomu-”

“They’re *not*,” Aizawa says, the rough growl of his voice snaps Hitoshi’s jaw shut as firmly as a mask closing around his jaw. He can’t believe that, Aizawa *is* a hero. He knows where his allegiances lie, and it’s not with whatever a Nomu is. “Hizashi and I are going to keep you safe, at any cost.”

“*When*,” Hitoshi asks, as flatly as he can. Still feeling the buzz and pull under his skin when he realizes what he said, how it *should* work, pulling his hands to scrub at his face and collect the tears running over scars. He can’t feel his hands as much over that scarred skin. “I was alone, and I...”

He was going to do it. He drew back the knife with the intent to kill, and that stain lingers on his hands even if he didn’t succeed. He can’t pull away from that.

“I’m not going back,” 27 says, and he feels hollow after he makes it real like that. This ‘safe house’ isn’t a temporary measure, he can’t go *back* to UA now. He’ll never be able to look at that snow where he stained it, to feel anything but the stain on his hands. To feel the ghost of Nemoto haunting him, something he can’t rip out, *stealing his voice*. “*I can’t*.”

27 hides his face against his bent knee, his hands folded around his nose like he’s ashamed that he’s crying. It’s so much worse than that, it’s so much *worse* and Aizawa doesn’t know. He can’t possibly know how pitch black this stain is. “You’re not going back to them. They were able to attack because of... a flaw, in the security system. When we go back to UA, you won’t be unescorted anymore-”

“That won’t *help*!” 27 snaps, his hands drawing away as the heat of the fire in front of him seems to swell, only to die out as soon as he looks at Aizawa. But Aizawa doesn’t understand. “They’re going to kill me, and anyone who’s trying to protect me, and I don’t want....”

He can’t let them *die*.

Whoever he’s with, he’s a danger to. Their blood on his hands, that *stain*. He won’t take it, he can’t *live* with that.

“We *will* keep you safe,” Aizawa says, another promise. Another baseless lie to believe in. “They’re not going to kill me, or Hizashi, or anyone. That’s what we’re trained to do as heroes, *protect* you, and you need to trust us that much.”

Trust. Trust that somehow, Aizawa and Yamada and everyone he cares about is beyond that inevitable death, beyond The Miasma’s reach. That they would be willing to-

I’ll die as a hero. That’s what Mirio said.

That’s what 27 *doesn’t want*.

“We have all faced villains, criminals, people trying to kill and willing to kill us. We have not failed,” Aizawa says, but he hasn’t faced The Miasma. Only 127, and even then he had help. “We will not fail you.”

27 breathes out, pressing his face back to his bent knee. He’s just so tired, so tired of fighting it. Fighting alone. If Aizawa wants him to believe in this pleasant lie, to be convinced just enough, he can take these weary bones. 27 doesn’t want them. “I’m tired.”

Aizawa pulls himself to stand, the sound of him pulling his shirt back on is the only indication that he is, when 27 won’t bring himself to look at him. When he hears Aizawa walk away, hears him brush the tarp that serves as a door aside, 27 just clenches his fists.

I’m not turning my back on you.

Aizawa comes back, holding his sleeping bag, and he lays it out on top of the old man’s bedding behind 27. “I’ll stay here with you, while you sleep.”

27 glances at the sleeping bag, watching Aizawa settle to sit against the wall. 27 grabs his discarded shirt in a fist, staring at the shoe he still needs to take off. “Creepy.”

27 only hears Aizawa grunt, something that sounds amused while 27 pulls his shirt on and his shoe off, pulling the sleeping bag closer to the fire before he starts tucking himself inside. “Only if I watch you sleep.”

Hitoshi huffs, zipping himself inside. He can’t really find an angle where his ankle doesn’t hurt from his foot pressing against the inside of the sleeping bag, the weight of it on top of him feels smothering. At least it’s a little soothing. “You’re going to leave the old man to die outside.”

“Maybe,” Aizawa says, something about that tone sounds teasing, but something else about it sounds like he’s fine with that possibility. It’s a bit heartless. “Frostbite should wake him up, if you falling asleep doesn’t. Your safety is my priority, either way.”

“I’m fine,” Hitoshi says, the cold that had soaked him to the bone finally fading under this warmth, more fully than the fire could manage. “You can leave.”

“I won’t.”

Hitoshi feels the darkness pulling at the edges of his mind, and he can’t possibly fight to open his eyes right now. He knows if he could move his foot, twist his ankle enough, he could stay awake. Stay alert. Stay away from 127 haunting him.

But he’s never been told a bedtime story like Eri has, and the idea of Aizawa keeping watch over him while he sleeps is a good one.

*

8 hours. Cherry. Bug’s maggots.

Aizawa agreed that it would be creepy if he watched Hitoshi sleep, but he can’t stop himself. Watching his eyes work back and forth under his eyelids, wondering what he sees in his sleep. If he can possibly fight it for him.

Aizawa folds his hands, only to rub his eyes with them. He *knew* there was torture involved in the creation of those scars, but to hear it like *that*.

Maggots. For *hours*. Furokage Mizuki died when Hitoshi was *nine*. He hasn’t forgotten that.

When Aizawa was nine years old, he was still young enough to be upset about outgrowing his favorite Ganriki Neko sweatshirt. He was still losing baby teeth. Hitoshi was being *tortured*.

Aizawa has known this would be difficult. He wanted to stop peeling back the scars to see the useful information in Hitoshi’s history long ago. He wishes he could stop knowing, stop thinking about it, half as much as he wishes it *never* happened in the first place.

Hitoshi is terrified, and he has reasons to have that fear. Aizawa won’t let any of those reasons come true, not Miasma, not The Commission, he won’t let *any* of that hurt Hitoshi. If it’s the last thing he does, he will *give* this child peace. He will give Hitoshi safety, for the first time in his life.

He will protect him, and he will give him that final escape. A true one.

He can’t help but be proud that Hitoshi has never given up from chasing it on his own, by himself. That he’s *never* given up, not *once*. Even if he deserved better. To never be faced with something

to fight that hard.

Aizawa gives the door a weary look when it opens, and can't barely bring himself to recognize his grandfather's entrance. The door closes, and Aizawa wishes he didn't have to deal with whatever mood his grandfather is bringing in with him. "Kid alright?"

That question, the weak way it was asked, is as surprising as the sight of the old man kicking his shoes against the floor mat to clean them. "His ankle is sprained. From your *trap*."

The old man shouldn't have taken Hitoshi out there to begin with, because of that danger. He probably didn't tell him how to see the markers for those traps. Neither did Aizawa. "And you let that deer loose, to die a slow, painful, cruel death. You know better than to—"

"He was *hysterical*, because he shouldn't have seen that," Aizawa says, bristling with those familiar words. He *does* know better, and he should have known better than to bring Hitoshi to this place, when he knows the old man so well. Better than anyone else. "You don't know what he's been through."

Shoga kicks his shoes off against the wall, making Hitoshi stir with the noise, but not wake. The old man makes his way to the fire, and Aizawa doesn't see any reason to let him, even if it's his. "So, when are you leaving? Running off again, like you always do when you never tell anyone *anything* worth *shit*?"

The implication there, that *fond* memory of the last time he'd laid eyes on his grandfather, makes that option *incredibly* tempting. "Tomorrow. It can't come sooner."

Shoga at least sits far enough away from Hitoshi that it doesn't rattle something Aizawa is *trying* to keep down, pulling threadbare and dirty blankets around himself. Aizawa has had more pity for strangers, for vagrants he's seen in alleyways. He knows there's a better possibility that they're better people, that don't deserve it. "Then, you're trapped here with me, and tomorrow you're leaving for another nine years. And I won't be alive to see that."

Aizawa can't tell if the numbness from that thought, that near inevitability and logical conclusion given how old the man is and how he lives, is something that he truly feels or if it's something he thinks he should. His grandfather saying it so bluntly makes him feel guilty for believing it won't make a difference. "Come down to visit for Christmas, then. You can apologize for the things you said to Hizashi then. My husband."

He's calling the old man's bluff, because he won't do any of that. If his grandfather wants some reconciliation in his twilight years, he'll have to earn it. Aizawa won't just hand it to him based on blood or history. He has to change. "Nine years. Seems he's good for you, then. Kept your ass alive this long."

Aizawa has to look, has to see if there's some indication that this is some Shapeshifter quirk that's taken his grandfather's identity. Instead, he just sees an old man shivering under his blankets, rubbing his thin and wrinkled hands, staring ahead as obstinately as he's always been. Unwilling to change his views for anyone, or any evidence that he should.

"You didn't tell me a *thing*, about that or... anything. *Hell*, I raised you, I paid for your fancy school," his grandfather grumbles, as if the money he had buried under this shack was wasted at UA, as if the rest of it hadn't rotted by now. As if that's the only reason Aizawa should have told him. It's the reason he didn't.

"You didn't come with me," Aizawa says, still finding that irrational and childish pang in his chest

hasn't died as much as he thought, after all these years. "You decided to stay here, despite everything. I was alone in that apartment to discover these things, to realize... And I didn't think it would matter."

"It doesn't," Shoga answers, with the *irrational* stubbornness that *cannot* be tolerated from a man who chased Hizashi out of his shack while *firing a weapon*. "But you didn't tell me. Shit, knowing you, I thought you were only getting married because you knocked some girl up or something. You just... aren't like that. Being like that, around people. *Changed* so much. In those years."

Aizawa had been busy after he graduated, after he became a hero. Before that, it seemed rational to spend his extended breaks at Hizashi's house rather than trekking through the mountains. Going years without seeing each other wasn't new, but leaving without the vague promise to visit again was. And Aizawa wasn't going to make that promise when he was trying to hold back the urge to *kill* the man who was trying to hurt Hizashi.

"I know I should have done better. Taken responsibility instead of being a miserable drunk. It's my fault that Misaki is like that. Defective quirk," Shoga says, and he's never said *anything* about this before. But he's never been this sober either, given that Aizawa hasn't seen him drink a single drop since he arrived to this shack. "They say drinking increases the chances of it--"

"For pregnant *women*," Aizawa has to clarify, because he remembers his grandmother was a *saint* who never would have done that, and he knows his grandfather is just unhinged enough to take that fact *differently*.

And he's unsurprised the old man huffs and shakes his head. "I had my part in it! Shit, I was young and... little swimmers were soaked in it, I bet. Had to have had an effect on it."

Aizawa just sighs, leaning his head back against the wall to stare at the ceiling. He's *not* going to give a man in his nineties a biology lesson. "Just because she needs her quirk to see doesn't give her an excuse. It doesn't justify it."

And just because her son was born with the *only* quirk that could erase hers, and make her blind in the short time that he *could* have used it on her before he blinked, was *no* excuse for the way Aizawa Misaki acted as a mother. Despite her thousands of claims to the contrary, and despite that *stupid fucking* eyepatch she forced him to wear, he *never* erased his mother's quirk. Not even *once*.

And Aizawa wouldn't be surprised if his mother knows that. She just wanted a convenient way to escape the son she bore with the intention to trap a man who would never marry her. A gamble with permanent consequences she never thought out fully.

Giving birth to him didn't make her a mother. And making sure that Aizawa lived until he was self-sufficient didn't make his grandfather into a father.

But there was a time that Aizawa saw it that way, when he could even be proud to be related to the old fool. When he wished that his grandfather was there at his wedding, even with that bitter parting still fresh in his memory that day.

The sake that he drank during the ceremony was especially bitter because of it. "I don't know how to help him. Hitoshi."

Aizawa finds himself staring again, watching Hitoshi sleep like the dead, too weary after the lack of sleep to even move or stir. The circles of exhaustion under his eyes are the worst Aizawa has ever seen then, his eyes bloodshot when they're open. Red and irritated when he cried. He's *terrified*. "It's your hero job to protect him, but it seems like you're getting into more than that."

‘Hitoshi.’”

“It’s what he wants me to call him. It’s...complicated,” Aizawa says, the fewest words that could never describe how many names Hitoshi has been *forced* to be called, to be named, when he has only ever deserved to answer to his own. ‘Hitoshi’ is what a parent would call this child, anyone who had the right and burden to protect him, to keep him well and raise him well until he was self-sufficient.

That’s not the whole of what Aizawa wants to do for Hitoshi, but that’s the closest name it can be called. Even if it’s temporary. “And you’re not going to tell me how it’s ‘complicated,’ or shit else about it. You just want your ego stroked.”

Aizawa glances out of the corner of his eye to remind his grandfather he *doesn’t* want that, he’s never needed or *received* some baseless praise. He doesn’t want false reassurance.

He honestly doesn’t know what he wants to hear. “In case you forgot, you’re a damn fine hero. You didn’t go into it for money or attention or praise, you decided to do the right thing however you can, wherever you can find it, at whatever cost. You turned out better than you were raised.”

He doesn’t want thinly veiled self-deprecation from the old man either. If the old man had such regrets, he could have said them sooner, or acted on them. When it might have mattered.

“Whatever this kid is going through, gone through, seen or not seen, he just needs a good person in his corner, to be there through it. And he’s got you,” his grandfather says, pulling his blankets closer around himself. “And you’re not the type to run off when it gets hard, when it really counts. That’s what he needs.”

Hitoshi needs so many more things, things that Aizawa can’t give him as easily as he can *want* to. He can claw at the restrictions that the wardship and investigation impose all he wants, Hitoshi won’t *get* what he needs until Miasma has been dealt with.

But he has Aizawa, at least, and he’s not running away. He’s not turning his back on Hitoshi.

If it can be as simple as being there for him, through the terror and anger and *gut-wrenching* pain, Aizawa will be there.

He just wishes he could do more.

Trust Fall

Chapter Summary

The possibility of Eri's quirk becoming active again caused her to be taken to the mountains along with Aizawa and Shinsou, and that risk comes true. Aizawa and Shinsou scramble to deal with it, but when Shinsou finds himself trapped in overwhelming memories, he looks towards a poor source of help. Eri's power blooms, when she moves forward with the strength of those surrounding her, and with her own strength recognized.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Painful sensory flashbacks, Distressed Eri, Underage drinking, Vague and unconfirmed implications of sexual assault (an unnamed character targeted by criminals because she was the daughter of a yakuza Head)

Previously on Wards of UA: The Big Three and Eri are staying with the Ketsubutsu training camp close to the mountain shack where Aizawa and Shinsou are staying, and Yo Shindo has made his rivalry with UA and Mirio specifically known previously. Shinsou sprained his ankle after being caught in a leg snare, and revealed to Aizawa that he was still afraid of what would happen if he were attacked again. Shinsou's quirk has mutated with Nemoto's Confession quirk, and now any question that Shinsou asks warps into one that the target doesn't want to answer, but they will be forced to answer truthfully. When Eri's quirk wouldn't activate for Chisaki, he would show Eri videos of Shinsou fighting and being hurt in the pit fights he arranged. When 127 attacked Shinsou at UA, Eri was placed with Bakugo ('Ugo') with Aizawa's instructions to stay with him so that 'he and Shinsou would know where to go to be safe,' but with Shinsou's injuries, Aizawa couldn't complete that. Chisaki would clap next to Eri's ear when she misspoke. When Shinsou would have to take Eri to the chair, he would ask her a question, which Eri used to answer with 'uh-huh' when she was younger. Eri Rewound the fusion of Chisaki, Nemoto, and Shinsou during the raid before she jumped to grab onto Midoriya. Eri remembers the 'Sakazuki' game fondly, but Shinsou doesn't, as during that 'game' Shinsou would have to give Eri doses of drugged milk and promise to give her nice things or good experiences, 'as long as they obey Chisaki.' While Shinsou, Yamada, and Eri can tell each other that they love each other, Aizawa hasn't told either ward that he loves them too. Before Shinsou was attacked by 127, he had been able to ask questions freely to Eri, but when he tried to ask Mirio if he would run too in order to escape 127, the question warped with Confession. Shinsou's tattoos were removed or altered by a tattoo artist who had a quirk that specialized in removal, in an earlier chapter.

Mirio grins and waves as the rest of the training camp members make their way haggardly down from the 5 kilometer hiking trail, finding it easier to grin when he almost timed it perfectly today. "Just in time for lunch!"

Yo had made a better effort of trying to catch up to him today, but Mirio has been the winner of the 'not competitive at all' hiking trails, push-ups, weight lifts, and *almost* all of the other training events. Yo emerges from the boy's cabin after cleaning up, still breathing a bit too hard, and still too exhausted to look anything but that when he glares at the lunch spread. "You bastard."

Mirio just smiles at him, cupping his hands around Eri's innocent little ears as a reminder, which doesn't stop her from raising her hands and cheering for everyone else's return. "We made lunch! I helped!"

"*Sustenance*," Shikikui sighs, sounding completely winded before he slumps onto one of the waiting benches to start digging in. "Made by tiny, capable hands. It's more filling."

"*Mom*," Tatami groans, slung over Ms. Joke's shoulder. It's definitely telling what a smaller class size can do for teacher-student relations, because Mirio has heard the Ketsubutsu students call Ms. Joke that a couple times. And he's pretty sure he'd *die* if he called Ecto-sensei 'Dad.' "I want one. *Please*."

"I know, I know, UA's hero course has the *best* mascot *ever*," Ms. Joke says with her own groan, pulling herself and Tatami onto a bench. "That's why we've got to steal her, alright? Because getting lunch from Eri everyday is just a dream come true, isn't it?!"

Mirio just smiles, because it's easy to take for granted what Eri means to the hero students at UA. Even if it's as small as seeing her walk through the hallway, just being a happy little kid, it *means* something. Victory, over the worst villains. Rescuing someone from their darkest moments, and carrying them through to safety.

He doesn't mind it at all if Eri takes all the credit. "That's actually the secret to why I've been beating you guys down the mountain! Eating snacks with Eri is my secret power-up!"

Tamaki rolls his eyes, but he doesn't point out that he's just been training his body more physically, instead of quirk training. Mirio appreciates it.

He's been able to pull off most of these training activities without being put in a corner due to his lack of a quirk, even if he's had to take some losses. It's not as easy, he would *definitely* represent UA better if he had it. But Ms. Joke keeps the training kind of chill, like it's just an opportunity to train, but there's no pressure coming from anyone but themselves.

And he thinks it actually made Yo angrier to win in that sparring match when Yo had him trapped waist deep in dirt and snow, even if it took Mirio a minute to work up a smile knowing how *easily* he could have gotten out of it.

After lunch, Ms. Joke announces they have an hour to digest and rest before they have dedicated quirk training, followed by a lumberjack competition. Mirio is sure that this time, that means the Ketsubutsu students are going to rest in their rooms for a bit, and Eri and himself can work on their snow bunny village, but that's not the case at all.

"Snowball fight!" Nejire yells, catching the back of Itejiro's head while he was walking to the Boy's Cabin to rest, and that's *really* the best way to set off a war zone.

Itejiro's Boomerang quirk made him the *best* snowball fighter by far, and Nejire didn't take that challenge to her crown lightly when they first dueled it out. *Playfully*, and all.

Now Mirio is just trying to run for cover. Eri is giggling in his arms *now*, but he knows things can turn just a bit more bloodthirsty any minute now with the snow flying and the quirks starting to

enter the mix. Nejire uses her quirk to send a wave of snow, only for Yo to counter her completely with his hands braced on the ground, settling that wave bit by bit until it dies out at his friends' feet. Tamaki has already sprung wings to drop behind the Ketsubutsu students and try to get the drop on their snipers, but Tatami is nowhere to be found, and she's a *brutally efficient* flanker.

Mirio ducks into another roll with Eri cradled tight to his chest, and he wonders if they could just slip out of this for some more quiet fun. Especially when he looks down at her, and she looks like she's getting a little sick without the time for lunch to settle. "Maybe we should get out of here for a bit, they're getting kind of rowdy. We can find a safer place to make some snow bunnies...."

Mirio trails off, watching Eri look less sick and more *terrified* for some reason, one that starts with just a flicker from her horn.

He doesn't know if it's selfish that he hesitates before he pulls her to stand up on her own and backs away. "Eri, it's okay-"

"*No!*" Eri screams, and she reaches for him, but he sees the moment that she realizes what's happening fully when she drops her hands, just to hold herself and crumple to the ground. *Shaking.*

It's so hard not to pull her into his arms again. "Eri, you're safe. You're not going to get hurt. I'm here, okay?"

It's not like he can do anything else but tell her that. To keep anyone running over to keep their distance, just for their own safety.

What a hero, Lemillion is, when Eri is shaking and screaming on the ground, her quirk blazing around her, and there's *nothing* he can do to help.

*

Aizawa had been looking through his grandfather's MREs, pondering which one would be the most edible option with some *unnecessary* input from the old man whenever he caught him frowning, when the radio cut on. "*Aizawa-sensei, it's happening.*"

Aizawa barely remembered crossing the distance to the radio to answer Hadou's panic, his mind trapped in needing confirmation when in the back of his mind, he knew he was wasting precious time. "Where? And when did it start?"

"*At camp, just now. She's not... she's not listening to us at all.*" Aizawa clenches his jaw, because while Emi was trained as well as any other hero course teacher in quirk training, including the basics such as activation and deactivation, he knew Eri's case was different from any other young child.

After what she had endured because of her quirk, what she had experienced *while* her quirk was active, she needed every piece of safety and reassurance in this moment to make such an advance forward. To reclaim control of her quirk. She needed the reassurance that his own quirk provides, that she won't be able to Rewind someone accidentally, that she would have that escape of Erasure if it were too much.

But Hitoshi needs him as well. "Give it."

Aizawa looks over his shoulder to see Hitoshi limping across the floor, his purple hair more of a mess, and his eyes still bleary and tired from being awoken at some point in the interruption. His hand is reaching for the receiver, and Aizawa hands it over with some trepidation. "Have you ever done this over a phone, or a loud speaker?"

He sees Hitoshi look down, confirmation in that shake of his head.

That was what Aizawa had suspected, and given that they don't know the full limitations of Hitoshi's quirk, this might be one of them. Hizashi's quirk is also weakened when directed into electronic communication devices, which he uses with his speakers to fine tune the control over his quirk.

"Take the radio to Eri," Hitoshi commands into the receiver, with a breathless 'Roger' in answer from Hadou, the sounds of another student in the background helping her locate a longer power strip to bring the radio to where Eri is. "You need to go."

Aizawa meets Hitoshi's bloodshot eyes, and he sees how much Hitoshi is worried, how much he knows this situation is dangerous for everyone involved. If Eri's quirk remains out of control for too long, without something to siphon off its power, it could hurt Eri, just as much as drawing out its active time could strain against her limits.

But that subtle shake in Hitoshi's hand, growing worse, reminds Aizawa of what he promised. That he wouldn't turn his back on Hitoshi, especially now, now when he was so *terrified* of being attacked again.

"You can guide her through the radio. She needs to know you're there," Aizawa says, even if that rends at him in his chest. He wants nothing more than to rush to Eri's side, to give her the control that he *promised* her, to give her the reassurance she needs, to do what he *promised* to do when Eri became a ward *specifically* because of his quirk.

Two children need him, and he can't abandon both fully. "*She's here.*"

"Eri," Hitoshi calls, his voice full of panic, his teeth clenched after the word. Aizawa knows this rends at Hitoshi too, that they *both* should be there, and Aizawa doesn't know if he could be enough for Eri to feel safe if he's alone because of that.

"*Twenny!*" Eri's voice is strained and high, terror in answer to panic. Aizawa knows the sight that accompanies that scream is a heartbreaking one, to see the fears Aizawa can only mitigate to a point coming to life.

"Aizawa is-"

"You need to try it," Aizawa says, clinging to this *single* logical option remaining to them. Eri seems to be in no place to attempt to regain control for herself, and that's understandable given the events that drove them to this separation. But if Hitoshi's quirk could be used, Hitoshi could placate Eri's quirk himself. Aizawa wouldn't have to abandon either ward that's in need.

"It's going to be *him*," Hitoshi says, his voice cracking, and Aizawa's gut twists when he remembers other 'him's from a much younger ward. "It's not my quirk-"

"I need you to try," Aizawa argues. He knows there's a risk that this will fall into many ruins, but this is the best avenue he can pursue.

"I need you to *go*," Hitoshi says, his voice cracking more, desperate panic breaking through at the seams. His eyes too wide now. "*Please.*"

Hitoshi felt the same worry Aizawa did, perhaps even more. He didn't want to trust in one avenue when Eri's safety was at risk, and Aizawa didn't either. Even at this cost. "I still need you to buy me time."

He sees Hitoshi nod from the corner of his eye while Aizawa runs to the door, only pausing long enough to kick into his shoes and make sure he has his capture scarf, which he should be able to use to make a much swifter descent down the mountain. "Aizawa is on his way. You're going to be okay, Eri."

Aizawa can't ignore that Hitoshi's voice only sounds barely reassured with that, with a promise that Aizawa will be there for Eri. As though any threat to Hitoshi's own life is still meaningless compared to any suffering on Eri's part.

Hitoshi has been a terrified child, only grounded in his care for Eri, for long enough. The only change is that Hitoshi has someone else to trust to care for Eri.

And Aizawa will meet that task.

*

Mirio has carried Eri a lot of times. He's smiled at her with his face really close too.

But when Mirio smiled at her, just for a little bit, he looked different. Not really different, but it was like everything else changed, and he wasn't smiling because he was protecting her from the snow.

He was protecting her from that bullet.

Eri felt it happening again. She felt how her horn felt so hot that she could feel it on her face, how her arms and legs felt twitchy, and how someone needed to take that feeling *out* of her. They're supposed to. She knows it's going to hurt, but someone needs to stop her quirk before she hurts someone.

She's not a good person with her quirk. Heroes need to stop her.

But Mirio puts her down on the snow, because he's afraid of her. "Eri, it's okay-"

"*No!*" Eri yells, because it's cold, and her legs and arms feel bad, and she knows this bad feeling won't stop. Mirio needs to get away, but she doesn't *want* him to get away. She doesn't want him to leave her there, but she's.

She's *cursed*. With a cursed quirk. A quirk that will hurt everyone. "Eri, you're safe. You're not going to get hurt...."

Eri hears the sounds that Twenny made in those videos He showed her, even if He's not here. Twenny's not here. Twenny's getting hurt.

And she can't protect him. She can't keep him safe. He got hurt, even at UA, with all the heroes, because Ugo made her leave and they didn't know where to go to find her, to be safe. She left Twenny, and he was so *scared*.

Just like it used to be with Him.

When Eri was with Twenny, Hari could say mean things, and He could say mean things, but they couldn't hurt him. But when she had to go to The Chair because of her quirk, Twenny got hurt. Twenny got hurt because she couldn't protect him.

Eri just hurts people. She's a bad person. She's worse than that, she's *cursed*.

“Eri,” Emi talks to her really nice, because she doesn’t know who Eri is, and Eri looks up from her arms and legs where she’s trying to be really small so she doesn’t hurt anyone, and sees Emi looks really small too. Emi is almost laying on the snow in front of her, and Eri is *scared* because it looks like she’s on fire. She’s going to *hurt* Emi.

“Don’t! Stop it!” Eri says, trying to make herself too small, trying to keep everyone safe. She *can’t*. If she uses her quirk on them, she’s a *villain*.

“Eri, we’re going to keep away from you so your quirk can’t affect us. See? You’re okay, and nothing is going to change unless you change it,” Emi says, still talking so nice. Eri looks up, just to make sure, and she sees the heroes standing behind Emi. She sees Mirio looks so sad. But she can’t be sure if they’re not on fire too with her quirk. “I want you to just close your eyes, and try to tell me how your quirk feels to you. We can work together to help you stop it on your own, okay?”

Eri shakes her head, she doesn’t want to. Someone just needs to *stop* it, it’s *scary*. It’s cursed, her quirk is cursed, and she doesn’t *want it*.

“It might feel like mine,” Yo-yo says, and he crouches down small, and puts his hand on his chest. He looks nice right now, but Eri knows he can be mean. “I can feel my head vibrating all the time, but I had to learn how to let that vibration travel down to my arms and legs, and how to stop it. I imagine it like a wave that I can let fall, or make it fall back up. We can help you imagine your quirk too.”

Eri’s quirk feels like red. Like blood. Like sharp needles stabbing her, all the time, even if she knows she’s not in The Chair. She doesn’t know if she wants to be, but she just wants this feeling to *stop*.

Eri closes her eyes, and holds her arms and legs really close, and tries to hold her breath instead of breathing like Twenny told her to. She’s crying, and she’s supposed to calm down, but she just wants this feeling to *stop*.

“*Eri*.” Eri looks up because she can hear Twenny’s voice, even if it’s crinkly. Tami and Shiki are holding the radio so Twenny can talk to her through it, and Eri almost forgets that she can’t get close because she knows she needs to talk through the part of it that’s dangling in the snow, because she needs Twenny to use his quirk on her.

Kinda Zawa sees that she’s trying to reach for it, and he picks it up and throws it to her, and she pushes down the button. “Twenny!”

She wants to ask Twenny to help her, to use his quirk to put her in the Safe Place where her quirk doesn’t hurt anyone, but she’s crying too much. She just needs to answer Twenny when he asks the question, and that’s always the easiest part. “*Aizawa is...*” Twenny stops for a long time, and he sounds a little angry when he talks again. “*Aizawa is on his way. You’re going to be okay, Eri.*”

Eri bites on her lip, and she feels where her lost tooth isn’t, but she wants Zawa here *now*. She wants him to stop her quirk from making her feel this sad and scared, and she wants Twenny to help. “Uh...Uh-huh-uh.”

Eri can hear Him clapping, because she didn’t say it right. That’s why Twenny hasn’t asked her a question.

“*Yes! Twenny, p-please! Please! Twenny!*” Eri hides her face in the snow, her horn is so hot it feels like it’s burning her, it *hurts*, and she needs Twenny to take her away from it.

Twenny sounds really sad and scared, and quiet, even through the crinkles. *“Do you want to go back?”*

“Yes!” Eri yells, until her throat hurts. It’s not supposed to hurt anymore, because she answered the question, and it’s the same question that always took the hurt away. She’s supposed to feel floaty, she’s supposed to feel safe, and she’s supposed to feel Twenny’s quirk but she *doesn’t*.

Eri’s horn gets so hot that she has to close her eyes, and the twitchy feeling in her arms and legs hurts even more. It hurts so bad, she puts her face back against the snow so she can try to scream the feeling out like Yama taught her to scream out her mad, but it doesn’t help. It just hurts worse.

“Twenny!” Eri yells, because he can’t just leave her with this feeling, Twenny can’t just *leave* her.

“Eri, it’s okay,” Twenny says, but he sounds so sad. Eri really wants to hug him, to make him hug her, to make all the bad things *stop* because she *needs* him here. *“Aizawa is on his way. He’s going to help you-”*

“I don’t want it! I hate it! I don’t want... my c-cursed...” Eri feels her tears running hot over her face, and no one is going to brush them away for her. No one is going to hold her and make her feel better, not even the heroes.

Because she’s cursed.

“Your quirk isn’t cursed, Eri,” Mirio says, and he crouches down too close. Eri knows she needs to fix his quirk, he only lost it to protect a cursed person like her, so she *needs* to fix it to be good.

But she’s *scared*.

“Your quirk made sure that Deku won that fight. You beat him, Eri,” Mirio says, but he doesn’t know how scary that was. *“Don’t forget what you did, with your own strength.”*

She didn’t want to hurt Izuku. She didn’t want Izuku to get hurt. She didn’t know if Twenny was okay, he fell down and didn’t get up but he looked so scared when he was falling. And she just wanted to go *back*, to when she at least had Twenny, but for a moment.

When Izuku raised his fist, and Chisaki looked afraid, she wanted to go somewhere else. Somewhere, where it felt warm. Where it felt safe.

“Twenny,” Eri asks, and she curls up really close to Twenny, because her legs still hurt. Twenny’s arm might hurt too, because He showed him how that mean person made thorns go into it before he threw Twenny on the ground. But Twenny is reading her a story, like always, like it didn’t happen. *“What are flowers like?”*

Twenny looks at the book, and moves his thumb until he can flip the page back to where Ferdinand the nice bull was smelling a flower. “They look like that. They come out of the ground, and they have petals. And the yellow stuff inside them can make people sneeze. Or Ferdinand.”

Eri shakes her head, because that wasn’t what she was asking. “What about a field of them? What’s that like?”

Twenny looks up at the ceiling, and Eri can feel that his chest doesn’t move from where her head is laying on it. Then he breathes out, and the mask that he wears makes it sound louder. “I-It’s nice. I read about it in one of my books. Flowers smell nice, like your soap, and together they smell really powerful. And the petals are soft. But they break....”

Twenny's arm holds her tighter, and Eri didn't want to hurt Twenny by asking about flowers. But the story he told him when they played Sakazuki made her have a nice dream, thinking of really big flowers that look just like in her books. And she could hold Twenny's hand and walk around under them.

She wanted to have that dream tonight, and dream it so good that Twenny has that dream too. "You can touch them first, when we find those flowers. In that field."

"If we're good," Eri says, because that's the rule. If they're good, He'll give them nice things, and Eri only wants to be good so Twenny can be happy.

"You'll see them," Twenny says, even if his voice is shaky. "I promise."

When Izuku raised his fist, and when Chisaki looked afraid, Eri felt like she could feel how a flower would. It might break, but before it breaks, it makes people happy with how powerful it is, how good it smells when there's a whole bunch of them.

When that flower isn't alone.

Eri closes her eyes, even when her legs hurt in the same places they used to make it hurt the worst, when her ugly spots hurt like they're bleeding, because *flowers don't break*. Not in her dream, they never break in her dream, and when Tama showed her how flowers grow by making one grow out of his hand, it just bloomed.

It grew, more and more, until the top part spread out into pretty petals. And even when she touched the petals, they just felt soft.

They didn't *break*.

"M-Mirio," Eri says, and she wants him to pick her up, she wants to stop being alone, but her head hurts a whole lot, but she closes her eyes tighter and imagines it's just a flower. It's just a flower coming out of her head, and it hurts, but she can make it go back inside.

"If I use my quirk to retract, and then Itejiro ties a rope around me, maybe she can let off some steam—" Tami says, but Emi pops up and doesn't like that idea. Because even Emi knows her quirk is dangerous.

Because Eri can't use it. "Eri!"

"ZAWA!" Eri yells, and she sees Zawa coming around the other heroes, and she worries he's not going to stop, he's going to get too close, but she *wants* him to pick her up. To make her quirk go away.

Zawa sits down on the snow instead, and he looks sad, and worried, before he stops looking like that and just looks like Zawa. "I'm here now. I can cancel your quirk when you're afraid." Eri *is* afraid, and she wants Zawa to help her stop. "But I want to help you stop it yourself, like we talked about. Do you want to do that?"

Eri doesn't know. She holds her arms, because they still hurt, but not as much. Everything still feels too hot, and she doesn't like it, and she wants it to stop.

But heroes need to learn to use their quirks. All of Eri's friends are heroes. And she wants to be....

You're my hero. Izuku said that. And Twenny said that.

And Eri wants to be that. So she nods.

Zawa pulls on his scarf, and makes it fall on the snow around her in a circle. “My scarf is surrounding where your quirk is right now. We’re going to start shrinking it,” Zawa says, and Eri nods, even if she’s scared. She doesn’t want Zawa’s scarf to move out, she doesn’t want to hurt anyone. She doesn’t want to hurt *Zawa*. “It starts with deep breaths. I want you to imagine your quirk getting smaller and smaller, with every breath.”

“And we can breathe with you to help!” Mirio says, and it does help. Eri wipes away her tears, and wipes the snow and snot off her face, even if it gets on her mittens, and tries to breathe like everyone else is. Like she’s a flower.

Like they’re all flowers, in this field, and just like Mizzy, they can make everything smell really nice.

Eri watches the scarf move tighter and tighter on the snow, and she looks up to see Zawa smiling at her. The scarf gets closer to her, and when it curls around her feet, she looks down at her arms and legs and sees the green fire going away, and feels like her horn isn’t as hot anymore. Even if it still feels big when she touches it.

She stands up and runs to Zawa, because if it’s not okay, he’ll stop her from hurting him, but he just smiles really nice and holds her, really tight so she’s really safe. “I’m very proud of you, Eri.”

Eri smiles so much she has to hide her face on Zawa’s chest, and she feels like she needs to kick her feet because Zawa sounds really happy. And she’s really happy too.

And the heroes sound really happy, when they start cheering and clapping for her. “Eri! You did it!”

Emi does a cartwheel, just like she was teaching Eri to do, and Mirio wipes at his eyes, but when he walks closer, Eri can see he’s crying. “I’m so proud of you, Eri! I know it was hard, and scary, but you did it all on your own!”

But Eri shakes her head, and reaches out for Mirio’s hand. It’s still so much bigger than hers, even with his big gloves and her big gloves. “I needed everyone’s help, so we could do it together. And I....”

She wanted to fix Mirio’s quirk, so he wouldn’t have to be like the sad reindeer who doesn’t get to play reindeer games with the heroes. Mirio has been sad since they came to this camp, because he can’t play hero games with the heroes without his quirk.

“Hey,” Mirio says, and he holds Eri’s hand with both of his, and his smile isn’t as big, but it makes her feel warmer. “I’m proud of you. I don’t want you to worry about that stuff. Because we’re all just....” Mirio closes his eyes real tight, even though he’s still smiling. “*Really* proud of you, Eri.”

“We are,” Tama says, putting a hand around Mirio’s back, and smiling just like Yama smiles at Zawa when he sees Zawa sleeping. “Learning to control your quirk is one of the hardest parts of growing up. This is a very important moment for you.”

“Learning not to be a *crybaby* is a big thing too!” Neji says, before she starts poking at Mirio’s face a lot, which makes him swat her away, and try to rub his face. “It should be a whole party by itself! A quirk birthday! And we can get you all the presents from all the heroes who are proud of you!”

“But I just really want....” Eri wants a lot of things, and none of them are presents. She wants to

stay in Zawa's arms, so she's warm and safe, and she wants to fix Mirio's quirk. And she really wants Twenny to be here, and for Twenny to be safe. "Twenny...."

Zawa holds her a little tighter, before he tries to push her hair away from her face, but he can't really do that with his gloves on, so he takes it off with his teeth. "Hitoshi misses you, and he'll be able to tell you how proud he is tomorrow, when we go back to UA. I'll tell him as soon as I get back."

Eri holds Zawa's shirt, so maybe he can forget that he's holding her, and take her back to where he's staying with Twenny. "Is Twenny okay?"

Zawa nods, and smiles at her, before he gets an itch on the back of his head. "He's worried about you too, but he wanted me to tell you... 'I love you.'"

Eri doesn't know why Zawa gets kind of red on his face when he says that, but it makes him look kind of pouty. And he looks really pouty and kind of scared when Eri pops out behind him. "Aw, Eraserhead! I knew you-"

"*Joke*," Zawa says, in his Teacher Voice, but it's kind of like he's scared or he's got a scratchy throat. Eri just wraps her arms around Zawa because he feels so warm. "Do you feel tired, Eri? Does anything hurt?"

Eri shakes her head. "No, but... I want to stay with you."

Zawa nods, and his hair tickles around her horn. "You can tell me about all the fun things you've been doing. Hopefully Ms. Joke has been behaving herself-"

"We're learning cartwheels! And making snow bunnies! And food for heroes!" Eri says, and she has a *lot* of things to tell Zawa, so maybe she can make him stay longer. Maybe Zawa will stay so long that he falls asleep, and she can sleep on top of him.

Because that's her favorite way to sleep, and she can't sleep good without Twenny or Zawa with her. And that's what she wants for her Quirk Birthday.

*

27 takes a shuddering breath as he pulls back from the radio, folding his hands in front of his face, as everything suddenly becomes cold.

Why did he ask her that?

He thought his quirk would work. He didn't want to use it *because* he knew how it would work, how he would draw out some poisoned thing from Eri's mind because *Nemoto* would ask it, but he didn't even *think* of the question when he knew what she looked like, how she sounded, how terrified and *afraid*.

Do you want to go back? The question keeps circling his mind, like a shadow he can't escape. How many times he's seen her hurt and bleeding before he asked, before he pulled that string, before he took that pain on himself.

At the start, before he was bought, he asked her if she wanted to go somewhere *safe*. He didn't take her to that place-

Aizawa said. That Eri calls his quirk 'The Safe Place.'

And he can't do that for her anymore.

He's asked Eri questions before, he asked her questions so freely, that very *day*. Nothing changed between that morning and when he asked Mirio that poisoned question, Nemoto must not be able to *touch* her.

But he might never be able to use his quirk on Eri either. If she loses control again, he'll be worthless. He can do nothing but listen to her scream. *Again*.

He's worthless to her.

"That 'Eri' girl can't control her quirk?" the old man asks, breaking 27 out of his blank thoughts and back into this cold shack, blisteringly quick. "The same girl-"

"My Boss, yes," 27 answers, and he doesn't know why he gives that away. Why it slips out of him that easily, but he feels it like a buzz under his skin that wants to run, even if his splinted ankle throbs and reminds him *not* to. It was hard enough to pull himself out of the sleeping bag and across the room to answer the radio, *harder* than it should have been to convince Aizawa to go. "Aizawa takes care of her because of that."

And now that's being stripped away.

Even if he believes that Yamada and Aizawa wouldn't do that to *Eri*, Eri is losing her purpose at UA with this too. Controlling her quirk means that once Mirio's quirk is restored, there's only *trust* left that Eri won't be taken away. That she will have fathers. That she will have this happy, normal life.

The old man sits down next to him, a heavy thunk from a bottle set beside him. "You're a pain in the ass when you want to be, kid, but he's still coming back up that mountain. Back to 'Hitoshi.' Stop worrying about-"

"I'm not worried," 27 bites back, his hands falling to his lap and he sees that they're shaking. He's not worried, he knows that Aizawa is going to come back, that he *had* to leave to help Eri. Because 27 couldn't help her. "It's fine."

There's *too much*. He can't wrap his mind around all the *horrible* ways this fell too quickly to ruin. He never even considered what this *means* for Eri, that Eri would be at risk, but she's *at risk* and he can't hope to stop it. "A toast."

27 looks at the sake cup, held between shaking and gnarled fingers. Three of them, at least.

The old man holds another cup, and his eyes seem oddly powerful. It's as though he's seeing through 27, and 27 realizes that he doesn't know his quirk. It's powerful, since he's a retired yakuza, and since he's related to Aizawa, he probably *does* have powerful eyes. "To the success of your Boss, and so we have something to do while Shouta walks his ass back up here to chew us out."

27 takes the cup with shaking hands, and thinks of the other sake cups he's handled. This one is full, it's so *different* from the first one he took with Chisaki, swearing his loyalty to him after being bought. He can't sit properly with his legs tucked under himself with his ankle splinted and aching, but he manages to balance himself on one with the other curled loosely at his side. "Take this lowly kobun into your esteem."

27 doesn't know why he picked those words, when they're not the right ones. He just feels like something needs to stitch itself into his side, to fuse into him. He doesn't care what parts he walks

away with, what's broken. "Take *this* old and haggard kobun, to do with what you will, as the benefactor of the great head of Shie Hassaikai. May this be the first of her many successes."

27 tries not to wince. As Eri's stand-in, he shouldn't in order to respect her, but the taste is still bitter and sharp.

It makes him thirsty, so he prods the old man for another. "Feh, Shouta said you can't drink. Just a little to take the edge off--"

"Need more than that," 27 because if he can chase down some pleasant numbness that Deidoro would drool over, that he could only give a nauseating, watered down version of through his quirk, then he *wants* that. Anything to peel him out of his skin for a while, chase the buzzing of his thoughts away.

The old man gives him a sour look, like 27 is *really* forcing him to, but he pours another toast, and this one is silent. It's not supposed to be, there's supposed to be a vow or an agreement or celebration to go with this.

27 will settle for a conversation. "Kochiya Kai," 27 asks, taking a guess when he folds his last two fingers down on his right hand. He's curious, too curious to really stop from asking.

The old man looks like 27 just spat on him, his bushy white eyebrows furrowing with a flash of his teeth in his beard. "Don't want to talk about that. I'm promised to a *new* family anyway, Shie Hassaikai."

27 tips his head, feeling a smirk when he thinks about how easy it would be to build up Eri's empire for her. Even if this old man has nothing to offer her, but plenty for himself, as her right hand. "As your Boss, then...."

27 doesn't ask, doesn't want to force the old man any more than that. After he said it, he remembers that people deserve to have secrets. Even if he doesn't. "Kochiya Kai. Right on the money."

The old man sounds odd, the rough growl of his voice stripped away. He looks odd, staring at the sake cup still raised in his three fingered hand too intently. Maybe 27 shouldn't have asked.

But the old man pours him another round, another chance to chase oblivion, and 27 wants that more than caring about the old man. "It was back when everything was only on the brink. Families *were* dying out, but they were stupid. Left power up for grabs, as long as you knew how to take advantage, quietly. I was young, had a... good quirk for that."

27 looks up, meets the old man's eyes for only a second before they change. Before they start glowing red, so much like Aizawa's, but 27's breath catches in his throat because he can't *move*.

He can't even *breathe*. "Paralysis is rare, but not as rare as mine. Takes about 7 minutes for someone to actually die when they can't breathe."

27 can't even see whether the old man blinks or just stops using his quirk, because he doubles over in a cough before he's gasping for air. The old man could have *killed* him.

"I can't keep my eyes open that long, but try telling them that," the old man says, and 27 doesn't want to know how few seconds he lasted. 27 knows torture, he knows information extraction techniques. And that is a *good* one. "So, I climbed the ranks pretty fast. From Boss to Boss, father to father. By the time my daughter was born, I was serving beneath the right hand. I had four lieutenants and nearly 100 men that would jump when I said jump, who would drive me and my

wife to the ritziest fucking place on the block, who would harrass the waitress until the owner came out and just stood there gaping like a strung fish because *no one* would fuck with me.”

27 can't imagine having that kind of power, or giving it up. He's never seen that kind of wealth, that kind of respect for a yakuza, but he knows that's because of the time he lives in. Chisaki *was* the Head and didn't have 100 men to command. But the old man was from another time. So different from the wrinkled, small thing that lives alone in this shack and grumbles so uselessly.

“But, you want to know about my debt. The fall,” the old man says, and 27 can't argue that he doesn't. He could reason that he needs to know, to know where the old man betrayed his last family, but he knows this old man is only playing along in this drinking game.

27 will settle for any story. Anything that isn't his, that isn't here. Where too many days are numbered now, and Aizawa isn't here to lie to him.

“A feud, of course. Nasty one. Men lost on both sides, peace ironed out then broken. Two Heads that were going to war, even when they knew that would just draw the wrong attention, drag them both into ruin,” the old man says, with another round. 27 knocks it back and doesn't wince anymore, and he can feel just the barest haze at his mind. Like it could knock him fully into this story. “My Boss wanted to end it before it came to that, save our side from it. But that would only come with a heavy blow to their pride, something to humiliate them too bad to want vengeance. Break them.”

He doesn't say the name, but 27 imagines it's Marutomi-rengo. That's the first group that the old man thought he was from, and they must want him dead for some reason.

“Their Head had a daughter. She was precious to him. And she was the same age as my own. Misaki.” The old man's hand shakes too much over the sake bottle, so 27 takes it from him. He pours - badly - for them both, too much in both cups and it spills. But 27 holds his cup and doesn't drink it yet. The old man doesn't touch his. “They needed me, and I said no.”

That's not something you can say to a Head, 27 imagines. He's never tried it himself. But he's heard that Shie Hassaikai was more than 100 men strong before Chisaki took over. And that they loved their Head before Chisaki took over.

“Happened anyway,” the old man says, tossing back his drink with his eyes barely opened, fixed beneath the table where the radio sits. “Badly. I was in a bar that night, just... rattling with whether I should. What I should. Just passed out in the end.”

“6,000,000,” 27 asks, as quietly and flatly as he can. 1,000,000 is the going rate for each knuckle, as far as he's heard. It might have changed. He knows he would lose all of his fingers and still not pay back his debt, that 28 million yen that Chisaki paid to own him. Chisaki would have to grow them back several times to fully cover it. Or Eri could Rewind them, but she wouldn't. *Shouldn't*.

27 feels like a child for asking, when the old man looks back at him, but through him with those eyes. “My wife. Haruka.”

A wife, that he took on lavish dates, that he treasured. A wife that might not be so different from Yamada or Aizawa, and 27 can't imagine how they would feel if they lost the other. 27 doesn't even know how he would feel about that either, he doesn't *want* to feel that.

“Lost 12 men, one of the Head's favorites, *and* got arrested. They had done... things the police wouldn't look away from. They were going to be little songbirds in that cell, something the Head *didn't* like,” the old man says, and it sounds more like he's telling a story. A story where he knows

how it ends, and he hates it. But he has to tell it the same way. “While I was getting scrapped off of a bar top, 12 of *my* men just.... Same lieutenant as the ones that were putting me in a hotel for the night, telling me I couldn’t go home to Haruka because she *hated* when I *drank*.”

And the old man still drinks. He pours another round, for himself, and swats away 27’s hand when he tries to help.

“It was clean. Looked like suicide. I’d given everyone enough reason to believe it. Misaki... just knew it, as soon as she looked at me. She believed it.” The old man’s lips twitch, before he swallows, before he rubs at his nose. “As soon as everything was taken care of, I left her with her aunt. Came here, for her own safety. Stayed up here... out of shame.”

27 starts to reach for the sake bottle again, finding he hasn’t found that pleasant oblivion yet, but he stops and rubs his hands. The last two fingers. Those were missing in this story too.

Maybe the old man sees that, because he huffs, settling his elbows on his knees before he folds his hands the best that he can, staring through 27 again. His eyes are watering. “Before all that, Boss asked me to prove how much I disapproved of it. He gave me a knife. I cut my fingers myself, right there. But that was just to get an out for that mission.”

Did the Boss want him to kill his own *wife*? His own *daughter*?

“If I took that knife to my eyes, he would know that I was truly against it. That a father would do *anything*, be driven to that desperation, even if it wasn’t *his* daughter. The Head wouldn’t be broken, he would be *angry* enough not to stop, for any cost. I don’t even think I would have had to do it, just to try, and he would have taken my word for it. I was still useful to them.”

The old man had a powerful quirk. And he didn’t want to lose it. He had a choice whether to become useless, and he wouldn’t risk it. 27 envies that, and wonders if he would have made the same decision. If he had it.

“Six knuckles instead, for six of our men that had been beaten to death the week before. Blood paying blood, and that wasn’t enough,” the old man slurs. “And I didn’t know how to tell my wife what I had done. If I could... make it any better by telling a father to protect his daughter. If that was somehow honorable enough.”

And he couldn’t tell her, in the end. The old man’s shame was his own. And since he found that he had nothing but danger to bring to his loved ones, he hid in the mountains with it. Thinking that he deserved it after all he had lost.

“Shouta would’ve gouged his eyes out on the spot,” the old man says, looking at the bottle again with an odd smirk on his face. “*Shit*, he wouldn’t’ve gotten tangled up in any of that, that money and power. Or *women*, apparently.” But the smirk drops, even if the stare doesn’t break at the sake bottle. “He’s better than he was raised. And he’ll be good for you.”

27 pours again, slower and better this time. He can’t tell if something is pulling under his skin, just from Aizawa’s given name, but he wants to crush it all the same. “Elders have more tattoos, I’ve heard.”

The old man lifts his head, one eye squinting and his face looks flabbergasted from what 27 can see under all that white stringy hair. “*Punk!* I’ve got *enough* of them to get kicked out of a bath house, not that I *go* to those places. Ain’t *stripping* for you or nothing.”

27 huffs and tries to hide his laughter behind his hand, then behind the sake cup. His face feels hot,

and the idea of seeing that wrinkled old man is *ridiculous*. “I only have one- two, maybe. They covered up the first one with the second, but... it counts.”

The old man lifts his eyebrows, giving him an odd look when he nods. “Getcha kicked out of a bath house, but there’s none up here.”

Wanna see? That’s a question that dies on his tongue, barely making it to his teeth, before he tugs his arm out of his sleeve then out of his shirt. Then takes his shirt off, because it feels ridiculous. “Two names here. ‘27,’ then they covered it up with ‘Dog.’ Got ‘Dog’ removed. The old guy kind of looked like you.”

27 pulls at the black band around his arm, like he needs to be reminded that ‘Dog’ hasn’t reappeared, that no other tattoos have sprung up again. He looks under both elbows too, looking for Nemoto’s red faced demon to bleed back into his skin, and sees nothing but the edges of a few Bug scars. Before he looks up at the old man, who looks at the sake bottle instead before he pours. “Trade you some stories, instead of tattoos. Tell me a few of yours.”

“Need more than that,” Hitoshi says, finding it too easy to smirk when his face feels this soft and pliable, just barely dizzy. He thinks it’s easier to talk when his tongue feels too thick in his mouth, everything feels loose enough that he can just lean his head against the table where the radio sits.

When he can forget about Aizawa coming back, unless he tries to remember, and just listens to some stories.

The Rotten Core Of It

Chapter Summary

Before Aizawa leaves the Ketsubutsu training camp, he needs to have an important discussion with Mirio. And when Aizawa returns to his grandfather's shack hours later, he finds himself repeating himself when Shinsou needs those words too.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Underage drinking, Ambiguously serious suicide threats (Shinsou says that he'll kill himself if something happens, but he is drunk at the time.), Several mentions of 50's death, Puking

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa left the shack in the last chapter because Eri's quirk had become uncontrollable. The reason that Aizawa didn't arrange for Yamada to stay with his grandfather in the safe house is because the first and last time that Yamada and Shoga met, Shoga fired his crossbow at him and seemed to be trying to kill him. Aizawa told Eri that he loves her for the first time, in a somewhat disguised way, in the last chapter. Mirio and Amajiki recently entered a romantic relationship, and they have been sharing the same room at the Ketsubutsu training camp, with one bed. Mirio teared up when Eri was able to control her quirk by herself to stop it. Shinsou's father's quirk allowed him to create small worms that could burrow into a person's brain and control them, which he used on Shinsou's mother, which caused her severe neurological problems after his death. Shinsou sprained his ankle after being trapped in a leg snare the day prior. Aizawa plans to adopt Eri in a year's time, but still wants Shinsou to move to another home after The Miasma has been brought down, and the wardship is over.

Aizawa can't pull away from this strain, this tug that's trying to tear him apart across a mountain. He knows that's why he would have preferred Eri to stay at UA, with Hizashi, but when they were right about her quirk erupting this weekend, that still brings him little solace. Because he knows that Hitoshi is still alone, the more he lingers here.

"And this is my room, but it's only for my stuff, because we have sleepovers instead!" Eri says, announcing her room in this cabin and quickly clarifying for Aizawa that she wasn't sleeping alone here. He imagines it would be terrifying for her to try something that brave, in a place so new, but Eri seems to have gathered that instinctively with those 'sleepovers.'

"I'm glad you're having fun," Aizawa says, unable to ignore the warm reassurance in his chest. Of course he's worried about Eri while he was away from her, when he knows that she needs faces more familiar and reassuring than the Big Three after the terror of that attack on Hitoshi. He would have rather had Hizashi stay with his ward, and he stay with his own, but his damned *fool* of a grandfather left him convinced that would only lead to manslaughter charges. "And there's only one more 'sleep over' before we all go home tomorrow."

He doesn't usually call the dorm 'home,' but somehow it fits more easily than he thought. Like too many things do, when he's too overwhelmed to have time to question it. When he finds himself inspired to be braver than he is.

Eri walks back to him, clinging to his leg, but he draws a full pout when he runs a hand over her head and she must notice how his hand lingers near her horn. It only shrank slightly.

But it's enough that he might have to risk going back to Hitoshi too soon. If Eri's quirk erupts again, he will have to make that trek back, but he can't linger much longer. He knows that Eri is in good hands, for just another night.

"Is Twenny sleeping okay?" Eri asks, her mumbled worries are heartbreakingly accurate. Eri might have done better with this sudden separation than Hitoshi did, and she might even know that already.

"He doesn't have anyone fun to have a 'sleep over with,'" Aizawa answers, the memory of last night's 'sleep over' where Hitoshi sung Overhaul's praises and strung out every insult he could just to have Aizawa's *voice* in the dark anchoring from his own terrors is still fresh. Despite knowing what poor company Aizawa is, he wants to rectify that.

It seems like Eri does too. "He needs Mocha back!"

Eri takes him by his hand, dragging him along for her mission. Aizawa only briefly wonders why 'Mocha' is in Eri's possession, then wonders why it technically *isn't*, before he realizes the answers to both of those questions would be disheartening. Hitoshi would want to give something precious of himself to Eri to keep before they parted ways, and Eri wouldn't want to trust herself to keep it safe. Eri trusts others far more than herself, and especially the hero students she spends the most time with.

Especially Mirio. "Mirio!"

Especially hero students who seemed to be doing *well* on this excursion off campus.

Eri opened the door and called out in quick succession, leaving Amajiki with apparently no other choice than to fling himself to the side and off the bed, rolling to the side where the bed will hide his presence. Mirio springs up quite readily, his face bright red, and Aizawa has no doubt that's due to the very close *proximity* that comes when one student is lying on top of another, on a bed.

But Aizawa catches Mirio rubbing the corner of his eye, and wonders if he could make this any less painful for the kid, when the situation seemed far more difficult than what he was led to believe at first.

"Hey, Eri! I just got a snowflake in my eye, and Tamaki was helping me with it," Mirio says, his voice odd from his nose still being congested. Another thing to easily blame on the winter weather, even if Aizawa doubts that's the case. "Whatcha need? Just showing Aizawa-sensei around?"

"Twenny needs Mocha back, 'cause he's not sleeping good," Eri says, and again it's confirmed that Eri knew Hitoshi that well to not be surprised by that. "And he can have a sleepover with Mocha!"

"Right, Mocha's been sleeping over with us-I mean, just me for too long! Just me," Mirio says, a hand running through his short blonde hair, and Aizawa is far from surprised from any truth beneath that lie. Nothing would surprise him.

And given they're both legally adults, there's nothing that he can disapprove of.

Mocha has been sitting in an odd place of honor, on a dresser against the wall that faces the bed. Aizawa doesn't know if that was something Eri would have insisted on, for Mirio to have his eyes on Mocha at all times during the night, or if that's a responsibility his student took too seriously and insisted on himself. Or if that plushie had other reasons to face a shared bed, with its beady, innocent eyes.

But when Mirio hands the plushie to Eri, who hands it to Aizawa, he takes it with what solemnity he can spare before he tries to find a strategy to move all pieces into place. "Eri, do you think that you could ask Ms. Joke for a lunch to bring for Mocha? We didn't pack enough for him."

Eri nods, too seriously, and a bit too eagerly he notes. "We gotta have some milk, 'cause Mocha's a cat!"

While he watches his ward turn and leave, Aizawa only barely considers that Eri could take this as a cause to drag out his stay a bit longer, but it needs to lengthen regardless. "Togata, come with me."

Aizawa has to carry this plushie, and trust for too long that Mirio will follow him before he hears answering footsteps, but while he'd rather have this conversation in Mirio's room, that would mean addressing the fact that Amajiki is still hiding on the floor. And Aizawa would rather not do that.

So Aizawa finds the next best thing behind the Boy's Cabin, leaning against the wall before he crosses his arms and half-hides the stuffed animal in his elbow. And faces a student who likely doesn't want to talk to him about these things. "This is a bigger step forward than you realize. Eri controlled her quirk, but her horn isn't shrinking. It might be a sign that she's more comfortable with it, and there would be less time--"

"I'm not worried about that, Sensei!" Mirio argues, flustering immediately with his hands raised. He almost looks insulted, which means that he is, so Aizawa crosses that item off the list. "I'm *really* proud of her, I am, and I know that...."

That pause is the pain. Whatever Mirio tried to hide behind his smile earlier, whatever he was only able to share with Amajiki before they were interrupted, whatever had drew Mirio to tears both times - Aizawa wants to know it.

"Sir Nighteye... would be really proud of her too. To see her beat him like that," Mirio says, and it feels like the drip of a freshly excised wound. That's only the palatable part of the infection, and even that, Aizawa knows is something that his student only barely trusts with Hizashi. But with his eyes downcast, Mirio continues on. "And I... couldn't really do anything to help. Again."

Again, stings harshly. "You did help. You kept Eri calm enough while I arrived, and there's no one else who I would trust with her right now. You did everything you could that night, and it saved Hitoshi's life."

Mirio shakes his head, the rotten facsimile of a smile in his grimace. "That's *not* all I can do. Everyone thinks that I can't, and they're right, but I just--"

"A quirk doesn't make the hero, otherwise everyone with a capable quirk would be called that," Aizawa interrupts, thinking of Ragdoll, how she's still perfectly capable of organizing resources on missions when she's done it for years, or Toshinori, who still inspires enough reassurance and calm and *awe* that most of his students go to him with their troubles. And when he thinks of Mirio, he sees far more than that. "That quirk made you answer with your deepest insecurities, making you answer what you didn't want to face. And Hitoshi used it...."

They're going to kill me, and anyone who's trying to protect me, and I don't want....

"Because he couldn't stand the thought of risking your life," Aizawa says, as quietly as the gravity of that statement deserves.

Hitoshi would die, willingly, instead of letting anyone he was close to get hurt protecting him. Especially Mirio, the first hero he saw in that raid. The only one he saw coming to save himself and Eri.

Aizawa honestly doubts whether Hitoshi even considers that Mirio was trying to save him too, and only admires him for his efforts to save Eri.

He still doesn't see his own life as worth saving. "But I would have.... Even if it-"

"That's not what being a hero is about," Aizawa reminds, even if a lecture is a poor way to reassure a student still fighting tears. A student who *wanted* to throw themselves into danger turns his stomach into a pit of tar, and he wonders how blind his own homeroom teacher was to have not given him these words. "The goal is to save every life possible, including your own, and that risk is meant to be avoided. You are *very* young, Togata, and you haven't graduated yet."

But it'll be worth it, Aizawa had told himself, too many times. *It'll be worth it if I save them. That's what a hero does, I'm willing to lay down my life at this moment, if it's meaningful.*

"Your life matters, to Eri, to Shinsou, to Hizashi, to so many others and to me," Aizawa says, even if there's a sharp numbness in his chest when he speaks those truths. He schools his face against showing it. "You have too much potential to throw it away."

It was a bad match up from the start, 127's invisibility against Mirio. Even with his quirk, he wouldn't know exactly when to use his quirk to dodge it. Aizawa should have been by Hitoshi's side, and he *will* be. But he needs Mirio to understand this first.

"There's only so much you can learn from turning these situations over in your head. You have to put them to rest before they become regrets," Aizawa says, like a hypocrite. He barely does, when he can spend hours awake thinking of his own bad matches, his own casualties. Even casualties that weren't his own, that sting worse for it. "They're both here, because of you, and don't forget that. That's entirely due to Lemillion."

"Just... clearing the way," Mirio argues, quietly. Shakily, and if Mirio is anything like Hizashi, Aizawa knows to step forward, to place a hand on his shoulder. It's not reassurance, but invitation, that might be necessary here.

"By being there, then and in the future," Aizawa says, unsurprised by the watery gasp, or how Mirio's broad shoulders bend and shake. "I'm sure Amajiki has told you that himself. He has a more rational way of seeing things."

"It's-s... just..." Mirio fights against a chest that doesn't want to breathe, a torrent waiting for the damn to give way. "W-would he be p-proud of me-e?"

A dead man can't answer that. But Aizawa can. "Yes. And I am too."

Aizawa finds that he's far more comfortable with his students at arm's length, when he does find that the need to reassure them needs to come from some physical proof. He's broken that rule with Mirio before, and it feels no different now.

He'll have to ask about Amajiki at some point, if he can't leave that up to Hizashi, and he'll need to

convince Eri that she's packed enough of a lunch, and that he needs to return to the shack despite how much she wants to keep him.

But for now, Aizawa bears the trembling sobs on his shoulder, and offers an arm around Mirio's shoulders this time. In the hospital, he couldn't quite go that far.

But this wound is a deeper one, and he needs to meet it to its core. And he imagines that Sir Nighteye would do the same in his place.

*

27 has a lot of *limbs*. A lot of himself, and they're all comfortable. This *floor* is really comfortable.

Deidoro was an *ass* for never letting him feel like this.

"So... *so*," 27 says, moving his hands to try to get his words out. He just lost them. "*Fuck*, oh- a fuckin' *robbery*. *Noo*, I stole people more. Kidnap. Three times."

He messes up his fingers at first, and starts to laugh. Does it even matter if he can't do it right? He's just *stupid*. The old man rubs his own face, making it redder before he sighs. "Oh *fuck*, you're drunk. Didn't wanna do that. Shouta's gonna be *pissed*."

"N' he can drink with us!" 27 says, because that's a *fun* idea! Aizawa won't be mad, he'll just be drunk! Drunk means happy and floaty, and it's *nice*. "Get 'im drunk, n' he's not mad. He'll talk to me too! He'll be happy, and talk-y. Shhh, it's a good *plan*. Let's get 'im *drunk*."

The old man tries to get up, and falls a little, but then he gets the bottle, and *no he can't take it*. "I'm just getting more, don't look at me like that. Tell me about one of those kidnappings."

27 lets his head fall to the floor, staring at the ceiling. It looks cold, but he can't touch it, even when he tries, so he's not sure it's cold. "Uh... Kidnapping. One of those. Huh. Oh, *Croak! Assholes*."

Croak is *always* assholes. Always. That's why 27 had to go help them a lot, for a lot of stuff. Lot of frogs and swamp things and people who looked like bloated dead bodies. They were alive and all, but smelled bad. Bad quirks. Swamp quirks.

"Wanted this frog guy. 'Cause they like frogs. Had to wait at his house, then he came outside. I was in the yard, 'sposed to be a lost little kid. Asked him... *something*. Prolly 'where's my mommy' or somethin'. Kinda *fucked up*, my mom *sold* me an' all. 'Cause she got fucky brain. From my dad. He's got brain worms, 'n they're small."

Fuck, if he had brain worms too, that'd be *weird*. Don't wanna put brain worms in *Eri*, why would he do that? Damn, Chisaki would've *killed* him for not putting worms in Eri's brain. He'd be *dead*.

"An' frog guy's nice, wants to help me. Hate those jobs, they always wanna help, n' can't. Croak got 'im in the car. Dunno what happened to 'im. He didn't show up in their gang. Maybe, he didn't work out. Had to kill 'im," 27 says, because he knows how it goes. 'Be useful, or die,' that's how things *fuckin'* go.

The old man comes back with more *sake*, and pours him some. 27 has to wriggle around so he can drink it, and it's hard to lift his head, but it's *sake*. Just tastes funny. "Maybe they just wanted to chat with him. If they like 'frog quirks,' maybe he was an ex-member. Make sure he's not telling stories if he's on the straight and narrow."

“*Yeah*,” 27 says, too loud, but the old man pours him *another* round. Holy shit, he loves telling stories. “*Fuck*, I’ve told stories. They wanna kill me now. I didn’t even tell them *nothin’* but they wanna kill me. That’s *fucked up*, they *always* wanna kill me when I didn’t do *nothing*.”

“Sure is,” the old man says, and he’s just gonna keep *pouring*? Wow, 27’s gonna get *fucked up*. “Shouta’s gonna keep you safe though. And if you wanna kick off, sleep it off, I’ll-”

“*Hoo nooo*,” 27 says, then he laughs, because the old man doesn’t know, does he? “No, no sleep. When you got nightmares, don’t *sleep*. Bakugo told me, don’t sleep ‘til brain mushy. Takes care of it. Don’t wanna see ‘im. He’s gonna kill me.”

127’s gonna kill him, because he’s a *dick*. Even when he’s dead, he’s gonna try to kill 27 in his sleep. In his dreams. 127’s *dead*, so it’s not even his job anymore. He’s just a *dick*.

“Mm, stabbed me. A lot. Put the... mask on. That’s *bad*,” 27 says, rubbing at his face. He was trying to just touch his scars, but his hand is pulling on his face, and it feels *weird*. “Ol’ man, you don’t got a mask. Wanna stay with you.”

“*Hell no*,” the old man says, because he’s a *dick*. 27 frowns at him, and his face is so hairy and wrinkly weird. “Hell no, I’m too old to put up with you. You’re going with Shouta tomorrow, to wherever that is. UA, isn’t it?”

“But I tried to kill people there,” 27 whines, because he doesn’t wanna see it. They’re all gonna know he’s a monster. “An’ here’s *nice*. So nice! No people, ever! No... no talking, just... quiet. Like it. Not dangerous.”

“You’ll miss people,” the old man says, and he sounds serious. 27 tries to look at him, but the floor’s comfy on his chin. Should hurt, but it just feels *weird*. “You’ve got an obligation to your boss, after all.”

“Eri don’ need me. Always needed me, but don’t,” 27 says, and feels sad about it. He’s got to lay down better to feel sad, so he tries to get on his back again, but it doesn’t work out. He’s just twisty. “She loves me n’ stuff, n’ I love ‘er. But, gotta do things for her. Tha’s how it works. Gotta help ‘er, she doesn’ need help. Can’t keep ‘er safe. And *Yamada*.”

Yamada could’ve died. 27 would wanna be dead if he did. 27 would make himself dead if that happened.

“Yamada... don’ wanna kill ‘im. He’s 50, but not 50. Don’ wan’ him to die like 50. If he does, ‘m just gonna kill myself. ‘Cause it’s my fault good people die,” 27 says, and maybe he should’ve *fucking* done that before. All of this wouldn’t happen. He’d just be asleep.

“You lose people, and it’s not your fault. Don’t do something stupid like that,” the old man says, and he makes 27 drink some more. This sake still tastes *weird*, it doesn’t make him feel fuzzy-drunk. “I’ve got a long story, so get comfortable. And close your eyes, so you can imagine it better or something.”

27 sighs and gets comfortable, one arm over his eyes while the other is stretched over his head, and one of his legs stretched out as far as it can. His ankle is starting to hurt, but he hasn’t even hit it in a while.

Maybe Aizawa’s not coming back, because he got smart. He’s gonna take Eri, and go back to UA, and leave 27 in the mountains.

And 27 is going to drink a *whole lot* if that happens, so he might as fuckin’ well.

*

Aizawa was returning to his grandfather's shack, with an important possession he probably shouldn't feel so uncomfortable carrying.

Aizawa has been shifting Mocha around while he carries the plushie, under his arms or in his hands, but for some reason it feels uncomfortable to hold it in any position. Aizawa *knows* it's a stuffed animal, it's not capable of being offended if Aizawa holds it by its head, but given how much this stuffed animal means to Hitoshi, he doesn't want to damage it in any way.

He'd rather have it in a backpack, but he left his own at the shack. The lunch that Eri packed for 'Mocha' also has to shift each time Aizawa shifts the stuffed animal, and Aizawa hopes these two things can help comfort Hitoshi somehow. It's getting close to the end of the second day on this venture, but Hitoshi's vulnerability has only festered deeper with this isolation. Aizawa doesn't know if he'll be in any shape to return to school on Tuesday.

And with Aizawa's cargo, he can't make the same trip up the mountains that he did before, as he'd lose one or both items if he were using his capture scarf to throw himself through the treeline. By the time he comes into view of the shack, the sun is beginning to set, turning the snow shades of gold while day dwelling creatures become silent, and the louder nocturnal ones begin to stir.

He hears the chirps of foxes nearby, and wonders if it would be a good idea to try to catch sight of them despite the cold and despite Hitoshi's injury. Perhaps a better display of being a nature guide could help Hitoshi take his mind off of his fears.

But when Aizawa opens the door, surprised to hear Hitoshi laughing, he looks at the scene before him and takes too long to comprehend it.

When he *should have known*.

"So, m' little kid, got the mask, n' if a cop shows up, m' sposed to do the 'I'm lost, can you help me' thing, *bam* quirk 'em," Hitoshi says, laying on his back with his shirt off for some reason, slurring his words with a flush on his cheeks, too far gone to actually make contact when he tries to clap his hands to punctuate his words.

"And *hell*, what I'd do for that kind of security, back in my day," his grandfather says, oddly *less* drunk than Aizawa expected, sitting with his back turned to the door while he faces Aizawa's ward. "You'd be eating kobe beef every day if you were one of my men."

"*Noo*, m' stupid. They're stupid, the clients're so... *stupid*," Hitoshi tries waving a hand, but too quickly it falls heavily. "M' *just* distraction, they're gonna rob the place, but they come out and they're *scared* and tell me to get 'n the car. They want me to *drive*. I can't fuckin' drive! M' small! Legs don't work."

"Hitoshi," Aizawa calls, because he can't even *look* at his grandfather right now. He can't *believe* the old man did this, either allowing but probably *encouraging* his *very* underage ward to get drunk.

Hitoshi tilts his head up, neck straining as he presses his purple hair against the floor. He's surprised the old man isn't whining about that. "Zawa, *shit*. Come drink with us! M' talking about the investigation, it's *fun* now, this is a good story."

Aizawa doesn't know if that was his grandfather's intentions, if he thought that getting Hitoshi *drunk* enough to talk about Miasma would be helpful *at all*, but he places the lunch and stuffed

animal on the table so he can carry Hitoshi to their borrowed room and find some way to *deal with this*. “Shouta, I only gave him a bit, but he should be coming down at this point-”

“So, can’t drive. Dunno how. I push the buttons, ‘cause it’s got buttons, right? But that jus’ makes ‘em mad, ‘*stupid fuckin’ kid*,’ an’ I fly in the back. *Pshurk*.” Aizawa doesn’t want to know what that slurred sound effect felt like, for Hitoshi to be a child young and small enough to press the buttons on a radio console thinking it would start a car, then ‘fly’ into the backseat as he was thrown. “An’ they’re *mad*. Guy back there’s *mad*, an’ he’s got a quirk-*hey!* S’ important for the-”

“It’s not,” Aizawa argues, Hitoshi thrashing weakly in his arms when he gathers the teen from the floor, too uncoordinated to actually put up a fight. “You’re going to hurt your-”

“*Zawa*, come *on*,” Hitoshi groans, dropping limp and sullen, *too much* like Hizashi when he’s had too much to drink “Drink! Makes you happy!”

“It *will not*,” Aizawa argues, turning to the side so that Hitoshi won’t hit his sprained ankle on the doorway, and not for the first time, wishes this room had a door instead of a tarp that he could *slam shut* on his grandfather.

Hitoshi just sighs, rolling his eyes when Aizawa looks. And his eyes are *very* unfocused, meaning that he’s had *much* more than the ‘little bit’ his grandfather claimed. “Kay, so mask is locked. And guy has a quirk that makes people throw up. An’ he’s mad at me, ‘cause his friend died. Maybe. Dunno.”

Aizawa kneels down and puts Hitoshi on the futon while he continues to tell this story, even if the mirth of it seems to be removed now. Hitoshi seems to actually think this story is useful for the investigation, without mentioning names or places or when it happened, things that Aizawa doubts Hitoshi could remember sober. He’ll have to get water from the barrel for Hitoshi to drink, have to convince him to sleep this off. Have to deal with a hungover teenager who’s already dealing with too much, which will make the hike down the mountain and the car ride back to UA *incredibly* fun tomorrow.

“An’ he uses it on me. Gotta throw up, but mask is closed. Can’t get out, just a... just a lil. S’ bad n’ I’m gonna....” Aizawa looks at Hitoshi’s flushed face, suddenly turning paler, and thinks this is *not* a good story to tell in any sense when the alcohol seems to be revolting against him. “M’ gonna die, but Boss’ quirk-”

“Hitoshi, stop talking and stay like that,” Aizawa says, pulling Hitoshi by his bare shoulder to lay on his side, as the last thing Aizawa needs is for his ward to asphyxiate on his own vomit. He has to take his eyes off of Hitoshi to grab the bucket by the wall and spill his dirty laundry out of it. Hitoshi had been folding his, before placing it under his backpack, something that Aizawa should have noticed before now as yet another sign that Hitoshi was regressing to old habits from the beginning of his wardship. Another step back that he can’t do anything about.

“Boss opens, an’ I-” Hitoshi is cut off by a gagging belch, and he pulls his hand in front of his mouth like he’s finally realized what’s coming. His arm curls around his stomach and his legs curl tighter around him, and when Aizawa offers the bucket in front of his face, he shakes his head with watering, unfocused eyes.

“Hitoshi, it’s alright,” Aizawa offers, and has to put a hand between Hitoshi’s shoulderblades just in case he tries to turn away and on his back. He’s proven right when he feels pressure against his palm, before another pang of nausea makes the teenager curl again, and soon enough nature guides Hitoshi forward to grip the rim of the bucket too and nearly push his face into it as the vomiting begins.

Aizawa pushes on his back and lowers the bucket on the floor, rubbing in circles on uncomfortably bare and scarred skin as Hitoshi chokes and coughs between heaves, the acrid smell being unpleasant enough. Aizawa doesn't want Hitoshi to choke back on something that needs to come *out*, and he knows that's difficult enough to manage in an inebriated state. From experience.

"It's alright," Aizawa mutters, when the heaving seems to taper off, the gasping breaths don't sound any more steady for it. He feels Hitoshi's arms shaking from where he also holds the bucket, and he knows that this violent spell has taken everything the teenager didn't have in terms of strength or coordination to hold himself up. He moves his hand to Hitoshi's shoulder to help lay him back down, but Hitoshi lifts his head with tears streaming down his face. Not just from the vomiting.

"I don' wanna *die*," Hitoshi chokes out, his irregular gasps turning to sobs now that the nausea seems to have taken away the more pleasant sensation from drinking. Now that he's left with too sober thoughts, and too much pain behind them.

But despite that, despite the sobs shuddering through Hitoshi's frame as he continues to curl into himself, pulling his still shaking arms in front of his chest like a shield, Aizawa finds himself stunned that he would say it. That Hitoshi would *admit* that he wanted to live, after he nearly threw his life away only two nights ago. "You're not going to die, Hitoshi. I'm going to keep you safe-"

"You're gonna-" Hitoshi shakes his head, even when it falls to tip on the ground as his neck no longer supports him, hiding his expression still wrought in pain. "*No!*"

Hitoshi didn't want to die. But he found losing someone, even like Aizawa, to be more painful.

Aizawa pushes on Hitoshi's shoulder, pulling the bucket behind himself and as far away as he could manage before using his other arm to gather Hitoshi up under his head, trying to lay him back down.

Trying to make Hitoshi look at him, and believe him this time.

Hitoshi pulls a hand to fist in Aizawa's sleeve, clinging to him with his tear-wrought and desperate expression. All of his anxieties made bare to the rotten core, how much *loss* Hitoshi has gone through, and how much he doesn't want to go through it again.

"You're not going to lose me, Hitoshi," Aizawa says, watching another shuddering sob punctuated by a curl of the teen's lip, showing his clenched teeth, how *desperate* he is to believe that despite the pain convincing him otherwise. "You're not going to lose Eri, or Hizashi, or anyone. You're not going to die. You're going to be safe. I swear to you, I'm not going to let you die."

"Don' be 50," Hitoshi pleads, his eyes finally focusing on Aizawa's, his teeth digging into his own lip afterwards. Aizawa doesn't answer quickly enough for his liking, pulling and pushing on Aizawa's captured sleeve with closed eyes and a tantrum that doesn't entirely fit a teenage boy. "*Please, please-*"

"I'm not going to die, Hitoshi," Aizawa answers, guiding the teenager to lay back on the futon so he can use his hand to try to remove Hitoshi's from his sleeve. Hitoshi just tightens his grip, shaking his head. "I'm not going to leave you like that."

Hitoshi stares at him, his red and irritated eyes narrowed as his face is still twisted in that pain. As much as Aizawa wants to soothe it, he needs to see it. He needs Hitoshi to bear the weight of it too, and accept it.

Hitoshi deserves to live, at the *very least*. He deserves more than that, but as much as Aizawa wants that for him, and as much as Aizawa plans to take the option out of his hands, he wants Hitoshi to *want* to live. To put forth trust that the worst is over for him, and that the fear of loss might hurt, it might linger with evidence he'll never forget, but he needs to *try* to move forward. To forge those new bonds, and *want* them, *selfishly*.

Instead of being ready to throw his life away at any provocation for it.

And Hitoshi nods. There's an audible, gulping sob when he does, when his eyes fall shut and somehow he *trusts* that he doesn't need to see right now, he trusts that Aizawa won't hurt him, and won't allow him to be hurt. And more than all of that, what Aizawa can only *hope* to call it in this moment, he's awed by a more real reason to believe this acceptance is honest.

Hitoshi never cries this loudly.

After that interrogation that forced Hitoshi to answer questions honestly, to forcefully break his silence and name Miasma, Hitoshi curled into himself and wept without hardly making a sound. He had tried to bite off his tongue, and had bitten Aizawa's hand instead, he had been forced into that desperate act and still didn't let himself cry freely in the horrible aftermath of it.

But his gasps are hardly bitten, from his throat is the aching wail of loss and pain stuttered from his breaths, and Aizawa can't just hover over him and watch it. He gathers Hitoshi in his arms again, the teen's grip on his sleeve finally loosening, to bring him to his chest and hold in him this pain. There's only a pause that reminds Aizawa that this could be a misstep, that Hitoshi does not like being touched and has reminded him of that every time he's had to carry him since his ankle sprain, but Hitoshi fists both of his hands on Aizawa's shirt with his face pressed to the collar, and with that assent, Aizawa knows what to do.

He traces circles on Hitoshi's back, just as he would for Eri, muttering assurances with each new cry. No one has ever done this for Hitoshi, he imagines. No one has ever been trusted with this pain, or allowed to see it when Hitoshi knows too well to hide it.

When Hitoshi finally quiets down to sniffing, his grip loosening but fidgeting all the same, like he doesn't want Aizawa to let go, Aizawa lowers him again to lay on the futon, only hesitating before he decides to trust the teenager to wipe away his own tears. "You need to drink some-"

Aizawa feels more than sees Hitoshi reaching out to grab his side and pull, feeling his leg try to kick Aizawa's from his kneeling position. He sees Hitoshi's frustrated pout in sharp orange hues, as the sun has set fully outside, and only the flames from the open wood furnace in the living room provides light.

"You can't flip me that easily," Aizawa has to add, because he's heard *something* about that from Hizashi, and he's even more doubtful that Hitoshi actually overpowered him after he was so violently sick. "I'm just going to the next room-"

"Nah leaving," Hitoshi answers in a rough and slurred voice, another fruitless tug accentuating his demand. Aizawa is surprised Hitoshi can overlook the taste of vomit that has to still be in his mouth, how his throat must be sore after that much crying, and how Hitoshi seems convinced that he can toss Aizawa over himself to lay down next to him.

Aizawa knows Hitoshi's stubbornness well enough not to argue, and he's also heard from Hizashi what will happen if he does lay down. But he sighs, and does flip himself over his ward, given that it seems unlikely that Hitoshi will let go of him for any less.

And he's not surprised by the ensuing tackle, Hitoshi's head thudding against his chest with an arm splayed over it, his hand apparently reaching for an arm to pin down. Or at least, pretend to, given that there's no way his husband was *actually* pinned down by a starving, sickly teenager who needed an IV drip just hours before.

Hitoshi's sigh of contentment is audible when Aizawa kicks at the blankets folded up at the end, managing to pull them over his ward with only one barely-free arm. Hitoshi *should* put on a shirt given the freezing temperatures outside, and how the furnace in the living room won't do much. There's a lot of things that Hitoshi should do, and that Aizawa should do as well, such as dealing with a bucket of vomit still in the middle of the room, or turning on the flashlight to prevent Hitoshi from remembering the dark torture he went through at such a young age.

But Hitoshi's greatest need right now seems to be to have Aizawa close to him, evidence that they're both alive, and they're both safe. And perhaps, Hitoshi can believe in the protection Aizawa has promised, in ways deeper than he first promised to do.

He swore that he would keep Hitoshi safe from Miasma, and again he swore that the Hero Commission wouldn't hurt him, when it seems likely that they will be interested in how Hitoshi's quirk has changed, how it's mutated with Nemoto's and how that could be similar to how Nomus are created. And he *will* keep those promises, up to and including fleeing the country with a forged passport.

But Aizawa hasn't truly promised that he wouldn't die to keep those promises. He's never considered it fully, but in the back of his mind, he let himself accept that it would be for a worthy cause to lay his life down for Hitoshi's future. A habit that he might have fought down, that flares up too often in a meaningful fight, such as at USJ, but he knows in the back of his mind that he's accepted the possibility very early in Hitoshi's wardship.

He can't do that now. He has people that won't accept that loss, Eri and Hizashi don't deserve that, and Hitoshi has only reminded him of that fact. Hitoshi has become one of the people who will need him in the future, who don't deserve to grieve him.

"You're 50," Hitoshi mutters sleepily, patting the futon when he still hasn't found Aizawa's arm, and before Aizawa can argue that, he adds, "N' I'm Eri."

A drunk, sleep-deprived, and incoherent thought from a teenager who should be none of those things, but Aizawa sighs and tries to pull the pillow under his head properly, trying to answer to it. "I'm not a woman, and you're not a 5 year old."

"Almos' 6," Hitoshi argues, because even drunk, sleep-deprived, and incoherent, he feels the need to argue that fact. "Don' leave her. 'Cause her quirk...."

Aizawa pulls the blanket further over Hitoshi's shoulder, finding his hand resting there afterwards. Unsure exactly how to say it. "I won't. Eri gaining control of her quirk won't change things."

The barest truths to that, which can hide a more uncomfortable one. One Aizawa doesn't want to broach until it's necessary, until Miasma and all of these other dangers have truly settled for Shinsou.

He won't abandon either ward, he will live for them, to be there for them in the future. But the way he will be hasn't changed. Shinsou still needs a clean slate, he needs to find a greater degree of separation from this pain he's endured in his wardship. He can't *possibly* find that in the guardianship of a man that he thought *owned* him for almost a month.

“Good. You’re a good dad,” Shinsou says, a weaker pat on the futon as he shifts his head a bit higher on Aizawa’s chest. “N’ m’ Eri. N’ you’re 50. N’ you’re gonna keep me safe, ‘cause I’m Eri. Kay.”

Aizawa doesn’t answer in time, staring at the ceiling too long as he tries to find a way to explain to Hitoshi that he doesn’t need to be *Eri* to deserve to be safe. A soft, barely audible snore answers him before he can.

Aizawa’s hand still rests on Hitoshi’s shoulder, his chest still serving as a pillow for Hitoshi’s head. He wishes it were easy enough to run a hand through his purple hair, to soothe him like that even in sleep. When Aizawa isn’t sure that he’ll have nightmares and wake up into another one with the darkness of the room steadily growing as Aizawa hears his grandfather shut the door to the furnace. He knows the old man might have overheard all of that.

But between those quiet snores, Aizawa still finds himself answering to Hitoshi, just as quietly. “You don’t have to be anyone else. We can be ourselves, like this.”

Aizawa doesn’t know if Hitoshi will ever trust Aizawa, or anyone, as much as a dead woman who has at least never harmed him and never can. If he will ever allow anyone as close as he did, before he experienced that loss for what Aizawa imagines was the first time.

But Aizawa hopes that he could be that person, and that these drunken urges can become sober actions one day, and that Hitoshi won’t hide his pain any longer. That Aizawa can stop it completely one day, so that Hitoshi can live a life finally free of pain, fear, and suffering.

Hitoshi only needs to live long enough to see it.

A Bird of Prey, A Kitten, and The Loch Ness Monster

Chapter Summary

On the last day of their time at Shoga's shack, Aizawa and Shinsou come face-to-face with the mysterious 'kid' that Shoga has been visited by. Shinsou is reluctant to leave, but they must return to UA, to Yamada and Eri. And to an important revelation that's been waiting on the path downhill.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Casual mentions of death or suicide, Casual threat of suicide

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou got blackout drunk last night with Shoga and is now hungover. Shinsou's favorite hoodie has been bloodstained ever since Todoroki's cat attacked him. Aizawa built a treehouse and a small cave when he lived with his grandfather as a child, though the treehouse has fallen down. Aizawa was often sent to live with his grandfather by his mother, who suspected that Aizawa used his quirk on her. Shinsou's knife fell out when he was trapped in the leg snare, and Shoga tried to take it to kill a deer, but Aizawa recovered the knife. Shinsou was panicking after his quirk was ineffective with Eri through the radio, at which point Shoga offered Shinsou 'one drink to take the edge off,' but they both kept drinking after that point. Shinsou and Mirio would likely be uncomfortable around each other after the attack by 127, where Mirio was brainwashed by Shinsou into leaving the situation instead of being able to protect him. Shoga and Aizawa stopped talking to each other after Shoga chased Aizawa and Yamada down the mountain after learning they were engaged, and Aizawa assumed it was because Shoga didn't approve of them getting married while both were male. Shiori was on campus the night that 127 attacked, confronted by Hound Dog who was found unconscious after being tased. Aizawa explained the legend of kitsunes while on the hike to the shack, after Shinsou seemingly called him a fox-faced bastard because he didn't understand why it was insulting. When Shinsou was struggling to fall asleep the first night out of his fear of the dark, Aizawa talked to him, and before Shinsou fell asleep he mentioned wanting to see the Loch Ness Monster while they were exploring nature, though he immediately stated he didn't believe in it and it was meant sarcastically. Aizawa withheld the fact that foxes are omnivores when Shinsou first spotted them, trying not to make an argument when Shinsou was offended that Aizawa explained what herbivores were. Nezu said he was going to arrange a confidential quirk specialist visit for Shinsou before Aizawa and Shinsou left for Shoga's shack.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hitoshi wakes up, too warm, with his head riddled with pain and a dry mouth that tastes like *ass*.

He blinks a few times, wondering if he really should try to struggle to wake up right now, when his head hurts enough to possibly promise that he'll die soon enough, before he realizes *why* he's too

warm.

He was sleeping right on top of Aizawa.

He doesn't remember anything that happened last night, and the more he tries to remember, the more his throbbing head wants to punish him for it. But he slowly pulls his arm away, wondering why he doesn't have his *shirt* on, before he moves the rest of himself away, rolling off the futon as his body sings with agony that would rather lull him back to sleep than try to endure it. Even the cold floor on his back, the cold air hitting him, can't remedy this throbbing sting, so he pulls himself to his knees and checks again that Aizawa is still asleep.

He'd rather Aizawa sleep forever than have to face whatever happened last night.

Aizawa's dirty clothes are scattered on the floor, and it seems like the bucket he was using has gone missing. There's a mug full of water close to Hitoshi's backpack, which he shuffles on his knees towards and drinks eagerly, finding that it numbs the pain just a bit, but the pills he almost didn't notice promise better relief. He wavers before he decides that Aizawa sleeping like the dead means he can change his clothes, when Aizawa had left the room for that express purpose the night before.

Wearing his galaxy cat hoodie that he probably should have washed, given that the inside and sleeves were still crusted with blood after Soba attacked him, Hitoshi carefully pulls himself to his feet, testing his weight on his broken and make-shift splinted ankle. And finds he's able to stand on it much better than he should, even if it still hurts and feels unsteady.

With that done, Hitoshi is faced with a choice he'd rather not make. He can leave and try to force himself to eat one of those MREs and risk seeing the old man, or he can stay in this room until Aizawa wakes up, and probably wants to talk about whatever happened last night. With his ankle so weak, he should probably take the time to rest and elevate it, and staying in this room is the best option for that.

So Hitoshi ducks and moves the ripped blue curtain so it makes less noise, and limps into the living room to see the old man isn't bundled up in his blankets. Or anywhere in sight. He might be checking the traps, and Hitoshi is glad enough to be excluded from that.

He remembers talking to the old man about something, and while he waits for one of those MREs to finish cooking after he snaps the heating element, he finally remembers it. The old man told him about how he left the mafia lifestyle behind, how he lost his two fingers. How Hitoshi practically forced him to do that.

Hitoshi must have gotten *shitfaced* after that, and now he's probably dying because the sake was poisoned slightly. He's not dead, but this *can't* be the 'hangover' that Rikiya and the others would complain about. This is so much *worse*, he can't imagine fighting anyone in this state. He can barely manage to eat half of this tasteless food, even with the water fighting his dry mouth, because *everything* hurts when he moves.

But he might feel better if he tries freezing himself to death, so after Hitoshi relaces his shoes around his splint and visits that *weird* shack they call an 'outhouse,' he decides to limp around in the snow a bit. Nowhere in particular, just pulling his hood up to block out that *offensive* sunlight, even if the cold air around his neck and ears seems to help with his headache.

He just finds himself going back to Aizawa's treehouse and cave, by accident. It's not intentional. It just happens, because he's a little curious what Aizawa wrote on that boulder, or why he was trying to hide it.

Hitoshi crouches down in front of the cave before he decides to sit, and starts pulling snow up and around his ankle, packing the snow around his splint because freezing his entire foot off is starting to feel tempting. There's a throb that makes him grit his teeth, and he should be better with pain, after all he's gone through. He's just gotten spoiled recently, 127 trying to dice him up notwithstanding.

Hitoshi turns his head, a bit surprised by what he sees carved chalky white on the inside of the right boulder that supports this little cave. 'No moms allowed,' a much younger Aizawa must have wrote, the strokes jagged and characters different sizes. Hitoshi huffs, before he decides to pull himself a bit deeper inside.

If this is the 'No Moms Club,' then this is definitely where he belongs. He can stay out here, instead of bothering the old man. Instead of going back to UA, like Aizawa seems to think Hitoshi will. He *won't*. Staying out here, without anyone around for miles, is definitely where Hitoshi is going to stay. It's a 'safe house' after all, and if Hitoshi is supposed to stay safe, why leave it?

"Might want to be careful, plenty of animals could already be holed up in there," a foreign voice calls out, and 27 nearly breaks his head open on the rock balanced above him, unable to see this person who shouldn't be anywhere *close* to him until he looks up, to the tree where Aizawa's treehouse used to be.

When he sees him, sees his obvious quirk and his smug face, he knows he won't be able to put up much of a fight. Not with an injured ankle, and he still hasn't recovered his knife from where he dropped it yesterday, after the old man tried to steal it.

And with this man grinning down at him, his smirk sharp and teasing, he wants that knife far more than the quirk he knows this man has no chance of standing a chance against. "Looks like a poor kitten got lost up here."

Looks like a bird with red wings needs to fall out of a tree.

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Aizawa is finding that he truly doesn't like waking up alone. And it's not because his husband isn't clinging to his side.

It's because, yet again, he wakes up and finds the teenager that he's *sworn* to protect *many times* who is in *critical danger* that he *knows about and fears*, is not in the room Aizawa wakes up in.

Aizawa takes note of that quickly after he wakes to the creak of the wood furnace door opening, and pulls himself off the futon with just the barest hope that it was Hitoshi tending to the fire. And while he's disappointed to find that's not the case, he rubs his eyes and barely holds himself from groaning because he'd *really* rather not deal with his grandfather right now. "Where is Hitoshi?"

"Dunno," Shoga grunts, sweeping the ashes and burnt out wood from the furnace and into a bucket that seems to have been cleaned out. Or at least, it hopefully was. "Looks like he ate. Should've taken some aspirin too. Left it out for him."

A shiver runs through the old man, and Aizawa feels the chill of it himself. This shack is barely more warm than the outside, but Aizawa would *much* prefer that his ward were in it. It would make it easier for him to ignore the warring pulls to help the old man with this chore, and to ignore him out of spite. "Let me do that."

Aizawa will steal the excuse to be too busy to talk from the old man, finishing the sweeping after

he crouches down, then starts building a new firestack. He spots a book of matches tucked under the furnace, something else that's new, and luckily replaced the well-worn pair of flint and steel. "He had that look after the radio shut off, and now I know why. Just supposed to be a little, take the edge off--"

"I don't need your *'help'* with Hitoshi. Not like that," Aizawa interrupts, even if it's pointless. Today will be the last time that Hitoshi ever sees the old man, and last night was *certainly* the last time he'll ever drink with him. "The last thing I need is a teenage alcoholic."

The *very* last thing he needs. "Didn't see him, but I'm sure you're itching to get him and your ass out of here."

Aizawa spares a glance at the table, spotting a half-eaten MRE, and two very important things he set there last night missing. "Where's Mo-the stuffed cat? It was on the table."

"Packed it for ya," the old man says, holding his hands up to the barely lit fire, his threadbare blankets wrapped around his shoulders. "Kid can call me anytime he wants, don't bother with all that goodbye crap because I know you want out of here--"

"After noon," Aizawa says, as the van wouldn't come to pick them up until midafternoon, and the less time Hitoshi spent around Mirio for the next few days, the better, for both of their sakes. But he raises an eyebrow as he stands and takes in the sour frown on his grandfather's face. "Is there a problem with that?"

"Didn't tell me that, like you *never* do," the old man grouses, but cagily. His grandfather is up to something, or hiding something, and Aizawa wonders if it has something to do with 'the kid.' This surprising visitor who's been sneaking things like floor mats, electric blankets, and better food into his grandfather's shack, and who his grandfather is *uncomfortably* secretive about.

The old man can keep his secrets, but to a point. "You checked the traps?" Aizawa asks, getting a grunt and nod, and that's *more* suspicious. "Narrows it down then. We'll stay out of your way until we need to leave--"

"Don't bother with that, ain't got nothing to hide," his grandfather complains, exactly like someone who *does* have something to hide. Aizawa ignores it with only the barest smirk as he puts on his shoes, thinking about petty vengeance that was certainly *earned* after his grandfather welcomed his ward to his sake.

Sake *isn't* an anxiety reducer that Hitoshi needed to be aware of, especially if he became aware of how much alcohol was sitting just next door in Nemuri's dorm. He's not even sure if Hitoshi would have to use his quirk to sample some, knowing how Nemuri hardly keeps track and Hitoshi has *exceptionally* light fingers.

Aizawa knows that if his grandfather checked the traps, then most of the perimeter has already been searched, and knowing that Hitoshi shouldn't have gotten far and wouldn't have gone somewhere unfamiliar to him, he starts walking in the direction of his childhood 'base.' Even when he does, he's sure Hitoshi isn't going there for any curiosity or sentimental value there, but he probably knows that he shouldn't wander far, and stick to the places that he's more familiar with.

Hitoshi also knows he shouldn't *wander*, but Aizawa is becoming uncomfortably unsurprised by his ward's poor decision making skills.

Aizawa is just barely in sight of the treehouse when he sees a flash of red, and stops in his tracks as

he takes in the sight. Hitoshi standing there in the snow, his face a determined frown and his eyes locked on the man kneeling on a tree branch above him.

Hawks, the number two hero in Japan, tilts his head to examine his ward with a bemused smile and equally focused eyes. At first, it seems more like the prelude in a nature documentary before an act of animalistic cruelty takes its natural course, and knowing Hitoshi's current circumstances in regards to his quirk, Aizawa still finds that *unnervingly* likely.

But Hawks seems to detect his presence, turning his head to face Aizawa with a warm and almost dopey grin falling over his face, a hand raised up to wave in accompaniment with it. "Ho, fancy seeing you two out here! You're Eraserhead, right?"

Aizawa is *unnerved* that such a young pro hero, who had climbed the ranks too fast to get acquainted with Aizawa's work as an underground hero, would know him on sight and in civilian clothes. "You're 'the kid' the old man talks about?"

Hawks draws an exaggerated hiss, rubbing the back of his neck. "Jeez, what a cold way to talk about your grandpa! He brags about you all the time, y'know."

While that's a more logical explanation for how Hawks knows so much about him, Aizawa still doubts it.

Especially when Hawks glances again at Hitoshi, his eyes slightly narrowed in a way that makes his black markings around his eyes seem far more raptorial. "This is your lost little kitten, right? Wandering around in the snow?"

Hitoshi narrows his eyes with a huff, his hands tucked into his pockets and his stance widening just slightly, but enough that both Aizawa and Hawks would spot it for what it is. The kid *better* not have the knife, or any plans to use it.

"What a nice family reunion!" Hawks says, crashing that tense moment with another too-wide, too-*honest* smile. "Grandson, great-grandson, three generations under one roof! And it sure is nice to take these kids out of the city, let them experience nature for a while! Fresh air!"

Hawks jumps down from his perch, wings flaring slightly to temper his fall, and if he doesn't catch the utter *confusion* written on Hitoshi's face, bordering insult, that's all the better. Aizawa will use it. "The old man is getting older, and they've never met before."

Hitoshi turns to look at him, at first with insult, then softening to quietly beg him *not* to do this. But Aizawa rolls his shoulders, almost a shrug, with a look back that he hopes impresses upon Hitoshi that this *will* be their story for now. For *Hawks*, who is working *far* too close to Endeavor for Aizawa's comfort. And far too close to The Commission because of that.

Hitoshi directs his petulant glare over his shoulder with a flash of bare teeth, but when he turns back with his usual sullen blankness, it's a believable act. "Aizawa thought Grampa was mad at him for being gay, but it turns out he's not, so they're making up for lost time. It's been... *very* fun out here."

Aizawa isn't *sure* if Hitoshi is just bad at making a script on the fly like this, or if this is a bit of pettiness coming out to play. But Hawks whistles a disappointed down-swing tune at it. "Jeez, 'Grampa' comes before 'Dad.' Or maybe it's just the lack of cell reception up here. I've got a hot spot if you want to unwind with some 'Clickster' or whatever's hot these days!"

Aizawa might be older than Hawks, but he knows Hawks is barely older than his students, and

should *definitely* know there's no such thing as 'Clickster' if *Aizawa* knows that. "This is a nice break from technology."

Hitoshi looks even more sullen with the reminder of the phone he had to leave behind, which is honestly *very* convincing. And Hawks seems to notice that. "Ah, shucks. Well, I still brought some nice yakitori for Gramps, plenty to share, but it's only getting colder the more we stand around here. Need a hand with that ankle?"

Hitoshi turns his head again to Hawks, outright glaring at him for the observation he clearly wanted to hide. "It's fine-*hey!*"

Aizawa expected a lot of things on this trip. Pleasant nature sightings mostly.

The sight of his ward being carried aloft with the number two hero's arms wrapped around his chest and under his arms while he hisses and Hawks laughs was not one of them.

But it honestly does feel like watching a hawk carry a stray kitten in its talons with the intention of devouring it at a secondary location, which is why Aizawa doesn't spare a thought to pride or not wanting to seem rattled when he runs after them.

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This is *cannibalism*.

This guy, with the big red wings, who the old man likes *too much* and seems embarrassed about showing it more than he usually is with Aizawa, is eating *chicken*. It was *his idea* to eat chicken. He's cooking the chicken, and the old man talks like he does this a lot.

It's almost as creepy as *he is*, and he's *fucking* creepy.

It's worse because he pretends he's not, and he's good at that. He smiles like he's got nothing to hide, like he's an absolute idiot who is soaking up every single *fucked up* lie Aizawa is spoonfeeding him about how Hitoshi was recently *adopted* by Aizawa and-

It *really* wouldn't have been a bad thing if he brained himself on that rock before this Bird Guy said another word to him.

But, Bird Guy's chicken must have the antidote to that poison that was in the sake, because after eating some of it, Hitoshi starts to feel closer to alive rather than death warmed over. He keeps picking and eating small bites of it, slow as he can, because he doesn't *want* to be part of this conversation. Even when it drifts over to the old man for a bit because Bird Guy brought him some slippers and handwarmers along with what seems like his usual delivery of food, sake, and supplies, Hitoshi keeps catching glances from him.

The Bird Guy has a good act, to a point. Despite that dopey grin and hands that just keep fluttering with too honest emotions, too *much* like Yamada, his eyes go too cold too easily. Hitoshi has seen that look often enough to know what that means.

Bird Guy has it out for him over something, and Hitoshi just has to *hope* Aizawa knows how to handle it. He doesn't have his knife, he doesn't *want* to use his quirk, but he will if Aizawa fails him here.

He doesn't know why he wants to wait, his arms folded and his nerves itching to get away from this place even if he risks running into a bear trap. But Aizawa seems to have a plan.

A *stupid* one.

“So, *Shohei*,” Bird Guy says, bracing his arm against the table as he serves the last of the yakitori he’s reheated on the stove. “It’s pretty neat that you’re carrying on the tradition of male Aizawa’s having ‘Sho’ in their given name. It’s almost like Eraserhead must have picked you for that.”

“No one said he didn’t,” Hitoshi says, because that would make sense. If Aizawa wants to carry on that tradition, and for whatever reason he had a bunch of children to choose from, looking for the right name would make sense. Because it already *doesn’t* make sense that Aizawa would *look* for a child in the first place, not someone like him and *definitely* not when he had Eri to look after.

Bird Guy chokes on a laugh, but Aizawa seems insulted for some reason. “It was just coincidence. I don’t put stake in things like ‘traditions.’”

Bird Guy hums, before he thankfully turns his focus back to Aizawa, bracing his chin on his hand with some excitement in his grin and in his eyes. “Aw, how did you two meet? I can’t imagine you were really looking, since you have a ward assigned to you and everything. What was her name—Erumi? Era—”

“*Eri*,” Hitoshi corrects, and if ‘Shohei’ wouldn’t be this insulted, then ‘*Shohei*’ can go *fuck himself*.

“That’s a personal situation,” Aizawa brushes off gruffly, which seems to be his usual defense for a question he hasn’t thought out well enough to answer. It honestly works better than when he tries, even if it’s obvious. ‘*Shohei*.’

Aizawa fucking *Shohei*, like Hitoshi would want *Aizawa’s* name over Yamada’s.

“And your ward? Little Eri? I hope she’s not running around out here like a little snow bunny, dangerous enough for lost kittens,” Bird Guy says, *winking* at him and practically *begging* for a knife to the face, and if Hitoshi *had* that knife, he’d also have *peace*.

“She’s at UA, this trip would be ill-suited for her,” Aizawa lies stiffly, but it might be convincing. Hitoshi can’t tell, because he knows it’s *lies*. For some reason, it irritates him, even if he knows Aizawa needs to lie to keep Creepy Bird Guy from harassing Eri.

If Bird Guy picked Eri up and tried to fly away with her, Hitoshi would *pluck and roast him*. “Eh, that’s a little cold-hearted. You shouldn’t treat the kids differently just because one is temporary and the other is a real commitment, with the adoption and all.”

Hitoshi only feels a flash of anger coursing through him, before he’s standing and he barely has a reason for it. This Bird Guy is just *fucking annoying*, and how *dare* he think that Eri is the temporary one? “H-*Shohei*—”

“I’m going to piss into a hole, if you *don’t mind*,” Hitoshi grates out, the first reason for an escape that comes to mind, and he kicks his feet into his shoes because this is the first place he’s ever been that doesn’t even have a *bathroom*. Even *Bug* gave him a toilet inside his room, but here, there’s just an *outhouse*.

And even if it’s disgusting, it’s better than sitting down with *Fuckbird* and playing along with Aizawa’s *stupid fucking lies*.

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Aizawa folds his hands, tries not to show that he nearly let everything fall to pieces in an emotionally charged moment that *shouldn’t* have felt anything like one, and sighs to act the part of

a father dealing with a teenager who isn't a fan of a trip into the woods.

It's *far easier* than it should be, with Hitoshi making it *far too easy*. "So, you know he's got a tracker on him, right?"

Aizawa looks up, watching Hawks stare at him from the corner of his narrowed eyes, that grin dropping to a smirk. Like a predator that knows full well it's only been playing with its food until this point.

"It's in his ankle, right behind his achilles tendon. Something rattled the signal, which is why I'm out here. And if anyone asks, this is like the seventh time I've swatted your very naughty hands for taking him out without approval," Hawks drawls, leaning back with a put-upon sigh. "For future warning, Endeavor's gonna see you the next time, so I wouldn't have a next time. Seems like you two have some kinda beef."

Aizawa would *love* to throttle the number two hero in Japan right now, for leading him on like this, *clearly* for kicks, but the way this information was freely given gives him enough reason not to. *Barely*. "An interesting place for a tracker. I don't suppose it's wired to explode. That would definitely put an end to any escape attempt."

Hawks' smile is frozen, as though he didn't hear that at all. Perhaps he shouldn't have, but with neither a twitch of amusement nor argument to the contrary, that places Hawks' allegiances squarely where Aizawa would want them. It's probably true that The Commission has a way to cut off any attempt to run, by making sure that Hitoshi *can't* physically do that, and despite apparently working closely with them, Hawks doesn't approve of that drastic and cruel measure.

And it would be nice to trust that Aizawa knows anything about Hawks or his allegiances at this point, but Aizawa won't jump to conclusions and risk being fooled again. "I don't suppose it's news to my grandfather who you really are, if you're telling me something like this."

"Kid's a hero," his grandfather says gruffly around a chicken skewer, as though that's all that needs to be said on the subject. When Aizawa looks at him and tries to impress upon him that it's *not*, he huffs and drops his hands to the table. "Kid's been coming up to this mountain for years, since he was a snot nosed thing. Always staring too much--"

"It's a nice place to roost and unwind a bit, with great company!" Hawks argues, laughing afterwards. "Yeah, I've been poking around here for a few years, before I became a hero. Guess that makes me part of the family!"

Aizawa. *Doesn't* want to consider that. Even *remotely* possible. "And you haven't reported him for squatting in all these years."

"Of course not," Hawks says with a frown, waving his hand at the accusation. "Everyone should be free to pick their own life, and no one comes up here except for me. It doesn't hurt anyone, so why bother? Which makes me wonder... what brings you up to the mountains? With a lost little kitten, and a collar you didn't know about?"

It's a question, for a question in turn, prying for prying. It's a question Aizawa *doesn't* want to answer, and especially to *Hawks*.

"Probably something to do with that kerfuffle at UA, a couple nights ago. It wasn't reported, which, not surprising, knowing you," Hawks drawls, and Aizawa doesn't like that implication that Hawks *knows* him, even if evidence would supposedly suggest that he doesn't care. "A *traitor* at UA, bringing down the security Friday night. It's good that they were caught, arrested and all.

Shame about what happened after that.”

Aizawa doesn't know what happened after that, and he's aware that Hawks may be baiting him by being so vague, because he is probably *aware* Aizawa doesn't know. But the tension that snaps inside him draws out again, and Aizawa finds himself speaking before he can consider all of the outcomes. “We left Friday night, for Shinsou's safety. Since we couldn't determine the cause of the attack, it could have left our phones compromised. We've been in the dark since then.”

Hawks hums, folding his arms as his expression turns solemn, his wings fidgeting before they pull inward. His wings might be more honest than his face, but Aizawa doesn't know him well enough to trust either. “Damn, that's a shame. They were arrested, but attacked in transit. Critical condition, so they're not sure if sh- *they're* gonna make it. Might have been The League, silencing loose ends since they sang a *pretty* song according to all the new intel.”

‘*She.*’ Aizawa doesn't know *anything* at this point. Nezu didn't give him a name, but there were still *students* on that list of suspects. *His own* students. “Who was it?”

“Confidential, but I'm sure you'll know,” Hawks answers, in non-answers. At first. “Not exactly like they can hide it on the attendance sheet come tomorrow morning.”

One of his students.

One of his students, and while ‘she’ narrows it down, he won't bring himself to consider a single one of them, to recall a single name. *Critical condition*, one of his students is injured and near-death, and while he knows this was brought about because they were the traitor who leaked the location of the training camp, possibly USJ, *definitely* had a hand in compromising campus security that night-

He knows Shiori is involved too. He knows that he doesn't know Shiori at all because of that, and he knows Shiori could have forced their compliance in any manner of ways. Shiori is a *powerful* asset, one that he's probably never truly had.

He knows one of his students is in a hospital, near death after an attack he wasn't anywhere near to stop, and that they were probably forced into all of this. One of his students is a *victim* and one of his students needed him to see that for too long, and he didn't *suspect* a single one of them, even when Principal Nezu *did*.

“I need the name,” Aizawa growls, demands with both a mind to use his quirk to clip Hawks' wings and his capture scarf to make him stay. To *answer* him.

“Like I said, *confidential*,” Hawks answers, his own tone offering warning when he tilts his head, eyes narrowed in warning. Aizawa knows he can't underestimate Hawks due to his youth, his hero ranking speaks for itself, and Aizawa knows enough about Hawks to know it's *warranted*. And he's playing with fire enough so far, which Hawks reminds him of. “You've got bigger issues right now, like that kitten that's out in the snow.”

That's true, to a point. Aizawa has a greater responsibility to Hitoshi on paper than he does for his students, but choosing between them now isn't that simple. “He's probably avoiding you, given the impression so far.”

Hawks laughs, too fully, and it's almost disturbing how quickly he'll turn to that wide-grinned face. “Aw, he's just embarrassed, I'm sure. I'd hate to ditch out without making it up to him though. Think he'd appreciate a first class flight down the mountain to catch up with little Eri?”

Aizawa *knew* it was possible that all his cards had already been marked for Hawks before this point, before he ever opened his mouth to address him. But those still narrowed eyes carve him down to the core, and it's all the more chilling because he doesn't know where Hawks' cards even *are*. Aizawa is an underground hero, he *purposefully* operates under the radar, and he's sure more is known about him as fact than about Hawks.

"I'm sure you already know, but I'd tread carefully from now on, Eraserhead. Endeavor will be paying a visit next time, and he doesn't seem to appreciate the loose and easy way," Hawks says, in a way that implies there are no secrets between them. That seems to be only halfway true.

Hawks lifts his arms above his head, groaning as he stretches, his wingspan stretching out as much as it can as well, but his left wing is still too long as it's still folded when it brushes the wall. His gloved hand meets the table afterwards with finality, another grunt when he stands.

"Welp, sorry I can't stay so long to chat, Gramps! I'll stop by next week, but might be busy after that. I'll make sure to stock you up though, and let me know what you want for Christmas," Hawks says, beaming at Aizawa's grandfather too loosely, too casually, and the way the old man allows it is just *unnerving* to the core.

"Don't bother with that nonsense, never keep up with the days up here," Shoga grouses, waving a hand at Hawks, and when the pro hero taps his shoulder as a far too casual way of parting, Aizawa has *far* too many questions about the past nine years. Specifically, *how this could have happened*.

But given there's a 'lost kitten' Hawks is far too interested in, Aizawa follows him out the door wordlessly. And they don't have to look far, when Hitoshi is laying down in the snow, just staring at the sky, a bit awkward in his steadfast decision to avoid Hawks by not coming back to the shack.

Which doesn't go very well, as Hawks sprints the short distance to him to turn, landing backwards in the snow right above his ward with their heads nearly meeting, flashing a smile and a peace sign to the phone already held in his hand.

Hitoshi springs up as soon as he notices it, which may have been too late for the selfie, and it was a bit too quick for his ankle sprain as he loses his footing before he gains it and instead kneels in the snow. Hawks laughs as he shakes out his wings. "Hey, that turned out pretty nice! Add me on one of those social medias, and I'll have my team send it over to ya, as a memento and all."

Hitoshi glares at the outstretched hand offered to help him, and the cell phone turned to show him the picture. Aizawa doesn't know if Hawks somehow already knows how to push every *single* one of Hitoshi's buttons, given that the kid seems to hate having his picture taken even by Hizashi, but he *doesn't* appreciate it. "He doesn't have social media, given that he's under protection."

Hawks pulls his yellow tinted sunglasses out of one of his chest pockets, smiling at Aizawa while he puts them on. "Well, good thing for that."

Aizawa doesn't know if Hawks knows how to push every single one of *Aizawa's* buttons, with that slight, so small that he almost thinks he's making it up insinuation that Aizawa has failed to protect Hitoshi in every single other way than keeping him off of social media. But the sooner the number two hero takes off, *the better*.

Hitoshi seems to agree with that, as a hand he had been holding behind himself draws out and Aizawa only has a split second to worry about a knife.

Before he sees a snowball that Hawks merely tilted his head to dodge, and Aizawa barely does. "Haha! See ya around, kiddo!"

There's a single red feather left in the snow after Hawks takes off, gliding over the treeline but trying to gain altitude with each push of his wings. Aizawa watches as long as he's visible, sure that there's only terrible reasons why he seems to be heading towards the training camp at the base of the mountain, where Eri is.

Perhaps, it might be better to risk Hitoshi being uncomfortable around Mirio for a few hours longer than Aizawa intended, or vice versa, with that in mind.

Hitoshi growls under his breath when he pulls himself to stand, shaking his jacket and hoodie free from snow before he spots the feather, and intentionally steps on it. He looks up, as though Aizawa had remarked about that, which he purposefully wasn't going to. "Knew a guy who could hear things through his feathers, something about the vibrations from sounds. Not taking any chances with that creepy *fuck*."

"That's only a little paranoid," Aizawa remarks, because in this case the paranoia isn't at all undeserved. He's not sure if Hawks *could* do that, but *if* he could, Aizawa is sure that he would. "As fun as 'kitsunes' were, Hawks makes for a horrible tengu. The Loch Ness monster would have made this trip more fun for you, I'm sure."

Hitoshi stares at him, eyes narrowed in insult even if his lifted eyebrow seems to indicate that he's confused by whatever he's deemed to be insulted by. And Aizawa wonders if Hitoshi completely forgot about mentioning that interest in seeing the Loch Ness monster.

But Aizawa will take it as a teachable moment, instead of bringing any of that up. "Tengu are winged birdmen who live in the mountains, and train wanderers in secret forms of martial arts, when they're not spiriting women or children away. They're sacred teachers."

"They're *assholes*," Hitoshi decides, and Aizawa is once again reminded that Hitoshi's mood was doomed to be this sullen from the start, from how poorly this trip has gone, and what caused it. And his grandfather allowing him to drink last night has probably insured that the teenager is going to suffer the effects of that all day.

Which means that Aizawa might need to trust that Ms. Joke and the gathered hero students can take care of Eri, if Hawks decides to stop by like he nearly threatened to. "We should go inside and pack. We're leaving in a few hours."

Aizawa only takes a few steps before he hears that he's not followed, looking over his shoulder to see that Hitoshi was still sullenly standing there, his foot still on Hawks' feather, and his hands tucked into the front pocket of his hoodie. Which Aizawa noticed was crusted brown at the bottom edge, thankfully with what looked to be old blood.

"Hitoshi?"

"*Shohei*," Hitoshi spits instead, and Aizawa would *truly* prefer if absolutely everything about that could be forgotten, which is why he's sure his ward *won't* forget it at all. "*I'm* Aizawa *Shohei*, so I don't know who you're talking about. I have *no idea* who 'Hitoshi' or 'Shinsou' or-"

"Listen to your father, Shohei. It's cold out here," Aizawa answers with a wave of his hand, turning back to enter the shack with a bait that's quickly followed. Hitoshi seemed to be incensed about that name for some reason, but given that it would be boring to snip and argue with no one to hear or answer him out in the snow, of course he was going to follow Aizawa inside.

And though he seemed to pause for a moment when he opened his backpack and found Mocha, his stuffed cat inside, it seemed more likely that he was struggling to find a scathing response to it.

Eventually, he seems to recognize he can't fashion one, huffing as he continued to pack, setting the stuffed animal gently aside so it wouldn't be crushed under his laundry.

Aizawa makes it a point to remind him that they'll be leaving soon along with how much time remains, so Hitoshi won't have the excuse of being surprised by that.

He knows that he misses Hizashi and Eri too, and this miserable trip's end can't come sooner.

*

Absolutely. Every *single* part of this. Was *stupid*.

"It's a three hour hike, and you won't be able to make it with that ankle," Aizawa says, but he won't even give Hitoshi the dignity of *looking* at him when he says that, crouching down to put his shoes on and facing the wall the shoes are lined up against. After acting like the most redundant *fucking* clock for the past several hours, just telling Hitoshi what time it was like he had *any* idea without a phone or watch, Aizawa *never* fucking told him *this*.

"Give me the sleeping bag, and I'll beat you there," Hitoshi says, because it would be an absolutely *blissful* break from Aizawa if he could just hide inside the sleeping bag and throw himself down the mountain. Even better if he breaks his neck, but Hitoshi knows he's not that lucky.

"Not going to happen. You'll either kill yourself, or ruin my sleeping bag. Or both," Aizawa answers, in a way that makes it clear where his priorities are. With that stupid yellow abomination he probably only bought because it reminds him of his husband, because he's just that embarrassing. When he stands up, he seems to think he's made his final decision, only glancing at Hitoshi when he looks at his grandfather, huddled next to the fire like he seems intent to spend his day. The old man should at least have a book to read, if nothing else. "Thanks for having us."

"Get the hell off my mountain," the old man answers, because he doesn't seem to like goodbyes. At least, not from Aizawa, which means he has good taste, because he turns to look at Hitoshi. "Don't give him any more grief, you've done that enough while you're here."

"I've been on my *best* behavior here," Hitoshi says, and intends to make that true. If Aizawa *thinks* he can drag him off this mountain, back to all those people and UA and the investigation and the undeniable reality that he's a *Nomu*, then he's in for a surprise. He *likes* it up here, and he's not going to give that up so easily. "See you soon."

"I'll see you," Aizawa says, something that makes the old man jolt and stare at him too long. Aizawa opens the door anyway, like he doesn't want to answer to that reaction, and just leave the poor old man alone with whatever secret insult or threat he means.

"I'll be here," the old man answers, too quietly. It seems like a code, and Hitoshi will have to ask him about it when he comes back.

Because he's coming back quickly, *soon*. He almost wants to make it now when he follows Aizawa out the door, and Aizawa crouches down in front of him.

"I'm *not*—"

"The sooner you do, the sooner we can see Eri," Aizawa interrupts, because he's *fucking rude*. "Take as long as you want, I'll wait," he adds, because Aizawa is undeniably, irrevocably, *completely* an asshole too.

Hitoshi walks forward, reminding himself how *easy* it would be to put Aizawa in a sleeper hold or snap his neck, and awkwardly steps each leg under Aizawa's arms, his hands moving under Hitoshi's knees. Hitoshi wanted that to be enough, but when Aizawa stands up, he nearly falls backwards, and has to brace himself by clinging to his shoulders.

Fucking asshole. "I know this-"

"Just *get on* with it," Hitoshi snaps, because *yes*, he doesn't like being carried around, he *especially* hates that Aizawa keeps insisting on it, and it's Aizawa's own damn fault that his ankle hurts too much to walk on now.

If Aizawa wasn't just such an irritating, infuriating *dick*, Hitoshi would have never gone out with his grandfather to check the traps in the first place.

Hitoshi has to carry both backpacks awkwardly, Aizawa's being heavier because Aizawa packed too much useless *stuff*. As Aizawa walks away from the shack, into the trees and changing his route in ways that seem pointless at first, before Hitoshi realizes he must know the traps better than the local deer do. Hitoshi tries to ignore how large and stiff and *menacing* Aizawa's hands are as they grip his knees. He tries to ignore how awkward this is, and fails, and instead forces himself closer by wrapping his arms around Aizawa's neck, tilting his head back to avoid a face full of hair.

When he carries Eri like this, that's how Eri holds onto him, with her arms wrapped around his neck from the back. Hitoshi *isn't* Eri, so he knows these thoughts are his own as he can't stop thinking about how he only needs one arm around Aizawa's throat, his other with the elbow braced behind Aizawa's shoulder, how he could use that to slowly pull and *squeeze* until he drops.

"It's about 12:30 now, should be at the training camp by-"

"You're not a clock," Hitoshi reminds, because Aizawa apparently *needs* a reminder. He would be *so much* less annoying if he didn't start talking out of nowhere, nearly making Hitoshi fall backwards out of surprise.

He wonders if he used to scare other people too, when they didn't expect him to talk either. "The position of the sun. It's easier out here with the trees. That stick is standing straight up, and it barely has a shadow."

Aizawa steps out of his way to avoid that stick, like Hitoshi really cares to notice that. Maybe it's a neat way to tell time, but *phones* are neater.

27 is going to miss having one, but it's better for everyone involved.

When Hitoshi moves his arms a bit closer, to his limit unless he wants to risk getting his head lost in Aizawa's absurdly scruffy hair, his gloved thumb nearly gets snagged in something he forgot about. Aizawa's capture scarf.

He pulls that hand away immediately, pulling at his black knit hat pointlessly as a distraction, before he bites down on the tip of his middle finger to pull the glove off. He's not sure if it will work with one hand, when the capture scarf might still respond only to Aizawa, and it's probably pressed against the back of Aizawa's bare neck. It seems to need skin contact though.

27 puts his hand on top where the white scarf is looped around Aizawa's shoulders, and barely opens his mouth to drop the glove or say a word to make it move, when it starts *moving*. It flares out immediately, Aizawa *notices* just as soon and stops in his tracks, and 27 is shoved off of Aizawa's back by those surprisingly sturdy cords but he clings to it with both hands and *pulls*.

27 lands on the snow and sees enough of Aizawa falling too, his own hands reaching for the capture scarf pulled around his throat, before 27 drops the scarf, turns, and starts *running*. His ankle cries out immediately, because all the old man would part with were the bandages and Aizawa *said* that was fine, but 27 just needs to get those things back.

He just needs to hide from Aizawa for a while, wait him out. Aizawa wants to get back to Eri, and eventually he'll realize that it's easier to leave 27 behind. That he *should*, he should just go back to Eri, back to Yamada, back to UA, and realize that 27 will be safe here and he *should* be left behind.

27 keeps an eye on the tracks Aizawa left in the snow, to make sure it's harder for him, and finally takes a breath for the first time in what feels like minutes when he doesn't hear Aizawa following.

Stupid walking clock finally ran out of patience, but Hitoshi feels like he'll never stop shaking after what he just did.

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Aizawa was going to pass it off as an accident, but with two loops of the scarf pulling *in* while the rest were flaring *out*, he realized that wasn't what happened. And when he took two steps in pursuit, crouched too low, his gloved hand curling around the capture scarf that had settled and pulled reflexively, it was the lack of response through the glove that reminded him what he was.

He's a hero, but he's not in pursuit of a criminal.

He forced his blood to cool as he forced himself to wait, forced himself to ask why in *hell* Hitoshi pulled that stunt. Why the kid was jumping around traps like that, regardless of which leg he landed on.

Desperation, was the answer. Something Aizawa wrote off or didn't see, something he didn't explain well enough, or some fear that Hitoshi didn't share with him.

He walks stiffly, as Hitoshi runs, and even when he passes out of sight, Aizawa knows he'll catch up to him. It seems likely that it won't be in a trap, as he notices there aren't truly new tracks on the ground. Hitoshi is jumping like that to land on his own footprints, sometimes overlapping the edge, but if Hitoshi continues on like that, he'll either follow those tracks to the shack or find a new trail leading somewhere else.

Hitoshi needs this time to calm down, as much as Aizawa does, so they can have a *conversation* about how attempted strangulation isn't an adequate way of expressing discomfort.

Aizawa sees the trail split as the shack comes into view, and almost doubts for a moment that this isn't an old path written in the snow. Hitoshi is going *back* to Aizawa's childhood basecamp, where he had run into Hawks just hours ago, and Aizawa only spares a thought to whether Hitoshi had hidden something there and left it before he dismisses it.

Hitoshi wouldn't put down roots in this place, when he knew from the beginning it was temporary.

But, Aizawa finds himself surprised. Mostly, by *how the hell* Hitoshi managed to get into that tree.

It must have taken a while, as Aizawa had been stalking him out of sight for a while, and it looks like Hitoshi has just barely managed the feat, his purple haired head falling back against the tree trunk with his injured leg dangling off of it. It's not the sturdiest branch on that tree, but Aizawa used to brace his treehouse with a board there, as the load-bearing branch was next to and above it.

And Aizawa takes off his glove to throw his capture scarf around that load-bearing branch, pulling

himself onto it too quickly to consider Hitoshi jolting out of the tree, only thinking pettily that this is a far less dangerous surprise than the one Aizawa was treated to.

Aizawa notices that Hitoshi stares, that he hasn't fallen out, but he looks like he's considering the option with his hands braced on the branch and trunk, ready to shove himself into another run. Aizawa tries to reassure him by settling himself on his own branch, capture scarf winding around his shoulders, pressing his back to the trunk with a sigh. "Whenever you're ready to talk about that, I'll be waiting."

Hitoshi scoffs and folds his arms, pouting almost when he throws his back against the tree trunk again. It's encouraging enough that he isn't bolting, it seems to mean he *will* talk about it eventually, of his own volition. No doubt with angry barbed words at first, but Aizawa supposes he'll have to get better at piecing out what Hitoshi means beneath those. "This is a *safe house*, and I'm supposed to stay *safe*. I don't *get* why you're trying to make me leave."

Aizawa nods, because Hitoshi needs some little reward for the attempt to be forthcoming, even if it's barely that. "Because this was always a temporary measure, and I thought I was clear about that-"

"I don't *have* to leave," Hitoshi interrupts, and he's *oddly* incensed about this. It's enough that Aizawa begins to consider the horrifying possibility that Hitoshi and his grandfather *bonded* so well over the past three days, that Hitoshi doesn't want to leave him.

Aizawa would *really* rather that Hitoshi has simply found a fondness for easy access to alcohol. "You do. You're Hizashi's ward, and he has legal guardianship of you, as do I for extreme circumstances, and my grandfather doesn't. Hizashi and Eri are both eager to see you again, and I don't think you would be happy never seeing them again if you stayed up here."

"I could talk to them through the radio," Hitoshi says, a bit less venom in his tone, which seems to imply that he's actually thought this out. "Can't use my quirk like that. And they won't miss me, and they'll be safe."

Three things that Aizawa overlooked, apparently. Hitoshi is still uncomfortable with his quirk, and unfortunately very aware that he will need to test it on Hizashi. Hitoshi seems to think that Hizashi and Eri would ever be reassured by his voice over a radio instead of verifying his safety with their own eyes, and given how injury-prone his ward is, that's *completely* an understandable worry.

And Hitoshi still thinks of himself as a danger to others, because he can't trust that anyone can protect him.

"It's actually a good thing that you can't use your quirk through the radio. It guarantees that your wardship can't be removed," Aizawa says, because his husband's total hearing loss isn't the only factor at play now. "Hizashi's hearing aids work like the radio, it processes sounds that we can hear and plays it like a speaker inside his ear. If it didn't work at all with Eri, then it won't work at all with Hizashi."

Aizawa glances out of the corner of his eye, to see Hitoshi tucking his bare hand a bit deeper under his arm. But his head tips down a bit, maybe a bit of guilt sinking in.

"Hizashi and Eri *will* miss you, if you stay out here. I'm sure you've wondered how they are, if they're worried, and just hearing their voices isn't enough to know they're safe. And you'll miss Eri's birthday party."

"I don't know what to get her anyway," Hitoshi says, a weak defense. Even when he says it, he

sounds too upset at the notion, like he should be. He deserves to see that important milestone for her.

“And I *will* keep you safe,” Aizawa says, as he’s said, *multiple times*. But this time, Hitoshi might remember now that he’s sober. “I’m not going to die in the attempt, because I’ve faced thousands of villains, and I’m *quite* capable of taking them down when I’m there to do something about it. And I will be around, because you will be escorted by either Hizashi or myself at all times, and if there is anyone you think could stand a chance against us, there’s another hero on staff that would be able to take them down. If there *is* someone like that, I need you to tell me about them. That’s why I need you to talk about the people who are trying to hurt you, so I can defend you.”

Hitoshi curls his uninjured leg a bit closer to himself, along with his arms tightening. “I didn’t. Tell you anything out here. That’s what you wanted me to do.”

If that’s a poorly thought out defense, a last-ditch effort to convince Aizawa to leave Hitoshi out here, or another ‘trade’ that Hitoshi wants to insist upon himself, it doesn’t matter. “I want to know enough to keep you safe. Whatever else you know, you don’t have to tell me.”

8 hours... 12 hours... B-Bug’s maggots. Those words still ring in Aizawa’s head, a name he wants to put to a *face* to put under his *fists*, because Aizawa has always known that Hitoshi’s past is painful. Not like that.

And Aizawa doesn’t want to make it more painful than it has to be. “I already know you’re adept at evaluating quirks, and the abilities of others. I trust your judgement on who we’ll need to be wary of. Beyond that, I need your help finding where they’re located, and if you’re comfortable trying to identify them, that would be helpful as well. But it’s not necessary.”

“I don’t know who’s dead or alive. It’s been three years,” Hitoshi says, a concern Aizawa has always been aware of. “Everything might have changed. I probably don’t know anything.”

“Then, you’ll have to put up with it for longer, until we find them,” Aizawa says, and if that’s music to Hitoshi’s ears, to know he won’t be parted from Eri that easily, Aizawa will take it. “If it takes long enough, you’ll probably be moved to protected custody once you become an adult. You could change your assignment to one of my students after they graduate and become fully fledged. Even Bakugo.”

Hitoshi huffs, a bit closer to a laugh than usual, even if it sounds bitter. “He’d get me killed in a week, or kill me himself. I’d probably make him do it.”

There’s a sharp edge to those words, that reminds Aizawa how fragile his ward’s desire to live seems to be. “It might seem easier to stay here, and avoid all of that. Despite how frightening it is, there are a lot of things you’ll miss out on. Things you don’t even know about yet, that you have no idea exist.”

Hitoshi doesn’t answer to that, and might not fully realize what Aizawa means right now. Even if Aizawa is sure he encountered nothing but surprise and terror after the raid on the 8 Precepts, when he was thrown into a world he couldn’t understand and had no hope of doing so, when he was completely unprepared for any of it, there is so much *more* written in Hitoshi’s future that he can’t see.

The silence drags out, the shadows only drawing further out when Aizawa looks, and he has to break the silence instead. “Like the Loch Ness monster-”

“You’re so *fucking* obsessed with that,” Hitoshi snaps, his head turned to face Aizawa with an

irritation that Aizawa is surprised he can find so amusing. He might be embarrassed, but that's a light consequence to assault with a deadly weapon. "You know that's fake, it doesn't even exist, ri-"

Hitoshi's teeth snap audibly when he cuts himself off, turning away with something that Aizawa finds far less amusing. "I still mean what I said, that it's possible to use one quirk and not the other. It's entirely up to you, if you ever want my help with that."

Hitoshi turns just enough to stare at his own knee, again too comfortable with silence. Again, Aizawa finds himself growing a bit impatient.

"And whenever you want my help getting out of this tree-"

Hitoshi sighs, dropping his head forward. "*Fine*. You win. Do whatever you want."

The teenager punctuates that by dropping his arms to his sides, his head raising just enough to rest against the tree trunk, going completely limp. Aizawa could argue the point that he would *like* Hitoshi's cooperation to make things go a bit more smoothly, but this seems to be the end of Hitoshi's patience as well.

Aizawa lets himself fall to the ground, and decides some more complicated capturing measures could serve him better here. He winds the capture scarf around Hitoshi's waist and both knees, keeping the tension there to guide Hitoshi's descent onto his back.

And after replacing his gloves, he puts his hands under Hitoshi's knees to steady him. But he's not removing the capture scarf from his ward.

"You're really going to carry me down the mountain like this," Hitoshi observes, his flattened tone making a rather pointless question into a rather pointless observation.

"You're really going to ask that after you tried to choke me," Aizawa returns in kind, his own flat tone stripped enough from accusation that Hitoshi's hands falling off his shoulders is surprising. "There are better ways to say you're uncomfortable with something, and I'd prefer you use them."

"*I'd prefer to walk*," Hitoshi argues, but his arms wind back over Aizawa's chest for balance. Aizawa tries not to react to it like it's more dangerous than his ward trying to balance himself.

"I'm relieved you no longer want to roll down the mountain in my sleeping bag," Aizawa says, and means it.

He really *shouldn't* be relieved by something like that, but that's what's unique about Hitoshi. It's always something new to be concerned about.

And yet, there's always something to be surprised about, in a different way.

"A fox," Hitoshi observes. Aizawa turns his head to catch a flash of that red fur between the trees, and sees the animal is either in pursuit of prey, or pursuit of a den to shelter itself from the cold from how quickly it runs.

"Omnivores. They mostly eat smaller prey, but they'll eat plants and insects too," Aizawa says, recalling a fond memory from his youth with a smirk he can't quite fight. "Supposedly fish, but not preserved sardines. I wanted one as a pet, and it wouldn't take the bait."

"Should've offered it something better," Hitoshi remarks, which might be true. But it's honestly better that the fox was wise enough to turn away from those oily, congealed fish from a boiled

MRE.

There's no way that Aizawa could have taken care of it.

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Aizawa stops suddenly, when he hears a weird noise. Hitoshi hears it too, something close to that injured deer, but quieter. His hands curl a bit tighter in front of Aizawa's chest, hoping that it isn't another deer, or the same one he saw with its mangled leg, only closer to death now.

Aizawa turns and walks towards it, but it isn't long before they see what looks like a body strung up by another leg snare, someone bundled up in heavy snow jackets with their arms dangling limply below their head, almost touching the scarf on the ground. The woman with her brown hair in a loose and frazzled bun looks somewhat familiar, but Hitoshi can't quite place her.

Apparently, Aizawa does remember her, not fondly, as he tries to turn and walk away, but somehow she must have realized he was there as her eyes spring open. "*You! Kidnapping a ward in our-ah!*"

The woman must have tried to kick out of the leg trap, now she's clinging to her leg and making weird sobbing noises, even if she's not crying. But that's not enough to stop her from glaring up at Aizawa, and though Hitoshi can't see his face, he imagines that Aizawa regrets investigating.

"I had to come out here, I had to leave Tokyo on a *weekend*, to come out *here*, to get *maimed* by these-*whatever* this is, that's *highly illegal* on top of how *illegal* it is for you to take our witness into this godforsaken mountain- you're *not* getting away with this, Eraserhead! This is the last straw, there's no *way* I can hide this, and that kid's going to *talk* when Endeavor signs the papers-"

"Did you hear something?" Aizawa asks, brushing his hair behind his ear, and nearly smacking Hitoshi in the face with it. "It would be very unfortunate if a government official was stranded out here with these freezing temperatures. The old man doesn't check his traps very often, especially the ones out here. And if he did find a *government* official.... I don't know if he would hear anything either."

That's a bit *cold*, even for Hitoshi's tastes. Aizawa is really going to let this lady die, just because she's annoying, and she wants-

Endeavor.

This is that bitch from all the interrogations. It's hard to recognize her without the suit, without her whining, but *this* is the lady who wouldn't let him take his knife to see Chisaki, who tricked him into drinking that poisoned coffee with that Jun lady. And she *does* want to take him away from Yamada, to force him to talk and force him to stay with that Endeavor guy instead.

The woman is still glaring at Aizawa, like she doesn't believe his words, or that threat. Aizawa *shouldn't* be willing to let her die, he's still a hero. He should at least have a cover story so that it's Hitoshi's fault, that he brainwashed Aizawa and forced him to leave this woman out here to her fate.

"You don't want to play this game, Eraserhead," the woman says, and clearly she's trying to threaten Aizawa. It's not working well, because it's pretty basic. "We *know* where he's been, we've tracked every violation so far, we've been *lenient* so far, but that's *over*. You'll be lucky to keep your hero license, or that arrangement with the little girl-"

"The Hero Commission has more jurisdiction with Eri's circumstances than you do," Aizawa says,

giving up the act that he 'hasn't heard anything.' "You'll have to do better than that if you want to get out of that leg snare."

Aizawa isn't worried, even with Eri getting a little more control over her quirk. Hitoshi trusts that, but he knows this woman doesn't seem to be working alone. If they know where Hitoshi is, that he's been away from UA and apparently he *shouldn't* have been, which Aizawa *didn't* mention before he started talking about this 'safe house,' and that's apparently a 'violation.' Hitoshi has apparently had *several* of those, and Aizawa *didn't* mention that either.

Aizawa is supposed to keep him safe.

"*Oh trust me*, leaving me here would be a *big* mistake for you! After all these months, the kid *hasn't* talked, you've just been wasting our resources this whole time, treating him to these little *outings* like protective custody is just a *vacation*-"

"The Miasma is in a warehouse," Hitoshi says, looking away because he doesn't want to know what Aizawa or the woman look like when he finally says it, his gloved fingers fidgeting with Aizawa's capture scarf. "It looks normal from the outside, but there are a lot of hidden floors underneath it. I don't know where, but it's close to the sea. The water tastes salty."

The silence drags on too long, Aizawa's stiffened shoulders impossible not to feel under Hitoshi's arms. He looks, still unable to see Aizawa's face while he's sitting on his back, but the lady is biting her lips together and pointing at her eyes, then at him. Is she trying to threaten him? To say she'll gouge out his eyes for some reason?

Oh. She wants Aizawa to use his quirk on him, before she talks. "I can't brainwash you without asking you a question-"

"*Why is he talking?!*" the woman squeals, seeming to echo through the small silence of the woods afterwards. "How *long* has he been talking?! If you've been hiding- *he's talking*-"

"Only since we left UA," Aizawa says, which is kind of a lie. He's only started talking to Aizawa after he was attacked by 127, *before* they left, unless she's talking about 'talking about The Miasma,' which she knows he's *had* to do before this point.

"Aizawa broke my leg up here. Now, I have no choice but to tell him everything he wants to know," Hitoshi adds, because Aizawa isn't making a case for him, so he has to do that himself. "If I have to deal with Endeavor, I'll just kill myself. He sounds like a pain to deal with."

The woman growls, staring at the trees in front of her rather than trying to look up at them. She's being offered a deal, and she should probably take it. "Oh. *He is*. Endeavor is indeed, *a pain* to deal with."

Her voice is not quite softer, but she seems less irritated now. There's still a sharp edge to her tone, like she's still considering the situation. Luckily, it seems like she's made a decision with that sigh.

"Alright, you want to do this your way? Get me down, I'll work *something* out, like you *actually* requested safe leave but it got to the wrong department, and as long as I have that address in a week-"

"Two months," Aizawa interrupts. "Isolating it to the coastline is still-"

"A month-"

"*Isolating it to the coastline is still*-"

“What will happen after you find them?” Nemoto asks, through 27’s voice. Hitoshi curls his hands tighter in Aizawa’s scarf, watching the woman’s mouth close from where it was opened to argue, her face falling slack.

“The raid, of course. Shut them down, I’ll finally get that promotion to supervisor. You’ll be someone else’s problem, I probably won’t even have to deal with finding an institution to stick you in,” the woman answers, before her eyes glaze white, her body dropping fully limp.

Hitoshi actually feels the string this time, not as fully as he should. He can feel how it’s fraying, because the woman is injured, and the rope digging into her trapped leg will probably break his control eventually. So he doesn’t have much time. “You’re not in a good position to negotiate. It’s fine. I know it’s temporary.”

He knows. He *knows* what it is, that two years until he turns 18 is a dream, that Yamada can promise he’ll stay as much as he wants, but there are people that Yamada and Aizawa answer to that don’t even know him. That don’t *care*, at all. “It’s not going to end like that. Or that soon.”

Aizawa can lie to him. Hitoshi could probably use his quirk to force him to admit it. He doesn’t.

“They live near the sea, not the mountains,” Aizawa says, like he’s repeating something. He tips his head when Hitoshi doesn’t answer, but still can’t face him without breaking his neck. “You were talking in your sleep, about Miasma. Not the Loch Ness-”

“Can you *ever* just-” Hitoshi cuts himself off, leaning back enough to consider trying to throw himself off Aizawa’s back. This *bastard* will never let that go, will he?

“You’re not going to an institution,” Aizawa says, and he can say it all he wants. That doesn’t make it happen. “Let me handle her.”

Hitoshi rolls his eyes, before he closes them. The fraying string is at least easier to see, and he tries dropping it. He tries imagining it falling away, out of his control, letting her go- “He- *he used his quirk-*”

“*Two months*, to do *my job*, because you have no idea how long it takes to narrow down such a broad search. Hitoshi *remains* in my care for a month following the capture of every Miasma operative and dangerous affiliate that will have the intent to harm him, *and* a quirk specialist, which is required at this point,” Aizawa says, speaking his demands quick enough to silence every expression she makes to argue while still drawing out emphasis on every word that makes his voice nearly growl. “With the quirk specialist that was requested, by name, and was vetted, before *all* of this.”

The woman huffs, before her eyes close, and her mouth carves into a too-sharp, too-smug smirk. “*Oh*, we did hear that *named and vetted* quirk specialist had a very *odd* appointment lined up this week-”

“Which you’re going to overlook,” Aizawa interrupts, oddly falling into this role of blackmailing this lady pretty easily.

She huffs and glares, before she remembers her current condition. “Which, I’m going to have to cover up, which is *difficult to do because you’re not good at this*. I’ll have to sweep it off his appointment ledger and tell him *not* to put it on, and you can tell the rat not to talk to him over the phone. I’ll get it done once I get back to Tokyo. And *civilization, get me out!*”

Aizawa just tilts his head, waiting for her to say it. She has to agree, to drop the bluster and accept

at least the appearance of defeat. It seems like she's not good at that.

"Two months, I'll extend the usual grace period another week, and like I said, *quirk specialist at your leisure with some discretion please*. Happy? Do you want tickets to Disneyworld too?!" the woman asks, and Aizawa isn't happy, and asking him to be is a bit too much to demand, like asking for tickets to that weird place everyone seems to be obsessed about.

But Aizawa pulls out a knife from the side of his backpack that Hitoshi is still wearing, and cuts her down so that she lands in the snow. She yelps, a bit dramatically, before she starts pulling up her pants to reveal the rope burn. The rope caught her in the middle of her leg, instead of the ankle, so it's probably not-

"*It's broken!*" she yells, and she wouldn't be squeezing that hard if it was. "How am I supposed to get down the- how am I supposed to *drive*?! You-"

"Pity," Aizawa says, before he turns and starts walking away. Hitoshi looks back, to see her climbing to her feet too fast. To see her hardly limping at all.

"*You* are the worst excuse for a hero I've ever heard of! If you think that you're making any friends, if you think you're doing *anything* but making a *big* mistake right now, *oh buddy*, I have news for-"

"It could be quieter," Hitoshi mentions, and he feels Aizawa shrug. Seems enough like permission. "Are you normally this annoying?"

"I'm under a *lot* of stress-" Hitoshi doesn't even realize it until he pulls the string. That he felt it. Completely.

And Nemoto didn't ask that question.

"Much better," Aizawa sighs, continuing to walk, almost like he didn't notice it. "You're improving, it seems. With your quirk."

"Follow us," Hitoshi commands, glancing back just to make sure she's doing it. That he's doing it, that he really, *actually* did that. Without Aizawa's help. He couldn't have. "Did you... There's another way. For your quirk to affect me."

"No," Aizawa says, and turns his head, before he remembers he can't see him. He can't look at Hitoshi, not with his eyes, can't *see* him. "You did that on your own. Controlling the question, then. That's... promising."

Promising, because Hitoshi hasn't tried it much, except with Aizawa. Aizawa said he could help, that he could strip parts of Confession away from his quirk, so his quirk could still be *his* quirk. Even if the woman was probably forced to answer, that's not exactly something that Hitoshi can deny would be useful. Powerful, even.

His quirk, but more powerful, as long as he can control it. And with that in mind, how he's a Nomu because of his quirk mixed with Nemoto's, Aizawa definitely wants him to see that quirk specialist.

And maybe, now Hitoshi does too.

Bonus points to whoever knows what 'Clicksters' is a reference to. ;) We stan horrible American movies in this house.

Also, 'Shohei' means 'to soar/glide,' evidence that Aizawa was being a little bit of a shit when he came up with that name.

The Mountain Man's Beard

Chapter Summary

Aizawa, Shinsou, and Eri return to UA to be reunited with Yamada and everyone else they had to be away from during the three day weekend. Both wards have grown in their time away from campus, and Aizawa needs to investigate the change to his class roster. To know who the traitor really is.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Purposefully re-triggering self,

Previously on Wards of UA: When Aizawa visited Eri at the Ketsubutsu training camp, he asked her to pack a lunch for Mocha. When 127 attacked Shinsou at UA, Mirio was there and tried to defend Shinsou before Shinsou used his quirk to make him leave, the consequences of that making both of them feel unsettled about each other. Ms. Saito's older brother, Hideo, had gone 'missing' prior to the Jun interview making Ms. Saito worry that he had been kidnapped by The Miasma, but Aizawa found him at a BDSM ball in an extreme master-slave relationship. When Shinsou accidentally used ConfessionWash for the first time, he asked Mirio "What do you think you can possibly do without your quirk?" After the Jun interview, Shinsou tried to run away from UA and Brainwashed Midoriya, threatening to make him use Full Cowl at 100% which may have resulted in Midoriya exploding. Aizawa assumed that Ms. Saito didn't want her brother's BDSM relationship to be public knowledge because he was also in a gay relationship, and she might be homophobic. On the night that 127 attacked, Ashido was planning to throw Shinsou a '6 year old's birthday,' and Sato baked a coffee flavored cake for the occasion. Shinsou tried to run away from the hero students who tried to get him away from 127, which Shinsou did in order to kill 127 to make sure that he wouldn't be attacked again nor would anyone get hurt by The Miasma. Before Shinsou got sick, he could only talk to people that he Brainwashed. Aizawa referred to his students as 'eggs' exactly once to Shinsou, and Shinsou has referred to 1-A as 'eggs' several times since. Iida got hurt when he ran towards 127, who was invisible at the time, as a distraction, and Midoriya threw himself into the air to get enough distance to see where 127 was, even though 127 had a katana at the time.

Aizawa has wanted to see the end of this trip before it began. Before he started to hike up the mountain, before he even entered Byte Sound's car, before he had to contact his grandfather to make the arrangement, he's been waiting for this moment when he sees Fat Gum's van and knows he's ready to go home.

There's just a bit of hesitation, when he makes the next step forward. It's something that Hitoshi takes for what it's not, and ends the control he has over Ms. Saito so that she can bluster and squeal about it, which he hopes that Hitoshi ignores as much as Aizawa does. For all the horrible things that happened on this trip, and all the horrible events that caused it, it was surprisingly nice.

He feels like Hitoshi is less of a stranger to him, and though he knows the situation is tender, new, and mercurial at best, he feels closer to him. He doesn't exactly want that to be what he leaves behind in the mountains.

But Aizawa has to go back, to Eri and Hizashi, to UA, to know who the traitor truly is and if it is one of his students like Hawks implied. To begin working with Hitoshi to find the warehouse where Miasma operated from three years ago, to see if they're still there, and if not, if there's any trace of them. To find some way to enforce that agreement Ms. Saito made, where Hitoshi wouldn't be removed from Hizashi's care until Miasma *and* their affiliates had been dealt with, which would include the League of Villains too.

As much as Endeavor will want to smother them quickly, Aizawa knows that's not easy, and that's easy time to buy to keep Hitoshi safe. Ms. Saito made her intentions known that she wants Hitoshi to be put in an *institution* after the wardship has ended, to make sure that he'll never know an ounce of freedom in his entire life. From the day Shinsou Ui sold him, Hitoshi has been controlled and kept isolated and in place, never cared for, never treated warmly or well or like a *person* until he came to UA, and the *last* thing he deserves after all he's done to escape those situations is to be locked up in another one.

Shigaraki being hard to track down, and hard to bring down, is not something Aizawa ever thought he would hope for before today. But if it keeps Hitoshi safe, and at UA, he might start hoping.

Fat Gum must have arrived only a bit ago, as the Big Three are still packing their luggage. Mirio looks better, far better than how Aizawa saw him yesterday, and while Aizawa isn't surprised that Eri's horn hasn't shrunk, he's at least glad that it hasn't grown. It will be better when they're all back at UA, and it won't be nearly as concerning for him. "ZAWA! TWENNY!"

Eri screams so loud before she barrels out of the van at a sprint, that Aizawa worries she might have hurt herself. Her announcement brings every eye to them, even if they're barely off the mountain slope and barely on the grounds, but half of himself wants to scold his own students at least for not noticing.

There's someone he *does* notice noticing, that he'd really, *truly* prefer didn't. While he didn't have a plan to hide Hitoshi's injury in the first place, and he did want to ask if Ms. Joke had a real splint in her first aid kit, he didn't expect to actually feel *fear* when her smile froze like that.

Ms. Joke cares deeply for a lot of kids as a homeroom teacher, and she'd adopted the same attitude towards his wards, which he doesn't mind in the slightest.

But right now, he might mind it, if only for the sake of his self-preservation.

Which he's thoroughly distracted from when Eri barrels right into his knees, hugging him tightly before she starts tugging at what Aizawa *hopes* is Hitoshi's uninjured foot. "*Twenny, Twenny, Twenny*, did you get Mocha? Did you sleep good last night? Did you eat the lunch I packed? Did you miss me?"

"I got Mocha, and I slept good thanks to that." Thanks to the *alcohol*, he thankfully doesn't say. "And I ate the lunch-"

"It was for Mocha," Eri says, almost *scolding* Hitoshi for it. Hitoshi *flinches* like it was worse. "But that's okay! Did you miss me?"

"Of course I missed you," Hitoshi says, putting what little full weight he has on Aizawa's shoulders as he starts pulling his legs out of the folds of the capture scarf that's worked as a harness so far.

Aizawa crouches and unwinds the capture scarf to help him, offering an arm out if Hitoshi needs it for balance, but Hitoshi just rests his hand on Aizawa's shoulder instead.

Despite how long Hitoshi's hands or arms have been resting loosely around Aizawa's shoulders during the hike, this hand feels heavier. A bit more like a casual, deep, and impossible to fake measure of trust that Aizawa *hopes* that he's earned at this point.

Hitoshi only manages to half-crouch down, to nearly fall after Eri launches herself into his waiting arms. He stands up afterwards, even if he should avoid the added weight, but Aizawa knows it's impossible to argue the point. Eri likely will remain clinging to Hitoshi like that for the next few days, if not a week, to make up for lost time. And with that sigh of contentment, Hitoshi will need that reassurance too. "I really missed you."

"Ah, yes, *professional* and *upstanding* heroes!" Ms. Saito calls out, the limp returning now that she's free from Hitoshi's control. It's for the wrong leg, but Aizawa doesn't deem it worthy to point that out. "I need *medical attention*, if you would be so kind to help a *civilian*!"

Eri turns her head, staring with wide and curious eyes, and Aizawa can think of little else that could be worse than Eri trying to talk to Ms. Saito. Aizawa can think of few things more dangerous for The Commission rep than talking to Eri. And Aizawa can think of *extremely* few things that look as dangerous as Ms. Joke does as she approaches with that still frozen, too tense smile. "Oh, yeah, we do have a first aid kit around somewhere. Those hikes can be awful on the ankle. Is that what happened with my sweet little cat son?"

"Aizawa broke my leg," Hitoshi answers. With what's *not* a funny joke, that Aizawa *didn't* appreciate the first time.

It's far, *far* less funny now, with Ms. Joke's eyes narrowed like that. "My *grandfather*, Aizawa *Shoga*, was involved in how Shinsou *sprained* his ankle. It was an accident. And that's not a good joke to make."

"Good," Eri chimes in, and Aizawa *honestly* doesn't want to know what she thought about him before he clarified the situation. He knows that if he did hurt Hitoshi intentionally like the teenager implied, she would never forgive him, and shouldn't. She might be giving Hitoshi all the missing affection first because she might blame him for Hitoshi being attacked at UA, and yesterday he was simply the most convenient shelter from her storm.

Aizawa knows if Eri doesn't forgive him for that, he'll never be able to accept it himself. As much as it hurts to know he wasn't there, the weight of failing both wards makes it far heavier. To fail in Eri's eyes as well.

And he counts himself lucky that Ms. Joke only knows the barest details of that, when she finally laughs, and looks slightly less murderous for it. "Aw, come on! It's funny! Because if you did get my little cat son hurt, or hurt him, or allow him to get hurt on your watch..." Aizawa knows what murderous intent feels like, and he can recognize it now. "It would be a *barrel of laughs*."

Aizawa could be insulted that Ms. Joke is using a classic teaching tactic against him. To lay out the consequences that a student has already earned, in a way that seems to imply the teacher doesn't know about how they've earned it. To let the student sweat with that for a while, before they realize that they've certainly been caught.

Aizawa isn't insulted, because it's working too well. "I don't want a staring contest."

Ms. Joke claps him on the arm with a smile, with what *might* be a promise that she won't use her

quirk on him punitively. Aizawa knows well enough that she's used that tactic as an ambush, and he'll have to remain on his guard. "Let me grab that splint real quick- oh, YO! TOSS ME THE SPLINT!"

Yo Shindo seemed to be treating Ms. Saito's 'injury' under the porch of the nearest cabin, seemed to be smiling in the tensest way possible while he bandaged her leg, as Ms. Saito carried on loudly but far enough away not to be heard. From what Aizawa recalls of that student's quirk, he could probably test whether she was actually as injured as she claimed with a subtle vibration that she wouldn't scream in agony from. And the tense smile might be evidence that he had.

Yo doesn't toss the splint from the first aid kit, but the long haired Itejiro did. Ms. Joke caught it, and then seemed to recognize that Hitoshi wasn't going to move to sit down, or set Eri down either.

Aizawa provided the support for Hitoshi to brace himself on as he stood on one leg, and Ms. Joke removed his shoe and the bandages that provided the barest support. Aizawa only glanced, but saw that his foot and ankle were *very* red and swollen. Probably from the sprint that he pulled only hours ago. "Oh, you're gonna want some painkillers for that too. We'll get ya fixed up for the ride home, then you're on bedrest for a few days. Doctor's orders! And Doctor Joke says you can order this big lug around to wait on you hand and foot! We'll get him dressed up in a little butler coat, trim that *wild* beard into a mustache-"

"It's not-" Aizawa starts, before he pulls a hand to his cheek and feels that *yes*, it is that bad. Hizashi will have a fit about it.

"Lemme see!" Eri demands, and though Hitoshi has to move his hand to balance on Aizawa's other shoulder to get close enough, Eri is able to reach out with her little warm hand to check how his beard has grown in. "*Zawa*, it's so soft! It's like Santa!"

Aizawa laughs under his breath, just *imagining* the conniption Hizashi would have, if he dared. Even if he enlisted Eri's support to help him with that. "Hizashi doesn't like it when it's this long. He's probably going to make me shave, like it was on your first day at UA."

Hizashi had made all the preparations already, had visited Eri several times in the hospital before that point, with the intention to soothe all the worries that were boiling under the surface. While Hizashi was outwardly enthusiastic about bringing Eri to live with them, the boil spilled over on the day of her discharge, and after making Aizawa change clothes several times to be more 'presentable,' he insisted on a shave and styling his hair before he finally allowed Aizawa to leave.

Hizashi *also* didn't appreciate the comfortable Ganriki Neko outfit Aizawa picked, but the point still stands that Eri *did*. And that Hitoshi does as well, and thus Hizashi's opinion on the matter is utterly null and void.

"Right, let's get you a crutch, don't worry about returning it because we've got a couple of 'em," Ms. Joke says, because she's luckily prepared for these training camps, and as Ketsubutsu doesn't have a healing quirk hero like Recovery Girl on staff, even training exercises on campus have to be treated in such a way before a hospital trip can be arranged. "Just hold tight!"

Ms. Joke might not have meant that literally, but Hitoshi's hand on his shoulder does tighten a bit. It might be due to lowering his splinted foot to the ground.

It might be due to Ms. Saito making a beeline towards them. "My car is a rental, but I can't drive like this, so I hope you-"

"I don't have a license," Aizawa says, and he's never felt more smug to pull that card than he does

now, at this moment. Especially when Ms. Saito's face falls like that, or when she devolves into blatant whining.

"This is *your fault* that I'm out here, that I'm *like this!*" Ms. Saito says, sweeping her hands out at a bandaged and splinted leg as though it's been completely amputated. Hizashi has driven with *far worse*. "If you didn't steal your ward away without permission, we wouldn't have wasted *valuable* resources and *valuable* time to--"

"I can drive!" Mirio offers, raising a hand and offering something Aizawa *truly* doesn't want him to be subjected to. "If you're going our way and all, I do kind of have school tomorrow."

Aizawa watches as Mirio's initially bright mood falters a bit, and knows it might be the tension in the air, in the distance between Hitoshi and the older teen. Hitoshi is pointedly looking at his splint, and Aizawa feels his fingers curl and dig against his shoulder. That needs to be a conversation, but the distance should probably be maintained until each kid finds some peace in familiar circumstances.

"Tokyo, I'll send you back with a taxi and some payment for your trouble," Ms. Saito says stiffly, brushing a hand over the sleeve of her ridiculous snow jacket. Aizawa is both alarmed and reassured that she seems to be attempting some form of gratitude towards his student.

"Let Hizashi know if you have any trouble. I won't have my phone until we get back to campus," Aizawa says, knowing that if there is any trouble, Hizashi will meet it in person. That might delay his plans a bit if he needs to be there for the wards, but he knows Mirio will only ask for help if he needs it.

And possibly, not even then. "Will do! I'll see you guys back at school!"

"Bye Mirio! Kiss Tama goodbye first!" Eri yells, probably too loudly with her hands cupped around her mouth. Ms. Joke returns with the crutch just to double over sputtering a laugh, and Mirio's face turns *quite red*. And Aizawa can see Amajiki throw himself into the back of the van, possibly aiming for the storage in the back.

Aizawa purposefully looks at Hitoshi as he learns to steady himself with the crutch, before they walk to the van that will take them back to UA. Just in case there *is* a kiss goodbye that needs to be given.

The 8 hour drive will be awkward enough without Aizawa knowing about it.

*

So, this is a little awkward.

Mirio has kind of put it together that this lady is from the Commission of Wardship Affairs, and she seems like she's in charge of Shinsou's investigation like that. And Mirio doesn't know a lot about that, other than how Shinsou had to meet with Chisaki because of them, and possibly because of this lady herself. Shinsou also got pretty mixed up after that other interview, even if he doesn't know what happened, but he knows that something *worse* than Chisaki must have if Shinsou tried to run away from UA after that.

Aizawa knows more about that, and it's clear to see that Aizawa doesn't like this lady. And this lady doesn't like Aizawa. And on top of how messed up it is that Shinsou still has to go through all that junk after he's rescued, it's more messed up that it's coming from people who work under the Hero Commission, and he's supposed to do that too when he graduates. He *definitely* doesn't want

to work alongside anyone who thinks that Shinsou should have to keep suffering after he's been rescued.

And he also doesn't know this lady's name, at all.

"So, you're a student at UA. A hero student," the lady says, putting her phone in her bag after she's been texting on it this entire time, sometimes growling under her breath. "Do you have plans after graduating?"

Mirio kind of laughs, because it's just really *weirdly* normal to be asked that. He's mostly been on self-imposed lockdown at UA, and hasn't really visited his extended family to get asked those kinds of questions, but he imagines he'll get that a lot if he goes to Christmas. "Uh, just hero-ing, eventually. The agency I interned with would offer me a job, but I might want to open an agency with my friends. Eventually."

There's a really big issue standing in the way of that, but he really doesn't want to tell her about it. She just hums, like he's supposed to take over the conversation.

"Oh! I didn't mention it before--"

"The *road!*" She shouts, throwing her hand towards the front of the car, and Mirio pulls his hand back to the steering wheel at 10 and 2, looking straight ahead.

There hasn't been any other cars for a while, but they are getting closer to Tokyo. He's a pretty decent driver though, and it just seemed friendly to look at her when he was talking. It *is* a rental though.

She just sighs, dropping her hand to her lap. "Sorry. I'm just... *God*, my life has been a *wreck* since I got this *cursed* case. I've *handled* cases before, but this one? And *Hideo*, I can't- *don't* let me start on him, he thinks he can just do whatever he wants, chase down *Mr. Gray* like we don't *all* want that, but what's he going to do when he's broke again *and* he quit his job at the Commission? He's going *back* to my couch, because he can't get his act together...."

Mirio just raises his eyebrows, flaring his fingers out on the steering wheel for a second. She didn't want to get into it, but she's kind of getting into it. "So, you're... having trouble with Shinsou's case?"

She groans again, throwing herself back in her seat. "*So! Yeah*. I'm 'having trouble' with the biggest case we've ever been handed, *basically*. It's not just a little mafia or 'Little Tobi needs a safe place to stay,' *no*, this is *crazy* important that the kid talks and the kid is *mute*. *Mute!* Every *single* day I have to file a report that just says 'In progress, here's all the things I *can't* do to resolve this! Here's the absolute nothing I have to report!'"

So, that sounds frustrating. And Mirio could maybe feel a little sorry for her if she wasn't trying to take it out on a kid. And take it out on *Shinsou*.

"*Finally*, things are looking up," she says with a sigh, pulling out her phone again. "With any luck, I'll be done with this by New Year's. Just *wash* my hands of it, take the promotion. Be *done*."

"Oh, you have a lead?" Mirio asks, not sure if he should. He's *pretty* sure he shouldn't, but if this lady means that *Shinsou* will be gone by New Year's, he has to ask. He has to know.

"Thanks to Eraserhead breaking his leg, I guess. Broke his silence too," she answers, with a *weird* giggle at the end. Like she *really* thinks that's funny.

Mirio just tightens his hands on the wheel, and when she turns back to texting, he doesn't bring up any more friendly conversation.

Like that actually *helps* or anything. He can't even bring himself to tell this lady off, because he can't be sure that she means it like that. It's hard to think that this lady, someone who works with heroes to save kids and keep them safe, would actually think it's *funny* that Shinsou got hurt, or that he's been too scared to talk to anyone for *months*.

Mirio just follows the directions to the Hero Public Safety Commission headquarters in Tokyo, relieved that even though it's late, he didn't have to deal with rush hour traffic. He's aware that he's a young driver, and even though he knows he's a good driver, it's just nerve wracking, especially in a rental.

He checks when he pulls into the parking lot, but she waves a hand and tells him that anywhere close to the front is fine. The Commission of Wardship Affairs must be in the same building as the Hero Commission, and she must have gotten the rental car arranged for by her job.

"Here, and I'll call that taxi," she mutters almost to herself, pulling her purse onto her lap as Mirio waves his hand to stop her.

"Really, it's fine! Just doing what a hero does, helping out and all," Mirio says, because he won't let his ethics slide just because she's a bad person. A really, *really awful* person. It would still be wrong to make her drive with her injured leg, or only help her to get the money. And since he offered to drive, he can call his own taxi to take him back to UA.

"Well... If you insist, but..." Mirio watches her looking out the window with her hand resting on the door handle, looking around at every angle in a way that a hero wouldn't, but with the same intention as a hero would have. Looking for danger.

Instead of seeing an awful woman, who he knows is either careless or sadistic towards Shinsou, he just sees a young woman scared to be alone at night, in a big city like Tokyo. "I can wait with you until you see your ride, you know? It's pretty late--"

"Well, aren't *you* an upstanding hero!" she says, smiling at him. It's weird, the way she looks so happy and grateful, like a lot of people he's met on patrol on the street, that he just helped carry groceries or gave out directions. It's a little weirder not being in costume. "I live a few blocks away, if that's alright. There's just been a few muggings in my area, but the taxis can be just as dangerous."

Mirio smiles and nods before he gets out, to offer an arm for her to pull herself out of the car, even if her limp falls away too quickly after he locks the car and gives her back the keys. He was *pretty sure* she was faking it, or just exaggerating. Or just convinced that it was worse, because the pain was fresh.

She sighs, this time actually relieved instead of those exaggerated, frustrated sighs from before, as she brushes some of her brown hair behind her ear. "I do feel safer walking with someone. Honestly, that was the only good part about working with Hideo, he'd always walk home with me. Paralysis quirk, even if he never wanted to be a hero, too much physical work. It's just safer, especially in Tokyo...."

Mirio nods, wondering how many blocks he can walk at this snail pace, with this lady holding onto his elbow like this. She's pretty thin, but he imagines the offer to carry her might come off the wrong way.

“Especially being quirkless,” she says, with a quick, defeated kind of shrug.

Mirio doesn’t exactly mean to do it, but he laughs a little under his breath at that. “Well, you know, quirks aren’t everything. In terms of safety and stuff, there’s always self defense classes, and walking in a group like you do-”

“*Yep*,” she interrupts sharply, something bristling in her tone. “Of course, there’s always those little ‘*self defense*’ classes that still don’t put someone on the level of defending yourself against a guy who can *puke acid*. Or breathe fire, or-or *anything*. I know you don’t get it, being a hero and all, but when it comes down to that? Facing a villain in real life? You *really* wish you had something better than ‘throw your wallet and run.’”

“That’s... happened to you?” Mirio asks, guessing. Maybe she’s a little high strung because of that, because she was attacked and that attack went poorly. There weren’t heroes around, she was unfortunately a gap between patrols. An incident.

“Few times. *Tokyo*, you know? You’re not really a resident until a villain decides to make you into a statement,” she answers, like that’s some kind of joke between locals.

For Mirio, it was ‘you’re not really a local until you get sick from the takoyaki stand just once!’ The old man who ran that stand for every festival seemed to have *really* bad luck with octopus. “That sounds really rough. Maybe, it’ll get better once the heroes get back on their feet. All Might retiring was... a pretty big thing. He was pretty local around here.”

She just hums, and probably doesn’t want to think about that. It *is* kind of scary, not having the Symbol of Peace on active duty, being retired. It’s easy to forget about that at UA, but in a few months, Mirio won’t *be* at UA. He’ll be out in the real world, worrying about the same things she does.

Being quirkless, in a world full of heroes and villains. He still knows how to fight, how to *be* a hero. And it’s still a little scary. “So, I know this is kind of awkward, but-”

“Hands up, lovebirds!” A guy with a black hoodie drawn up over his head is standing next to a parked car, where he might have been hiding in wait close to the rear tire of it. Where Mirio didn’t see it, walked right past him. “Yeah, give me all the money for your date night, and you’ll *live*. You don’t *want* to see my quirk, but I’ll give you a demonstration if you give me a reason.”

The lady is already digging into her purse, but Mirio puts his hand over hers to stop her. He tries to get a good look at the guy, and he sees that he dressed for the occasion. Loose, dark, baggy clothes that make him nondescript except for being a little suspicious for that.

But ‘you don’t want to see my quirk’ is suspicious too. “Are you the mugger that’s been attacking people lately? Making people scared to walk home at night-”

“*Kid*,” the lady almost whimpers when she pulls on his arm, trying to tug him back from facing this guy. Mirio just puts a hand on her shoulder, refusing to break his stare with the guy whose face he can’t see, but he *sees* that nervous way he rubs a hand against his jeans.

His quirk isn’t offensive. He’s just *scaring* people because people *are* scared, and he probably wouldn’t have the nerve to do it if All Might hadn’t retired and left everyone shaken. “Don’t be the tough guy for your broad! I’m warning you!”

Mirio just grins at him, bending slightly into a stance, and the mugger almost seems like he’s caught on an ice patch with the way his feet shuffle back and forth before he charges at him.

Maybe he was thinking about turning and running, before pride won out, and Mirio knows he was going to stop short as another scare tactic.

But Mirio dives and grabs his arm, twisting it behind his back to push his shoulder into the sidewalk, and makes quick work of grabbing the other wrist to keep him restrained.

To her credit, the lady starts calling the police before Mirio tells her to, right before the guy starts begging to be let go. “Dude, *come on!* Come on, let me go! That’s not fair, that’s *entrapment!* You’re some kind of cop, aren’tcha?!”

It’s been a few months since Mirio has seen those police cars arrive with sirens blazing, but Mirio pulls the suspect to his feet with a smile that feels more like Lemillion than it has in what feels like *years*. “He hasn’t used his quirk, but he was telling us to drop our wallets before he had to use it. I think I accidentally caught a mugger for you.”

The first police officer takes a good look at the guy after pulling off his hoodie, and there must have been other victims who got a better look at the guy. “Yeah, I’m hoping you did us a favor, kid. He didn’t threaten you at all?”

Mirio moves away so the second officer can take over the handcuffs, keeping his attention divided for the transfer. “Just with-”

“He ran at us,” the lady says, still clutching her purse. And still probably unaware that she didn’t have any issue standing on her ‘broken’ leg. “He threatened to use his quirk before that, then he started *running* at us, and who *knows* what kind of speed quirk he could have had, he could have just ran *through* us like mince meat!”

“I don’t *have* a speed quirk!” the mugger complains, turning his head *uncomfortably* far to look at the lady. Who was standing behind him. “It’s just my *neck*, that’s not threatening at all-”

“Threatening to use a dangerous quirk is still a threat,” the second officer says, before he starts leading the mugger to the car. “Kaito-”

“Do you have a hero license? Off duty?” the first officer asks, staring at Mirio. Cocking his head to the side as he looks like he wants to scold him, but he pulls off a pretty *weak* comparison to Aizawa.

“Provisional, but it’s temporarily suspended right now,” Mirio has to admit, still pulling out his wallet to show the officer. “I didn’t use my quirk to subdue him, sir, and I *definitely* wasn’t looking for trouble. Just wanted to make sure she got home safe, since she’s a little worried about the area.”

The officer just glances at his provisional license, writing down the name. “‘Mustafu.’ UA huh? Never heard about anyone getting ‘temporarily suspended,’ but I’ll take your word for it that you weren’t looking for trouble. Just don’t let me catch you playing hero without that license intact, alright?”

“Yes sir,” Mirio agrees, and decides to give him the report of the incident, since the lady seems just a little too shaken to do that. It’s understandable, civilians aren’t trained for this, and they should be shaken. They shouldn’t be used to it.

Mirio just feels like he can’t pull the smile off his face when the officers leave and they continue walking. Like it’s a lot more of a Lemillion smile.

“So, I guess that’s one less thing to worry about,” Mirio offers, even if he knows that’s just *one*

mugger. Who didn't even have a dangerous quirk, it seemed to just let him turn his head around like an owl.

The lady has been holding onto his elbow too tight for a few paces, just staring at the ground, before she huffs. "'Temporarily suspended?' Did you... do something, or-"

"Oh, no," Mirio answers, laughing nervously at that. He's never heard of a suspension like that before, and that *does* sound suspicious. "It's kind of a funny story, but I kind of lost my quirk. In the 8 Precepts of Death raid. They had a quirk erasing bullet, and I kind of got shot with it, but there's a way to fix it and get it back. So, 'temporary.'"

The woman turns to look at him with a hard stare, her lips drawn tight like she's halfway angry about something. "The little girl, right? Eri. So you know about the other one."

Mirio just nods, not willing to talk about Shinsou with *her*. There's a lot of people in this world who don't deserve to get mugged or walk home afraid at night, and she's one of them. But he still doesn't want to hear her talk about Shinsou.

"He could probably use his quirk on her, and restore yours," the lady says, oddly avoiding Shinsou's name. Maybe it's just to keep him safe, to not say his name out loud on this street where they *might* not be alone. But he appreciates it for any reason.

"He could! But, that's not what I want. I don't want to use Eri like that, and I can afford to wait," Mirio says, and it's hardly a reminder to himself. Practically everyone tells him that he can wait, he'll still be an amazing hero even if he has to wait years, because he's still young. But that's not the reason he's waiting. "I don't want either of them to think that they have to do anything for me. I decided I wanted to help them, and what happened after that was on me."

He has monthly testing with Recovery Girl, waiting to see if there's a sign that his quirk factor wasn't Rewinded completely out of existence, but maybe just back to before it developed. Then, in four years, he'll have his quirk back anyway. At 22, he'll still be in great shape to be a hero if he keeps up with it. And if not, he imagines that he'll already be used to walking Eri to school in the morning and back.

At least, he hopes so. He can't really imagine that any other way. "I guess I... don't really get why it has to be harder for them, you know? They've been through a lot, and I think they've been through enough. Without anyone making them feel like they have to give up more, to deserve to be safe."

The lady looks at him, slow fear rising over her eyes, and Mirio throws both hands up in a panic.

"I didn't mean- I didn't really want to mention it, you know? I didn't say I'd walk you home and everything to try to...*threaten* you or anything, it's just..." Mirio runs a hand over the back of his neck, looking at the building to his left instead of at the woman who's on his right. The lady he can't really figure out. "It... kind of hurt, when he had to see Overhaul, you know? You probably don't know anything about the raid, but, I kind of blew it there. And I thought I could make it up to him, but the hits just... kept coming. And there's really nothing I can do."

What do you think you can possibly do without your quirk?

"I guess, what I didn't really want to say was... If you're doing stuff to make it harder for him, I'd rather you didn't. He's a really good kid, and he didn't deserve what he went through. And he doesn't deserve it from anyone else," Mirio says, forcing himself to look straight ahead, and ignore how his elbow almost feels like it's burning from where she's still clinging to him. He doesn't

know if it helps, if she could possibly not *know* that Shinsou doesn't deserve to have to look at the guy who tortured him and Eri for years. That maybe the *heroes* shouldn't make Shinsou so afraid of the home he's barely gotten to know that he'd threaten to kill Midoriya to escape.

"He's a 'good kid,'" the lady says, softly at first, before she snorts. "Buddy, you're a nice guy, a *really* nice guy. But this 'good kid' has been doing violent, *awful* things for *years*. He brutalized police officers for *weeks* just for standing next to him, and even on the off-chance Eraserhead *isn't* hiding something like that happening at UA..."

Mirio knows he's not.

Well, other than the escape attempt, probably. And Mirio has heard that Shinsou has gotten into a few fights, but he didn't really hurt anyone. And Mirio knows from experience that Shinsou just kind of *likes* fighting, that he's only ever seen him so close to peaceful after they sparred together before he had to meet Chisaki. "There's nothing I can do. I work under the umbrella of Public Safety, that means I do my part to keep people safe. That means that whatever this kid knows, *I* need to know, and you can't tell me that the kid doesn't know that."

Mirio knows. And he knows *very well* why Shinsou is afraid to talk about it. "He's part of the public that needs to be safe."

"Not more than anyone else," she argues, and he feels her eyes on him, but chooses not to look at her, instead watching for the pedestrian crossing sign. "At least hundreds of lives are at stake, hundreds weighed next to *one*. What would a hero like you do in my shoes?"

Mirio just smiles, because he already knows. "Save the one. The one person I can see, who's right in front of me. Who needs my help, and I can help them. I've made that mistake before."

He could have grabbed Eri when they first met. Eri was clinging to Midoriya then, whimpering for help, *clearly* needed it. Mirio talked Midoriya down that time, because they didn't have enough intel, they didn't even *know* Chisaki like they did afterwards, and definitely didn't know at that meeting before the raid what that meant for Eri. The nightmares, the *fear* that almost smothered that little girl.

And she was still drowning in that fear when she reached out, and Mirio decided against action because he didn't have enough information to weigh his choice. Even knowing now that there were *two*, that Shinsou would have been left behind if they acted, he knows that Eri would have told them that, and helped them find him. "I know that's a hard decision, though. And I don't really blame you. But I think if you really knew Shinsou, he wouldn't be just a number to you."

Mirio smiles after they cross the crosswalk, just because it might be a little awkward if he doesn't. She's frowning to herself, and he can practically hear how loudly she's thinking that she didn't ask for the advice of someone *younger* than her, who doesn't even have a job and doesn't know her job. How *naive* and idealistic it must be to try to save people one by one, to save everyone that way.

That's what he used to think too. And maybe it's a little jaded of him to think that she's naive because of it.

She pulls him to stop in front of a building, which he realizes is an apartment complex when he looks up to see the name. "You should come inside to wait for your ride. It's *just* that, I'm not inviting you in for anything-"

"I have a boyfriend," Mirio says, laughing. Laughing and trying not to blush too much or feel weird

about saying it for the first time. It just feels right as much as it feels *new*, it feels a little *scary* almost. He's felt this way about Tamaki for a while, but saying it and acting on it is just still *new*.

She narrows her eyes a little at him, before she opens the door, holding it out for him then heads to the elevator. "You probably shouldn't... You should probably watch who you say that around. I work closely with people on the Hero Commission. I know how some people are, in this day and age."

"I'm just guessing that you're not one of those people," Mirio says, with a shrug while he watches the elevator doors close in front of them, and she pushes the button for her floor. Mostly, he just doesn't think it matters what she thinks, or what anyone thinks, really. He knows he's a good hero, and that shouldn't matter to anyone.

He thinks she's just scared, of a lot of things. And in a funny way, as much as Shinsou has to fear, he's braver than she is.

Her apartment is at the end of the hall, and it's pretty nice for a one bedroom in Tokyo. It probably costs a lot of money because of that, because it's right in the middle of the business district, but Mirio feels a little envious of the spacious living room, since none of the apartments he looked at had half of the space. At least, the ones in his budget.

Yamada wanted him to go a *bit* out of his budget and insisted that he would help, but Mirio had to almost argue with him that he didn't *need* a lot of space. He still hasn't found one that he feels like he can see himself living in. Especially since almost all of them have strict pet restrictions.

After Mirio toes off his shoes, listening to the lady talk to a taxi dispatch, he sees a ball of fuzz come out of the kitchen to start yowling at him, and he almost laughs.

This lady has a *cat*.

She definitely hasn't spent any time around Shinsou if she hasn't found a kindred soul. Even though Mirio prefers dogs, he *likes* cats, and he could tell just by looking at Shinsou that he liked cats too.

Since Mirio likes cats, and figures that with the eight hour drive and possibly more before that, this fluffy guy is probably hungry, he starts poking around the cabinets to see if he can find their dinner. The lady catches him doing it, and after explaining that he figured the cat was hungry, she just sighs.

And pulls out the *refrigerated* cat food. She not only *likes* cats, but makes sure to feed her cat the good stuff. "It'll be here in about 15 minutes, and the driver will call me when he's here. They're the most reputable taxi service in town, but... I'm sure you can handle yourself if there's any trouble."

Mirio just laughs again, remembering the mugger. Remembering how it felt to remember that he was a hero, that he could take care of himself.

What he can do *without* his quirk.

"Yeah, I definitely prefer a nice, simple ride, but I can take care of it if it's not," Mirio says, watching her dish out the food and run a hand over her cat's fluffy coat. "What's their name?"

"Cheerio," she says, like there's a story behind it, and there usually is with pet names. But when she stands up, she looks like she's going to explain it, before her eyes go wide at him. "Wow, I *never* got your name! What on earth am I- I'm *sorry*, this week has been a mess--"

“It’s okay!” Mirio says, trying not to laugh *too* hard at the conundrum he’s been trying to fix for *hours*. “It’s Togata Mirio, nice to meet you.”

“Saito Hikaru,” Saito answers, before she crosses her arms, staring at him. “What’s your other one? Your hero name.”

Mirio just smiles, and feels it this time. “Lemillion.”

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Yamada has been eying the time for the last eight hours, and now with half an hour to spare before his family comes back home, he’s on his way back to welcome them.

He has an armful with the tank that Fishio and Fishie call home, though the two goldfish have seen some new sights this weekend from the common room of the 1-A dorm where they *definitely* couldn’t be neglected, with Eri’s little beansprout Beanie precariously stacked on top. With the freezing weather, Yamada makes a quick step to the dorm, and thinks that at least Fishio and Fishie will appreciate the warmth of the kotatsu from the familiar top of it.

With Beanie back on its rightful place on the windowsill, Yamada finds himself waiting for the same kind of feeling. Like everything is back in place, like everyone is home where they belong, and every inch of that attack on campus can start fading away over time.

Yamada lets himself check everything over one more time, looking at empty bedrooms that he hopes will look more lived in and less empty in just a matter of time. He’d probably have gone crazy waiting in such a quiet and empty place, and thankfully, the 1-A dorm has been anything *but*.

Except for a few hours after the traitor was escorted away. After the kerfuffle of that, things were quiet for a while, a bigger blow to a group of kids who were already silently dealing with the stress of Friday night’s events.

And one of their own will probably draw Shouta away soon enough.

Even if that student was the traitor, he knows his husband won’t see it that simply. The traitor was *his student*, and it will take a while for that hurt to surface, for Shouta to even let himself see it. It hurts worse, knowing his informant was involved, and especially with how ‘Shiori’ is doing these days.

When the door finally opens, Yamada sprints towards the door, in time to hear the name he had no *idea* he could miss so much. “YAMA!”

“Eri!” Yamada calls back, spreading his arms and taking advantage of the doorway gathering everyone together to sweep his family into a *desperately* needed hug. Hitoshi had Eri cuddled up in his arms, and Shouta was probably trying to retreat, but he should know better. Yamada squeezes them all together and feels like he can’t quite squeeze hard enough to shake off the days they’ve been gone, especially when Shouta’s arm winds around his back and *Hitoshi’s* does too.

Hitoshi is *not* really a hugger, but that’s just a sign that he was missing him pretty hard too. And the Eri necklace dangling around Yamada’s neck is a pretty good sign that as fun as a trip to the mountains was, *everyone* is glad to be home.

But when Yamada pulls back, Eri necklace still holding on, he opens his mouth to get everyone in before the Eri Report starts off, but looks down to see that Hitoshi has a splint and a *crutch* and wants that report first. “*What happened?*”

Yamada's voice is flat enough that Shouta knows there's a threat behind it, and Hitoshi tries to tuck his *crutch* under his elbow to explain before Shouta catches that. "My *grandfather* took him to the traps, and Hitoshi was injured in a leg snare. It's just a sprain."

There's a weird little look between his husband and ward, almost a glare trading back and forth, but both of them have that kind of 'soft glare' going on like it's mostly for show. And Yamada realizes what happened.

They bonded.

Hitoshi is just so *very much* like that teenage Shouta that Yamada witnessed for himself, in so many different ways, and he's *known* this day would happen. Shouta would finally stick around the kid long enough to see it, and probably hate it, but with three days trapped in a cabin with a crazy third party they'd both probably grow to hate, Shouta might have already gotten over that and just accepted who Hitoshi is, Shouta-parts and all.

And Yamada needs to hear about *all of that*. "Hitoshi has a crutch, a sprain, and you have a *beard*."

It looks *horrific*.

This is not just the five o'clock shadow growing into scruff, or the scruff that's a day too long, this is a *beard*. It's thick enough to cover his jaw, there is a nearly solid covering of black hair all over the bottom of Shouta's face. He needs a razor, *stat*, and Yamada fully intends to give him that barber session before he gets a kiss that he's *needed* the past three days.

"Yama," Eri says, before she takes a deep, *audible* breath. "We drove for a really long time with Gummy and Gummy is *different* now, he's *really* big and squishy, and Emi and Neji and Tami and me had sleepovers every night, and *Mirio and Tama are gonna get married!*"

Yamada was definitely there for the Fat Gum reveal, even if he was criminally unaware of how Eri found out how 'squishy' he is, and it's not too hard to guess that a girl's only sleepover might have happened. But Mirio and Amajiki getting together, in some fashion that an almost-6 year old little girl would take as 'getting married.'

It's not *surprising*, but a little sudden, and a *little* concerning that 'something' happened while those two adult students were barely supervised off-campus. Yamada looks at his husband, and sees a blank look in answer that he can read as 'I don't know either, but I'm less concerned.'

'*Eri flower girl*,' Hitoshi adds, which is a detail that makes sense except for every way it doesn't. Maybe Eri still thought that just exchanging 'I love you's meant that two people were getting married, even if that is something that must have happened *quickly*. Still, even that's not terribly surprising.

"Well, I'm very happy for Mirio and Amajiki," Yamada says, wondering how *exactly* he can ask about that in a text message to Mirio. "And I'm *very* happy that everyone is back home where they belong. We've got a nice dinner to talk about our adventures over, and some nice hot showers for everyone who didn't have that luxury."

Hitoshi nearly *sags* with relief at that, even if Shouta can't bring himself to show he cares. Even if he doesn't, he *should*. Yamada doesn't know if the 'no indoor plumbing' meant no baths or just cold ones, Yamada is decently sure he didn't pack any soap, and *quite* sure that Shouta's grandfather doesn't have any on hand.

And with Eri kicking to get down and follow Hitoshi to the bathroom, probably to camp out in

front of the door to babble to him or at least maintain the meter distance that she can tolerate after missing him for days, Yamada tugs his husband to their bathroom to make sure he's nice and clean.

Even if he has to put up with a *nasty* beard kiss as soon as they're alone in there. "*Ugh*, why didn't I pack your electric razor? It's soft *and* prickly."

Shouta just hums as he strips, and Yamada leans on the counter finding himself doing a too-common analysis of his husband's body, not just admiring but seeing if there's any bangs or bruises he might be trying to ignore. "I wouldn't have had time to use it. *Your ward* demanded a lot of my attention."

Despite that blow, that little jab that Yamada wants to answer to with a reminder that Hitoshi definitely *deserved* some attention after having to fight for his life and having that *mask* locked on his face on UA's campus, he finds himself fighting a tight smile. Because '*your ward*' sounds a whole lot like '*your son*,' and no matter what Hitoshi might have done to instigate that, Yamada won't be able to be unhappy about it.

Shouta almost groans when he steps under the hot spray, drawing the curtain around just to keep the water from dripping onto the floor, *definitely* not because he's hiding anything Yamada hasn't seen. Very recently. "Even with a sprained ankle, he can climb a tree to avoid me. Despite being terrified that he's going to get attacked again, he's also *very* intent on not being in a place where he can be guarded. He's also been spending too much time with Bakugo, and got drunk last night with my grandfath-"

"*What?!*" Yamada says, throwing back the curtain because he's *sure* Shouta is going to be wearing that shit-eating grin just to pull his leg, but he's *not*. And maybe Yamada missed the sight of his husband not wearing anything but that exhausted look and a few soap suds in his hair.

"My grandfather was under the impression that sake was an anxiety reducer," Shouta says, and the 'grandfathers' are weird enough, especially how he says them. Especially how he *still* hasn't gotten into how painful this weekend was for him, to be forced in close proximity with the old man. "He also listens to your radio show. And approves, now."

"*What.*" Again, that's really all Yamada can say about it. The guy who *chased them halfway down a mountain* with a *crossbow* after going into 'How dare you's and 'Get the hell off of my mountain' and 'You show your face again, I'll cut and dress you,' which certainly didn't leave any room for being a fan of the show, now *approves*.

"He thought I would only get married in a shotgun wedding at the time. He doesn't like change, or being wrong," Shouta says, with a shrug while he continues to lather his hair. While Yamada still feels the urge to take over there, even if that means he'll either be soaking wet or *quite* distracted from making a meal for everyone. "But, he approves. And Hawks has apparently been making regular trips to see him. They're friends."

Yamada should probably be concerned that the homophobic hermit not being homophobic is rocking his world a bit more than the number two hero in Japan stopping by to 'befriend' an elderly squatter. "*Why.*"

Shouta pauses his rinsing to open an eye at him, a look that doesn't bode well. "I have *no* idea. And The Commission also has a tracker implanted in Hitoshi's ankle. Hawks tracked him down, and knows that we've taken him off campus before. There won't be any fall-out from that, but next time, Endeavor is supposedly going to have a talk with us."

Yamada will have *plenty* to say if *Endeavor* wants to tell them how to take care of a child.

“Hitoshi told me what he knows about Miasma’s location. And The Commission will be aware of that break in the case soon,” Shouta says, even if he doesn’t say how or specifics, he’s definitely not happy about sharing that detail with The Commission. Before he could even get started on working with that. “Who was it?”

Shouta leans down to cut his barely-more-than-military-style shower off, probably because he’s eager to know. He deserves to know. Yamada knows he’s been agonizing over that question all weekend after going dark, having to leave behind his phone.

And Yamada has been dreading the fact that he has to tell him. “Hawks said they were hospitalized. I *need* to know-”

“Whoa, that’s.” Not *untrue*, but definitely *diabolically* misleading, and absolutely *horrible* for his husband’s scorched nerves. “Inpatient at a hospital for a nervous breakdown, last I heard. It happened yesterday, so they’re still trying to sort things out. The family just went AWOL, left her at the *police station*, even when they got the call that... it wasn’t what it seemed like.”

It’s almost worse than what Yamada imagined, seeing Shouta’s face right now. His eyes pleading to know, even if the pain everywhere else makes Yamada want to stop. To just tell him to leave it, she was his student but she made her choice, and apparently it was made before she became his student. She *enrolled* under the League’s instructions.

“Beard. Come on,” Yamada says, because getting Shouta to wrap a towel around himself and sit on the toilet seat will be a good enough way to make him sit down for this. Working on that beard will give Yamada something to do with his hands, and plenty of reason not to see his husband’s heart shattering to pieces. “She was working with Shiori for a while before all of this. Took the entrance exam because the League wanted to hire someone to ‘get information about All Might.’ She told them where she was at USJ, summer camp. Helped Shiori get into the security system to bring it down. Find where Hitoshi was that night.”

Yamada gets half of the beard back to normal length with the electric razor, all the prickly trimmings falling on the floor so he can sweep it up later. He still feels like this deserves a shave.

If this is going to be the last time that Shouta sees his student. “Shiori turned herself in right after the arrest. Turned over everything she had on Miasma, the League of Villains, which wasn’t much. At least on the League. They, uh. Attacked in transit, when they were taking Shiori to a high security prison. Shiori’s....”

Yamada swallows, pausing to look around for the shaving cream, the razor, which are just sitting on the counter exactly where he put them. He doesn’t like to think about how long Shouta has worked with Shiori, how that absolutely dysfunctional working relationship is still going to hurt when it has to end like this.

“Not going to recover. Sansa’s hoping you know anyone who might want to... be there,” Yamada says, a hand on Shouta’s shoulder when he starts to stand up, when he knows his husband doesn’t even want to speak the words that he has to be there, if no one else will.

No one deserves to die alone. Even the real traitor of UA.

“Let me do this,” Yamada whispers, squeezing a bit harder than he wants because he doesn’t *want* Shouta to run off again. Even if he’s known since everything that had already crashed down started setting itself on fire, he’s still not prepared to let go again.

Maybe it's selfish, that he wants to keep his husband home because he missed him so bad in the span of three days, when his husband needs to see to a student that is exiting his class in the absolute *worst* way and a crazy, criminal mastermind of an informant is dying slowly as they speak, with not a single soul to be there through it.

But if Shouta is going to say farewell in two painful ways, he'll look his best for it. Even if Yamada has to wrangle him into it.

*

"My horn's still not shrinking," Eri says, still on the other side of the shower curtain where Hitoshi finally allowed her to be, when she kept opening the door to talk. Hitoshi just hums, trying to cling to what she's saying about her horn, lowering himself another inch but still too far from the bathwater to rinse his hair.

It's just a bath. He could take a shower, if he's a coward. If he wants to keep being *afraid* of different forms of water. If he wants to keep smelling bleach where it isn't, hearing Hari's voice or feeling his presence behind the shower curtain where he's not.

Maybe he does want that. A familiar terror. Something to make him uneasy when it's too easy to fall into comfort and warmth with Yamada, seeing him again. Feeling like there's nothing that can hurt him now.

Hitoshi knows too well that's not true. He can't risk getting comfortable so *easily* in this place.

It's better for his ankle anyway. "Twenny, what's your quirk feel like when you use it?"

Hitoshi leans far enough back to scrub the shampoo out of the back of his hair, what will be the worst part. His ears are still out of the water, and he feels the strain in his neck and hears it in his voice when he answers. "A string. Sometimes. I can pull it, and make someone go under my quirk. Why."

"Are you okay-" Eri's small hand makes a shadow on the curtain, and Hitoshi pulls a hand to the edge to keep it closed.

"I'm fine, Eri. I'm old enough that you can't see me bathing, remember?" Hitoshi reminds, an honestly *exhausting* argument he didn't want to have when Eri was *weirdly* insistent that it would be fair, since he bathed her when she was younger. He doesn't remember being curious about other people's bodies, since he saw the basics of different anatomy in 10's textbooks. The child development books said it was normal to be curious, but didn't really say how to *stop* that.

Eri seems to sit back down with an irritated huff, but the silence doesn't last for long. "Yo-yo said that quirks feel different to people. Like his quirk is a wave, and imagining stuff helps you use your quirk. And I wanna use it."

Hitoshi hums again, lowering himself into the warm water so he can wash his hair quickly. He doesn't want to risk not hearing whatever else Eri has to say, and the soap is starting to itch on his scalp.

He barely notices that his hair feels softer under the water before he realizes he hasn't breathed in too long, his chest aching with it. He knows how to swim underwater, and a bath doesn't need that.

He still doesn't breathe until he's sitting up, chasing every droplet off of his face and out of his hair with shaking hands. "You just. Have to use it. So you know what it feels like. Aizawa can help with that."

“How did you do it?” Eri asks, as Hitoshi starts to wash his arms and chest, quicker than he probably should. He just wants to get out of here, and can’t fight the urgency.

He can’t really answer Eri’s question either. “I just... knew how. My quirk is easier to use. Just trained with it, and I learned how.”

He remembers how much his jaw would shake when Bug first started opening the mask for that, how he’d stuttered differently, how it would even *hurt* sometimes if he had to talk for too long. How he felt relieved when the mask closed again. “I wish my quirk was easy to use like yours. I could train and fix Mirio’s quirk faster.”

Hitoshi splashes water on himself quickly, pulling the plug out of the drain as he stands, almost forgetting his ankle before the pain reminds him to steady himself with a hand on the wall. “It’s better if it’s not easy.”

He still can’t bring himself to talk to Yamada.

He knows he’ll have to. He knows that even if Aizawa said that his quirk won’t work, that if it didn’t work on Eri through the radio then it won’t work on Yamada when he’s wearing hearing aids, it’s just *so* much more than that. He doesn’t want to talk to Yamada, even if he can’t use his quirk on him, it’s close enough to doing it. Talking *is* his quirk, and he knows it doesn’t matter if he doesn’t want to. He’ll still be forced to. Soon.

He doesn’t know if he can, when it comes to that. He doesn’t know what will happen when Aizawa tells Yamada he can talk, and he still doesn’t talk to Yamada. But he can’t bring himself to just avoid that outcome and *talk* to Yamada.

It’s just *terrifying*. Thinking about it makes him feel like cold lightning is setting his nerves on fire from the pit of his stomach, it feels like the worst hesitation in a fight. It feels like it won’t *end*, even if he manages to talk to Yamada, and it makes him feel like he never can. That the mask will trap his breath and smother him if he tries.

Hitoshi reaches out to grab the towel behind the curtain as the water drains around his feet, finally feeling relief as he rubs his face dry then his hair, spending too much time trying to wring his hair out before he gives up on that and moves on.

He’s not as thin as he used to be. It’s almost weird to see how much his arms have give when he presses down on his skin. He doesn’t have muscle built up the same, almost obscene way that the hero students or most Numbers do, but he can feel it beneath his fingers when he presses down. When he looks at the broken black band tattooed on his arm.

He remembers what his number used to look like. When he traces the edge of the ‘2’ hiding under all that black, he can almost see it clearly.

When he looks down at his chest, he stops to pick at what he sees, what he thought was just somehow some shorter hairs from the back of his neck that had gotten stuck on his chest. But among the scars are purple hairs sticking out, scattered and starting to curl. Not the weirdly thick amount of hair that Aizawa has on his chest, and definitely not as long. They don’t seem to grow from the scar tissue.

He’d look *weird* if he grows as much chest hair as Aizawa has, with all the empty patches to break up the purple. Maybe he should shave his chest, if it ever starts to look like that. “I’m getting-*Eri!*”

He pulls the towel around himself, even if he just saw her starting to peek, she probably hadn’t

seen him. She *better* not have. “It’s not *fair!* You always help me take a bath, and you didn’t let me help at all!”

“I’m *done* with my bath, and I’m getting out, so I need you to leave,” Hitoshi says, rubbing a hand down his face as he tried to convince himself that she *hadn’t* seen him naked. But he still doesn’t hear her leaving. “Eri. It’ll only take a minute.”

He hears Eri huff, before the door opens and closes. And he waits.

Before he pulls the curtain aside just enough for him to peek around it, and see Eri standing in front of the door, suddenly stricken with wide eyes as she was found out. “*Eri.*”

“You’re *mean!*” Eri yells, stomping as she *actually* leaves, and Hitoshi caught a glimpse of Yamada walking down the hall just in time to hear Eri’s complaints. “*Yama, Toshi won’t let me see him when he’s taking a bath, and that’s not fair, ‘cause he always...*”

Eri’s voice trails off behind the door as she follows Yamada down the hall, and Hitoshi can hear Yamada’s voice answering her, soothing her from anger to whines, and down to quiet acceptance while he gets dressed. Hitoshi stares in the mirror when he’s done, bracing his arms on the counter. Wondering if he could just stay in this muggy bathroom and listen to Yamada’s voice, instead of leaving and having to look at him.

Instead of bearing the weighted expectation of Yamada’s green eyes, his fake to sincere smiles, and what words he’d use to say that it’s *fine*, that Hitoshi can talk to him. They won’t give him a mask, he won’t get hurt, he can just *talk* to Yamada.

Hitoshi runs a hand through the hair on the back of his head, dropping his head to stare at the counter. The tile is definitely easier to face than that.

But there’s a pull in his chest that makes him forget about fear, about expectation and complication, and he turns to open the door and practically announce that he’s done hiding, when he isn’t.

Because he just wants to be close to Yamada again, no matter what that feels like. Because he can’t stand this horrible ache of missing him any longer.

*

Yamada tried not to pry. Tried not to startle this. Even when he wrangled one or a few of the herolets into cooking with him over the weekend, it just didn’t feel as right as working with his favorite little sous chef Hitoshi.

Who had sprained his ankle in a leg snare, tried to avoid Shouta as much as he could, got *drunk last night*, and had apparently taken a bath just recently.

A *bath*. Not a shower, which he had to clarify with the little bean along with trying to clarify that while being curious about what other people looked like naked was normal, peeping is not too swell and Aunt Nemmie was going to explain some things for her later.

But Hitoshi, who has plenty of reasons to see baths as a trigger and avoid them, had taken a bath and if Yamada didn’t know it from Eri, he wouldn’t have guessed.

Except for maybe these little ‘leans’ that Yamada is definitely leaning into.

At first, Yamada thought Hitoshi was just trying to keep his weight off of his sprained ankle, and

Yamada tried to excuse him to sit at the table because of that, not terribly passionately, and was immediately turned down. But he noticed that it just seemed like he had a certain gravitational pull for his ward, as it didn't matter which side he was standing on, Hitoshi was just leaning towards him a little bit.

And a few times, the lean ended with their elbows touching, or their arms, but as Yamada started serving everything on Eri-approved plates, he noticed a lean becoming an *actual* lean, as Hitoshi's upper arm rested against his, until his head found rest on Yamada's shoulder.

And he might have 'fixed up' the plates a little longer than he had to after that, picking at the sides to make everything presentable. Not really wanting a reason to pull away from that.

But eventually, the three of them sat down for a good meal, with his husband absent. Missed, of course, but Yamada found it easier to distract himself from that with two kiddos who had a wild weekend without him. Hitoshi let Eri do the bulk of the talking, and Yamada had heard practically every little detail that Eri could possibly remember about snow bunnies and hero training and the new and exciting Ketsubutsu students and their antics before he could pester Hitoshi into joining in.

Hitoshi saw a few animals, *did* listen to his show and *liked* the song he picked for him, did admit he found 'Zawa Coffee' annoying sometimes, and did not mention the alcohol at all.

Yamada found it a little easier to hear Hitoshi's version of events, and he knew there was probably a guilty-teenager shaped reason for it. But given that it was a one-off thing that he trusts Shouta has handled, and definitely didn't want to bring up that lecture in front of a little bean, he let it slide.

"Well, I just sat at the dorm missing you guys all weekend. The herolets were making fun of me for crying beside the window, they're so mean," Yamada says, even if that's not *quite* what happened. He kept the tears inside, and it seems to have paid off with herolets that didn't have to deal with anymore stress and a family that returned to him happy and intact.

"That's mean!" Eri chirps in, coming to his defense, and he absolutely *loves* his pint-sized defender who's picking around the garlic-y veggies she doesn't seem to be a fan of. Yamada knows he'll never stop being a fan of Hitoshi not only eating enough for a clean plate, but going back to pick up a few seconds of his favorite sides still resting on the stove. Like a *teenager*, with an appetite to match.

"They *are* mean! They bullied me all weekend, just because I'm not the wards they were looking for," Yamada says, and that's a *little* true. Monoma had an especially sour look when he dropped by on Saturday morning and heard that the wards were not in the building, and would not be in the building until Tuesday. "I think they'll be very happy to see you guys tomorrow morning, worrying their poor little herolet hearts out all weekend. And I think there's even a cake saved for someone too!"

Sato and Ashido *defended* that sugary sweet from too many herolets who had a moment of weakness when faced with the temptation of stress eating, but Yamada is sure that it will pay off. A coffee flavored cake from Sato's more than capable hands will certainly boost Hitoshi's mood tomorrow morning, and might even make up for the hysterics that are sure to come when the hero students have to make *sure* their wards are okay.

Hitoshi seems to have done the same math that Yamada has with the reminder, already looking exhausted at the thought. It might be better for him to jump on his phone and assure his friends that he's alive and well, and won't appreciate the trouble that they'll *probably* still give him. "Speaking of, you guys should probably get to bed pretty soon, it's getting a little later than usual."

It's closing in towards midnight, which will definitely be *bad* for a little bean who usually arises earlier than his favorite listener, and Yamada makes the executive decision while he cleans up the table that his little bean will need to sleep in a bit. He hears the sounds of teeth brushing down the hall, and Eri possibly describing the accommodations for that from her own cabin stay, which he knows will be *very* exciting for her to think back on for a while.

Before he hears Eri get a *whole* lot more excited. "Twenny! You got Yama hair!"

Yamada barely remembers to turn off the faucet but gives up on *not* sprinting down the hall, because this *might be it*. This might be the real deal, the *real thing*. His son, entering the final stages of puberty and springing closer to adulthood, *growing his first facial hair*.

It might be that all-too-common not-peach-fuzz patch that starts from the corner of the upper lip and then grows out, and it might have had to grow for a while with how pale Hitoshi's purple hair is. Yamada knows that he didn't notice his own first mustache until it started tickling his lip, being blonde and all.

And Yamada makes it to the doorway to see Eri watching in awe, sitting on the counter while Hitoshi pulls around at his face, looking in the mirror for any other 'weird hairs' that he was unaware of before. Yamada's too far away to see the 'Yama mustache,' and that's criminal, but Hitoshi's hand pauses under his chin like he found another one.

And Yamada is there just in time, to watch in *horror* as Hitoshi tries to pluck it between his fingers with a glare, before he notices Yamada in the mirror, pulling a mix of shock and guilt at the intrusion. Yamada can see in the mirror that his own expression might inspire the guilt. "Whoa, no need for plucking! We can have a little lesson on how to handle a razor-"

Yamada's hand almost flies to his mouth, just pulling on his own mustache, because *he's going to teach his son how to shave*.

"Uh-" Yamada clears his throat, trying to fight the tears as he glances down the hall, and tries to remember how to *use* a razor even if he gave Shouta a neat shave just a few hours ago. "Let's see what we've got here."

Yamada walks closer to Hitoshi, who frowns not quite at him, but doesn't seem to think that this new sign of maturity is any fun. Yamada sees a few sparse purple hairs right at the corners of his lip, just as he thought, so few that he can count them. And about three on his jaw, just stubble starting to poke through.

"You sure you want to shave? You could grow it out since you're not in school, rock the 'stache or the scruff-" Yamada stops the teasing when he sees another soft glare directed at his chest and two defiant fingers making their way to the chin again.

Yamada tries - and fails - to see the determination in destroying the scruff while the mustache apparently deserves to live, as anything other than a sign that the mustache might win out in a few years. Maybe Hitoshi would even trim it up like *his*.

Yamada has to distract himself with fetching the shaving cream from his and Shouta's bathroom along with the razor and aftershave lotion, wiping a few tears from the corner of his eye at the thought. But when he gets back, he still sees an Eri parked on the counter, and she's *quite* interested in learning the sacred art of facial hair grooming. "So, first you'll want to get your face wet, it'll help the shaving cream lather up and get another layer between you and the razor. A little warm, but not too much or it might sting a bit, might cut yourself easier."

There's a weird half-eyeroll that Hitoshi directs into the mirror when he turns on the faucet before he cups the water around the bottom half of his face, and Yamada isn't sure if he's just annoyed about not being allowed to *pluck* himself, or if there's a silent little barb about getting a cut and subsequent new scar to his face.

Yamada appreciates that it's silent, since he won't forget the sight of that horrible black mask coming off of his ward's face anytime soon. "Then, shake up the cream and spritz a dollop in your hand. You can just get full coverage this time, it's good practice! Might trim down a few other little hairs that you haven't spotted yet."

Hitoshi gets *excellent* coverage on the cheeks and chin, that part is very thorough. Yamada has to bite his lip not to giggle, because even if it's clear to see that Shouta came back from that trip begrudgingly more fond of his ward, the feeling is quite adolescently *not* mutual.

"And then just gently shave down, with the 'grain,' cleaning up with each little stroke. That way it's harder to cut yourself, gentler on the skin," Yamada says, watching Hitoshi turn on the faucet then turn his attention to the task. The first stroke on his cheek is too gentle to clear away the bottom half of the shaving cream, but Hitoshi still rinses and tries again. Yamada just cheerleads silently, alongside Eri who still seems enraptured by it all.

Until a stroke barely starts before it earns a wince, and Yamada remembers Hitoshi's face isn't exactly easy terrain to start with. Hitoshi washes the razor but his hands drop in the sink at the bit of blood welling up, his expression dropping too, into defeat.

"Ah, always get a nick the first few times, let me--"

'It's fine,' Hitoshi signs with too-quick movements, awkward with the razor in his hand, wetting a hand to clean away that blood, but then he starts washing away the shaving cream.

"Hey, hey, it is fine," Yamada says, a hand feather light on Hitoshi's shoulder when he reaches around him, between the teen and the sink to awkwardly pull a classic pinch of toilet paper off. And when he pulls back to look at the kid, he sees *defeat* written on his face. Which Yamada decorates with a bit of paper to soak up that spot of blood. "Want me to show you?"

Hitoshi doesn't look at him when he nods, but does so jerkily. Yamada smiles even if he doesn't see it, guiding his kid just another step back so he can get access to the running water. He runs the clean razor gently across Hitoshi's cheek, not surprised that it doesn't catch on anything thicker than peach fuzz. And he carefully avoids the raised edges of those scars.

"My moms arm-wrestled over who got to give me the first shave," Yamada says, noticing that Hitoshi is struggling to find a comfortable place to look other than the loudmouth in front of him. "It was a little different for me, since I decided I wanted to shave my legs as soon as they got a little bushy. Most guys don't bother with that, and it's perfectly fine for a girl not to go through the hassle either!"

It'll be a *few* years before peach fuzz turns to a razor argument for the little bean, but it's best to start on that early, before peer pressure gets there first.

"And my mother won, so me, her, and a bottle of shaving cream had my legs de-bushified just in time for swimsuit season. But, that meant that when this little mustache started up when I was in high school, my poor mom insisted that it was her turn," Yamada says, laughing under his breath at the memory of his dear mom, barely tall enough to come to the middle of his chest at that point, having to sit on the counter just to reach.

And Hitoshi's eager help by turning up his chin to get those offensive little hairs underneath.

"The angle was not great, and the razor was not *new*. I had more nicks than hairs I started out with, and that was *not* a good look for me."

Shouta asked if he got in a *cat fight*. With a *cat*.

Yamada, with all the intelligence of an incredibly embarrassed and flustered teenager, not only agreed but elaborated on the completely fictional events. How he had tried to fetch a stray from behind a dumpster, tried luring it out with different types of food, how the cat suddenly charged and dug its claws in and Yamada had to use his quirk to pry it off of his face and get the bloodshed to stop.

Shouta gave him the cold shoulder for *two days*. On behalf of the *fictional cat* that he thought Yamada had cruelly abused in that elaborate lie. Admitting that the whole thing was fake was almost the worst part of Yamada's high school experience.

"But, it was nice. I didn't have the traditional 'dad teaches you how to shave' thing, but I don't feel like I missed out at all. My moms knew how to shave, and doing it like this is kind of..." Yamada trails off when he swipes at the razor with his thumb to clear off the remains of that baby mustache, not sure how *entirely* to put it. "It's like one of those last steps of being a kid, getting taken care of and groomed like that. A little more independence once you learn how to do it."

Yamada checks his work before he starts on the other cheek, but happens to catch a look in his ward's eye that seems a bit panicked at that, as much as saddened. Yamada almost didn't want to say anything, because he knows that Hitoshi hasn't had the usual care that he deserved, that this 'last' thing is probably the 'first' thing for him.

"But, it's not like that's the end of that, you know? I'll be happy to be your barber, little listener. Hair care comes with a shave every time, on the house at Yamada's Boutique Salon," Yamada says, before he risks ruining how Hitoshi's shoulders have finally relaxed, and his eyes are back to half-lidded. "After all, Shouta's been growing hair for almost two decades, and I don't think he's shaved himself *once*. He'd have a full beard if I wasn't there to stop it."

"A Santa beard!" Eri says, with plenty of enthusiasm for the concept. One that Yamada *hopes* Shouta doesn't hear about, because he *knows* Shouta would argue that it would be fitting for the season.

"Exactly! We've just gotten undeniable proof that Shou can't shave himself," Yamada says with one more swipe before he leans away for Hitoshi to rinse himself off, and Yamada is grateful that he doesn't seem to look in the mirror to see the shaving cream still resting over his scars.

At first, it was like they weren't there at all, but now Yamada knows exactly what's hiding under the shaving cream.

"Now, we can finish up with the lotion, re-hydrate the skin because taking away that hair was a little rough for it," Yamada says, handing over the little lotion pump and watching Hitoshi pull a face at the first minty jolt of it. "There's some aftershave that has alcohol in it, but that stuff *stings* so bad, and it's pretty awful to dry out after all that washing."

The word 'alcohol' has a little echo in Yamada's ear after he says it, and he doesn't like that he *might* have to talk about it with Hitoshi so they can have it out in the open, so Yamada can *know* that's not going to be a *thing* with his kid.

But Hitoshi works the lotion in, fingers trailing lightly over the incomparable feeling of smooth that comes after a good shave. Definitely a little awed by it, by the way his eyes widen just a bit.

Before he double-checks his chin and jaw, and Yamada wonders if it's *ever* going to stop being funny. Hitoshi *thinks* he hates Shouta that much, to be so worried about having the same kind of facial hair.

“Well, at least there's one guy who likes a clean shave around here,” Yamada jokes, because while *he* likes a clean shave, he likes it on his husband. His own mustache is an undeniable *look*, and it suits him. He's also pretty sure he'd never even out the tan line if he did shave it off, after this many years of careful maintenance.

Yamada starts to excuse himself so that two kids who need a good night's rest can get to getting it again, but he happens to hover a little at the doorway, and feels a solid little ‘lean’ slowly morph into something else.

At first, it's just Hitoshi's arm pressing against the side of his chest, something he almost instinctively moves away from to give the kid space, but then the shoulder follows, and with a little turn, there's a kid gently pressed against his chest, the arms at his side not *quite* making it a hug.

But it's an invitation for one, and if Hitoshi needs to learn the sacred art of the casual hug, Yamada is the *right* guy for the job.

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Hitoshi slowly pulls himself away from Eri while she sleeps, and unfortunately the softness of her bed seems to make her follow him, following the dip in the mattress. But eventually, he's able to get on his feet, and limp to the window.

His own room doesn't have a window, which was why he was fine with sleeping in Eri's room tonight. From what he can see of the wall outside, it looks like it will be difficult to climb down or up without rope, and three stories will be difficult to land, especially with his ankle still injured.

He starts opening the window, before the cold air reminds him. He doesn't have shoes, and wearing pajamas will make the trek agonizing. He might freeze to death before he gets to the dorm.

And he'd have to keep the window open if he snuck out this way, which would make Eri cold. So he shuts it, and slowly and silently leaves Eri's room to see if Yamada is in his room or not.

Yamada is on the couch, on his phone, and unfortunately in the living room which means that Hitoshi can't sneak out the front door without being noticed. It's a long shot, but he might have to try a different plan. The worst that Yamada would do is tell him ‘no.’

But Hitoshi doubts it. “Hey, little listener, can't sleep?”

Hitoshi shakes his head, and *hates* this habit of breathing in like he's going to say something. It's become a habit from spending so much time with Aizawa, from talking so much. Despite how he does it, a pang of cold fear cuts through him every time he does it in front of Yamada. ‘*Know it's late. Can I see hero students? Very quick.*’

Hitoshi signs the last part as quick as he promises to be, biting the inside of his lip because he *knows* Yamada is going to say no. It's late, he has to face them at school in a few hours anyway, but there are things he has to say before school and he can't say them over the chat. The chat that imploded *so many* times before he finally was able to check if any of them were awake.

To find out that one of them wouldn't be there, something that Yamada knew and didn't tell him. And the reasons why he wouldn't.

"It's *definitely* after curfew for them," Yamada says, which is almost a 'no,' but it's not. Yamada's green eyes seem so much clearer in this light, after too long that Hitoshi hasn't seen him, and how Yamada seems both familiar and strange because of that. "*But* they probably promised to meet you downstairs anyway."

Hitoshi nods, because they did. Some of them bragged that All Might wouldn't scold them, and Sero mentioned that Iida wouldn't be awake to know, which seemed to wake him up to tell all of them not to do it. '*Can't sleep until I see them. Will be quick.*'

Yamada slowly nods at that, not happy, but he seems to accept the urgency. Even if Hitoshi is being misleading about why it's urgent. "Alright, but you definitely need to bundle up, and take the crutch. I'll walk with you—"

'It's-' Hitoshi stops himself mid-sign, because 'It's fine' never seems to work for him anymore. Yamada always takes it as the opposite. '*Rather alone. If okay. Will be quick.*'

Yamada almost seems sad about that, but leans back on the couch and allows it. "Alright, but in 30 minutes I'll be calling a search party. It's late and freezing, and all."

'And all' is his *still* sprained ankle, infuriating and insulting because Hitoshi has had worse. It's not even *broken*, but every aggravating twinge calls him weak, and reminds him that he's usually healed by this point.

Hitoshi pulls a thick jacket over his clothes, and a scarf, and knows it's not worth the hassle to change into thicker pants. He puts one shoe on, the splint won't go over the other, and takes the crutch when Yamada gives it to him. Yamada seems to hover in the open door, to make sure he won't turn back around, and he won't.

Hitoshi walks through the snow once he gets outside, irritated with every single *fucking* twinge. How his arm seems to ache and chafe no matter how he holds the crutch under his arm, how the crutch seems *useless* until he tries not to use it. It's *frustrating*.

And when he finally gets to the 1-A dorm, Bakugo is the one scowling at the door to invite him inside. "What the *fuck* happened to your foot? Did you break a toe when you were *running away from help* like a dumbass?"

It's *especially* irritating that Bakugo doesn't sound mad, even when he slaps Hitoshi's arm. Hitoshi ignores him, walking into the common room to see most but not all of the hero students. All of them look tired, but have irritating weak smiles. Sure, they're angry that he ran away from 'help,' but now they want to smile at him like he was just too stupid to know they were 'helping.'

"A belated-*Shinny*, what happened?!" Ashido turns away from the cake, her smile falling when she runs towards him. Sato, Yaoyorozu, and Sero look concerned, Shoji, Tokoyami, and Todoroki are impossible to tell. Aoyama still looks like he's falling asleep on Jirou's shoulder, Kirishima still barely awake from where he's half-leaning on the counter, and Iida takes a few steps too like he thinks he should *carry* Hitoshi, or something stupid like that.

"It's sprained," Hitoshi says, adjusting his grip on the crutch and considering how he could use it as a weapon when Ashido finally stops short, looks at the crutch like she knows what he was thinking. "I didn't come here for cake. I came here to tell all of you to fuck off."

Bakugo makes a weird scoffing noise, before he tries to slap Hitoshi again. Hitoshi grabs his wrist and twists it. “What the *fuck* are you-”

They’re not getting it. “You’re all completely useless to me. Not a single one of you *heroes* could actually stand a chance against me now, and that means I have no use for you. As fun as it was for you to treat me like I’m weak, I’m not, and I’m not going to tolerate it anymore.”

“Shinsou,” Yaoyorozu says, curling a hand over the collar of her shirt. “I’m sure that you’re angry and hurt that we didn’t...”

Hitoshi glares at her, imagines that he’s glaring her into silence, but she probably just doesn’t want to say that they failed to protect him. They shouldn’t have tried, they’re too ill-trained. Too stupid. “I’m not angry, or hurt. I’m tired of all of you.”

Hitoshi lets Bakugo pull his wrist away, and trades a glare with the most useless one of them out of the bunch.

“I unfortunately have to live here, and deal with you during school. But don’t mistake me, I’m not going to tolerate your attempts at pity anymore. It’s insulting,” Hitoshi says, watching Jirou’s eyebrow raise as her eyes widen, her mouth opens but Ashido speaks first.

“Shinny-”

“Why are you doing all of these annoying things for me?” Nemoto asks, wrapped in Hitoshi’s voice from the place that he haunts in his throat, and Hitoshi sees Ashido come back into view after the flash of blindness that comes with Nemoto’s quirk.

“I want to be your friend. I want to make up for everything bad that happened, and make you happy,” Ashido is forced to say, before the yellow iris surrounded by black in her eyes turns white, and the nervous tension in her body goes slack.

“Shinsou-” Iida starts, angry, because ‘you can use your quirk like everyone else can’ was something that Bakugo said. *Bakugo* promised.

And Hitoshi knew it was never true.

“Oh, I remember that she wanted to be Brainwashed, but that’s not my quirk anymore,” Hitoshi says, tilting his head to the side to look at Iida’s frustrated tension, his fists knotted by his side, because he wants to act against him but he *can’t*. It’s ‘unheroic’ to attack a ward. “Whatever I ask, you’re forced to answer. And I can make you admit your deepest insecurities, the things you don’t want to admit to yourself. That would have been useful to have, before one of you invited 127 in.”

“That wasn’t us!” Kirishima argues, wide awake now, looking between Ashido and Hitoshi like he doesn’t know who to hit to break the control. His fists clench at his side, and Hitoshi steadies himself on the crutch. “Dude, I get that it was really messed up that you were attacked, but you *hurt* Tsuyu-”

“I’ll cut her tongue out next time,” Hitoshi says, and says it lazily, like a promise that he means that means nothing to him. Still staring with his head tilted back looking down at him from the end of his nose.

Exactly like Chisaki used to do.

“So again, fuck off. I’ll ignore that you exist, but if you invite my attention, you’ll suffer for it. I’ll unfortunately see you around,” Hitoshi says, turning to see Bakugo *fuming*, his hand splayed open

and ready to use his quirk, and his glare murderous.

Good. They need to understand, he doesn't want anything to do with them anymore. He doesn't need the distraction, or these 'friends.'

And it's better for them to not have a dangerous friend like him.

*

Midoriya woke up to a slamming door, and looked at the phone still in his hand before he nearly flung it in his scramble to get out of bed. Shinsou said he was going to come to the dorm because he needed to talk to them about what happened while he was in the mountains with Aizawa. After he was attacked by that Chameleon quirk guy.

He runs down the stairs to see that he probably missed Shinsou's visit completely, Kaminari, Jirou, and Todoroki are turning up to the next flight, but Iida looks at him from the steps leading downstairs. "It's better that you weren't there, Midoriya."

Iida doesn't say anything else, turning away to continue to his own floor, but Midoriya continues to the common room to see Kacchan and Kirishima close to Ashido bent over the counter, her arms wrapped around something. Sato just looks at Midoriya, looking exhausted and a bit angry, before he rubs a hand over his face and starts walking to the stairs to leave. "Was Shinsou-"

"He's *not*-" Ashido snaps, throwing her arm out to swat at Kirishima, who seemed like he was trying to take whatever she was holding. "He's just *upset*, he didn't mean that."

Midoriya can tell that Ashido is really upset. She sounds like she's crying. "What happened with Shinsou?"

Kacchan turns around to look at him, stalking forward like he's angry at Midoriya for whatever happened when he was asleep. "Fucker is off his *shit*, he wants all of us to 'fuck off,' and he's *fucking* welcome to that. Just a heads up, don't *fuck* with him."

"Shinsou kind of came back with crazy eyes," Sero adds from the couch. "*Literally*. His eyes *glow* now, and his quirk is *insane*."

"And he's *fucking dead* if he tries it again," Kacchan growls, clipping Midoriya's shoulder like he's forgotten this isn't middle school, and Midoriya isn't just his punching bag for his frustrations.

But Midoriya lets him, this time, because Ashido is clinging to the *cake* she saved for Shinsou. Shinsou was clearly upset, there's something weird with his quirk and eyes, but Ashido is really hurt by whatever he said. "We can put it up. Bakugo's not really gonna toss it, he'll get over it by tomorrow morning."

Ashido just hugs the cake closer, sniffing, despite what Kirishima says. Midoriya puts a hand on her shoulder, and she flinches, before she turns around and nearly tackles him in a too tight hug. "I just want him to be happy, that's not wrong, right? It's not *pity*, it's *not*! I'm not a bad friend or a bad person, just because he went through stuff, right?"

"Of course not," Midoriya reassures, as best he can when Ashido is kind of squeezing the life out of him. "I'm sure he... didn't really mean that."

Got a lot of friends. That Chameleon quirk villain was taunting Shinsou with that. That villain threatened to hurt them, and hurt *Eri*. Just because Shinsou was close to them.

Shinsou *really* didn't mean that.

"I'm going to talk to him," Midoriya decides, gently pushing at Ashido's shoulders as he trades a look with Kirishima, who will probably be her next target for a hug. Ashido needs to cry it out, but Midoriya was the only one who heard what that Chameleon quirk villain said to Shinsou, who knows what Shinsou is trying to do.

It doesn't matter what Shinsou tries to tell him, how insulting he tries to be. Midoriya has heard everything that could be hurtful thanks to Kacchan, and he knows that Shinsou *can't* just push them away when he needs them most. He can't give up on having friends just because they might be in danger.

Midoriya knows that too well. He knows that he's similar to Shinsou because of that, because they both have dangerous secrets. If his friends knew the secret behind One for All, they could be at risk, and there's a part of Midoriya that still worries if he's being a good friend by keeping that secret. But he has to.

But it's different for Shinsou. They're the first friends he's ever had, and he can't give up on that so easily.

Midoriya finally pries away from Ashido and runs out into the cold, without a jacket over his sleepwear, but he sees Shinsou not far away, and he sees Aizawa too, standing in front of Shinsou. At first, he worries that Aizawa *told* Shinsou to say whatever he did to make everyone upset, but when Midoriya slips around the back of the 3-A dorm to listen in on their conversation, he hears that's not true.

"What part of *you will not be unescorted* was unclear to you?" Aizawa asks, in a tone that almost makes Midoriya flinch and mentally prepare for being grounded from classes for three days.

Shinsou just huffs, before he answers back in a clipped tone. "I thought I was clear about not turning your back on me."

Shinsou really is talking now. Maybe he could have brainwashed Aizawa, but it seemed like everyone got a barbed word from Shinsou when they met him downstairs, to be so hurt by it. And it does hurt, they worried the entire weekend and decided to wake up in the middle of the night to meet him, just because he asked them to. "If you were worried about my students-"

"I'm not worried anymore," Shinsou interrupts, this time he sounds so *much* like Kacchan did that night after Kamino ward, it's too clear that he's speaking loudly, in almost an airy way, to put more distance between his words and the hurt behind it. "Your 'eggs' got the message. If they try to get involved again, then they're just stupid and hopeless. That's another test you can use to expel them."

"You snuck out, on a sprained ankle, in the middle of the night to wake up my students and inform them that you don't want friends," Aizawa says, the usual way he sums up whatever someone did to get in trouble, usually in a more insulting way to make them feel stupid before he lays out what they should have done and how they'll learn to do that instead.

"I don't want distractions," Shinsou argues, still angry at first. Then, so quietly that Midoriya almost doesn't hear it. "Or casualties."

Midoriya was right. Shinsou is only doing this out of fear, because he cares about them. He doesn't *want* to lose all of his friends.

“One of them got stabbed because his great plan of attack was just *running* at 127. The other, the *Problem Child*, decided to hurl himself into the air so he could get skewered by the sword he couldn’t have seen,” Shinsou says, and Midoriya has to bite his lips together to keep from running out to defend himself. He was *going* to use an Air Force Smash, and kind of hoped that using a higher percentage of One For All would let him manifest a stronger version of Black Whip, but Hadou caught him mid-air before he could and basically accomplished the same thing with her life force spirals.

“Again, you’re *not going to be unescorted*,” Aizawa says, his voice dropping to a growl when he has to repeat himself. Before he sighs. “The wardship isn’t going to end that soon either.”

It’s a reminder that Midoriya didn’t need, and didn’t want to hear. Shinsou is a ward, and that means he’s only at UA temporarily, until the wardship ends. But after that, he’d have to be taken away from Eri, away from everyone, but now that Aizawa knows about Shinsou’s mom, he won’t be going back to her.

It’s not just because Shinsou is afraid of them getting hurt. He must have done what Yaoyorozu said Aizawa told him to do. Shinsou had to tell Aizawa everything he knows.

And that means the end of Shinsou’s wardship is getting closer. “It’s going to end. It’s temporary.”

Midoriya holds himself against the wall, just waiting for Aizawa to tell him that he’s wrong. Aizawa *can’t* just be okay with letting Shinsou go to who knows where after this, to be separated from Eri like that. “Not for months, at worst.”

Months?

Shinsou only gets to live at UA, for *months*? And no one knows where he’s going to go after that, if he’ll still be able to talk to them. If he has a phone, of course everyone will still message him on the groupchat, but it’s hard to get permission to leave campus for more than an hour, and they don’t know where Shinsou will be.

It can’t just end like this. Shinsou can’t just push them away because he’s afraid of that. “*Hey!*”

Midoriya looks around the corner to see Aizawa pulling Shinsou onto his back with his capture scarf, and Shinsou hitting the side of Aizawa’s arm with his crutch. “Since I can’t trust you not to run off on your own, even with a *crutch*, the privilege of limping back to the dorm has been revoked. You’re also not going to be healed by Recovery Girl, you’ll be healing on your own.”

“*Great*, so the next time one of *your* students invite The Miasma to kill me-”

“You *won’t be unescorted*,” Aizawa interrupts, starting to walk away. “Getting healed by a quirk every time you’re injured has apparently made you less aware of how to treat yourself while injured. Like the Problem Child.”

Midoriya tries to consider himself lucky that Shinsou called him ‘Izuku’ when they first started messaging, now that he knows that Aizawa and Yamada probably call him ‘Problem Child’ *a lot*. “Great, I’ll be forced to rely on you for protection. Which is going *swell* so far. Really knocked it out of the park last time-”

“*Unescorted*,” Aizawa interrupts, and it’s kind of nice that they argue like this, in a kind of playful way, but Shinsou wasn’t really unescorted. He was with Togata after all.

“And you’re just so *perceptive*,” Shinsou says. “To not see a villain in your own class.”

Even if Shinsou doesn't know he's here, doesn't know that Midoriya is listening to this, he feels the sting from that barb all the same with a pang in his chest. No one knew, *no one* would think that it was her. Midoriya *wishes* he could have known.

"It's funny, you couldn't have seen it. Invisible and all."

It's not funny, at *all*. After all they've been through together, from the very *first* day of school, they were meant to become heroes, they all had that dream. Except one of them.

Hagakure.

*

Hitoshi withers under the silence for too long, his ankle still throbbing in a way that makes him too thankful that Aizawa is still insisting on awkwardly carrying him around. Maybe he just wants to break the silence because the staff dorm is only getting closer, maybe just to distract himself from the pain from his sprain, or the exhaustion that's falling over him now that he knows the hero students won't bother him.

Maybe it's just because his hands on Aizawa's shoulders can feel too keenly how he's slumped forward, as though his weight is too great a burden. But he knows it's not that. "She's fine. Hagakure."

Aizawa doesn't answer him for a while, even though Hitoshi tried not to make him answer. Between one step and the next, he finally does, his voice too weary for it. "She'll be fine."

That doesn't answer the real question that Hitoshi has, and he struggles to word it right, his fingers fidgeting on Aizawa's shoulders. "You're... fine."

He knows Aizawa isn't. He doesn't know if he wants to be trusted with the truth willingly, or to have a pleasant lie so he can stop worrying about it. Maybe he shouldn't have said those things, shouldn't have lashed out at a clear wound. He doesn't know why that comes so easily to him now, and it's not even because Aizawa irritates him that much. "I'm fine."

But it *is* irritating, to get that lie, dismissive as it is short. Hitoshi glares at the top of Aizawa's head, and wishes that Aizawa could be anything less than just the human embodiment of *irritating*.

"I will be fine," Aizawa adds, more honest, and his voice softer for it. It's not a pleasant lie, but it's a pleasant truth, that Aizawa is hurt now and Hitoshi carelessly added to that pain, but Aizawa will be fine eventually. Probably not tomorrow.

And that makes two of them.

*

Saito swears under her breath when she pulls the file from the 8 Precepts raid, a hand over her mouth as she realizes what was *done* to her by that *brat*.

Confession. Forcing an honest answer. The kid's quirk requires a verbal response. This probably the greatest weapon of a quirk she's ever *seen*, ever *imagined*, and there's no telling what this kid could and *would* do with it, and he's used it on *her*. Eraserhead *let* him use it, and Eraserhead's allegiance to the Hero Commission has always been questionable, even before this wardship brought evidence of it to light.

But if this kid has *two quirks* now, and he's not suffering from the backlash of that, that means

there's a way to repeat that process. There's a way to create a Nomu without creating a monster, without killing the host, and a way to get *answers* for the Nomus that are locked up in Tartarus, trapped in that inhuman cognizance. There's a way to save every Nomu that's been made, including the ones they haven't found yet.

This is a goddamn *breakthrough*, and her name could be stamped all over it.

Could.

Saito looks at Cheerio, rubbing her face against her laptop aggressively, desperately affectionate after their usual weekend bonding had been cut off by that assignment to track down the ward in the mountains, after Hawks seemed unwilling to respond for whatever reason. Saito sighs, trying to catch Cheerio's bright blue eyes and try to remember that she shouldn't be *thinking* like that.

Sure, the kid will need to be moved to a facility where they can run tests on him, but that's only better for the case. Mind Slice can step in, easy, they'll know everything about this Miasma and take them down before Miasma can take another victim. *Hundreds* could be saved in just that raid, and then *thousands* saved by preventing Nomu attacks. They could cripple the League of Villains at least, but they could have a chance of taking them out too.

The work of heroes is flawed. All Might himself, the Symbol of Peace, couldn't last forever, and he didn't bring the crime rate down to zero. It might never be zero, but it could be lower. Every percentage that shrinks is a *million* citizens that aren't touched by violence.

Save the one. The one person I can see, who's right in front of me. Who needs my help, and I can help them.

That's *exactly* why the system is flawed. Saito has seen heroes posing with fans while on patrol, she's seen them help with groceries or save cats from trees. All the while, the world is burning down, there are *horrors* and violence they don't face or stop, and it just goes on.

She can't do anything about that. She's *quirkless*, which means she's born to be the best target. She has no chance to fight the wrong of this world, except in this, except for doing the paperwork and *triaging* the situation. Forcing heroes to look up from their idealized worldview and see that the world is *fucked*. They're needed elsewhere.

Every ward is a kid. Every kid deserves a better world than what they're born into. They can't *work* on case-by-case basis, they have to stabilize and move on. She's seen wards slip through the cracks, they aren't protected well enough by those increased patrols in their next home or they become the criminals that they once feared. There's only so much that a kid can see of a cruel world before they try to emulate it, and there's no way to insulate that with kindness once the poison has sunk too deep.

This case is the *worst* case Saito has ever been handed. A kid who was sold by his mother when he was four, spent eight years getting tortured and performing criminal acts for money, gets sold again and gets tortured *worse*. This kid was raised in the mire of this cruel world, there's really no hope for him. He'll be the worst of the lot when he gets out of his wardship.

Especially with this quirk.

"Cheerio," Saito calls, scratching her cat's chin to get her attention. She shouldn't be *wavering* with this, and that Togata kid doesn't know a *thing* about the real world. He's not even a pro hero yet, he hasn't graduated. He hasn't seen *shit* yet. "Is this still a kid?"

Saito *knows* it's a kid, Shinsou Hitoshi is 16 years old, almost half her age. She remembers being 16 and stupid, and she's sure this kid will never have that opportunity, no matter what she does. The kid's just a lost cause, he's *gone*, he's never going to forget what he's gone through at this point. He'd do a lot more good for the world as a labrat than he could ever accomplish on his own.

But when Saito tries to open a new email to report directly to the Commission of Wardship Affairs board members, to send it *right* to the top, she can't click the button to do it. It feels too heavy. She *knows* it's a life that she'd take.

Save the one. The one is right in front of her.

She closes her laptop instead, dropping her head into her hands while Cheerio moves on to rubbing against her wrists, still begging for attention. She's not *saving* the kid, and she's not really going to do him any favors. She needs more time to think, that's all, and she needs to get some sleep before she has to wake up for work. Report her findings.

Maybe 'saving' can mean just not killing the one.

Code Breaks

Chapter Summary

The Traitor's tale, from past to present, to future.

Chapter Notes

Uploaded as a bonus, as Shinsou does not make an appearance in this chapter.

Trigger Warnings: Graphic injuries (Not vividly described, but in the paragraph that begins with "She probably doesn't have that much time, though."), Internal monologue describing death beginning in the paragraph that begins with 'Delete Face stays for a long time' and continues until the POV break ****SPOILERS FOR THE WARY BELOW 'PREVIOUSLY ON'*****

Previously on Wards of UA: Hagakure was revealed to be the UA traitor, working with Shiori (Aizawa's hacker informant) and the League of Villains. During the first group chat with 1-A, Shinsou revealed that '27' was a 'name he's used more often than the other ones.' During 'Come on the Radio!,' Hagakure installed two chatbots - Midobot to track how many times Midoriya asked Shinsou to check their chat, and Bakubot that tallied each time that Bakugo swore, but it seemed to cause a severe error on every member's phone when Bakugo swore on the chat for the first time. Shiori will only work with Aizawa or Sansa. Aizawa asked Shiori for all of the Number reviews, and Shiori refused to give him more than two Numbers', out of fear that she would be killed to silence her. Shiori has a habit of referring to things as 'analog' or 'digital.' Aizawa has previously expressed irritation that he can't take down the online suppliers of his knock-off hero merchandise brand, 'Delete Face.'

*****SPOILERS***** (a fake out death)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's funny. She doesn't know why she did it, either.

She has an older brother who has been hospitalized all of his life. He has a lot of issues, and they're all incurable because he has a defective quirk, now completely resistant to quirk suppressants. While her quirk allows light to pass through her body, his absorbs it. And his body can't handle it. Even the light from inside night vision goggles can give him second degree burns.

There's only a handful of doctors in the world who have a quirk that lets them see in the dark, and they're all pretty useless.

It's funny, because she has no idea what her brother looks like. She's pretty much lived in his hospital room; her parents visit him every day and stay for hours, just talking to a voice in the dark. It's funny, because no one really knows what Hagakure looks like either.

It's funny. She's not more invisible in the dark, but she feels like she is.

It's funny, because her brother isn't the reason why she did it. There's not a magic cure that's too expensive to buy, because skin grafting would be comparatively cheap if they found a perfect donor. One with a skin-related quirk close enough to his so the graft won't be rejected, with the right blood type too. She's not helping her parents pay for his medical bills, because they obsess over their finances too much for her to hide it. She's not really making much money from this anyway.

It's funny, because she's always hated playing hide and seek. It's too easy to win, and there's no point in playing if you don't win. You hide, you wait for someone to find you. Maybe you move to a new spot to make it harder. It's funny, because she used to try to lose, and she still won.

It's funny, because her parents would sometimes tell her to play hide and seek with them, and then they wouldn't try to find her.

It's funny.

*

The funny thing about encryptions is that they're meant to be broken. Someone is supposed to find the message in the bottle, even if it's tossed into a current that leads to a deserted island. Someone has to find it and break it.

Her parents are relieved when she finds a website for encryption fanatics. She was 8 years old when they bought her first laptop, when they covered up the webcam with tape and enabled the parental controls. *Don't talk to people you don't know on there.*

It's funny, because that was probably the most concerned they've ever been about her, but she picked the tape off as soon as they left. It's funny, because they never checked.

It's *actually* funny, because the camera wouldn't be able to see her anyway.

She gets better at encryptions when she starts using programming languages. It's not just finding the right book and turning to the right page, scouring the text for the key. It's automated. It's effortless. It doesn't have to be a book.

She finds more websites like that, and finds people who meet on other websites to continue the encryption. A key hidden in a chat room, in the backend of a webpage. She spends enough time in those groups to remember their usernames when they post a challenge. She keeps track of the chat rooms they like to use, the websites. The keys. She imagines what kind of people they are in real life.

She's 10 years old when one of them finds her.

She told her parents that she was going to the restroom, and she's old enough to know that they know she doesn't need to leave to do that. But she's tired of spending all of her time in a dark room, talking to a voice she doesn't really know. And if they know, they don't care. And she knows that.

"Your encryptions are good."

Don't talk to people you don't know on there. She thought that she wasn't really talking to them, she was playing with them, playing games and they shouldn't have found her.

“But you don’t know shit about VPNs.”

Hagakure met Shiori. Shiori cracked a code Hagakure didn’t even know she made.

She doesn’t know a lot about Shiori. Shiori is older than her, old enough to live on her own, or smart enough to do it anyway. She spends her time hosting websites for encryption challenges. Shiori is good at solving them, it’s part of her job.

She didn’t tell Hagakure what her job was back then. Honestly, she never told Hagakure, but she gave Hagakure the keys to find out.

Shiori teaches her about internet infrastructure. Hardware. It’s not encryptions, it’s not hide and seek, but Hagakure likes it. She likes learning about it from Shiori.

Her parents don’t complain when Hagakure says she has extracurriculars and can’t visit her brother. The only key they pick up on is the smell of Shiori’s cigarettes on her clothes. Her mom asked her, *Are you smoking?* She said no. *Good, it’s bad for you.*

It’s funny, because her parents used to ask her how her day was.

It’s funny, because she used to ask them back. It’s funny, because they’d always sigh, and then talk about how stressed out they were, how horrible their day was, how her brother was doing. It’s funny, because she practiced coding instead of really listening.

If var.Hagakure_asks == “How was your day?”;

open(obj.Parent_Monologue)

Parent_Monologue.write(var.Sigh + “*Well, it’s been a day. Your brother needs to see that specialist and my boss won’t allow the time off, and we can’t really afford to have part of my salary reduced this month, thanks to the specialist...*”)

If obj.Hagakure == “Gets to leave”;

close(Parent_Monologue)

It’s funny, because even though they don’t talk to each other, she still rattles off information like a script gone wild. Just like they do.

It’s funny, because she’s the only one who knows it’s all filler. It’s the part of the encryption that’s supposed to be picked out and ignored.

It’s funny, because even people who don’t know about encryption know to ignore everything she says.

*

Shiori cracked it. The real code that Hagakure wanted to break.

They were trying to frankenstein three outdated and broken computers into a functioning one, and Shiori was purposefully making it harder by not testing the parts with a known good.

“Don’t force it, it won’t fit,” Shiori grumbles, taking the RAM chip out of her hand. “The slot is for DDR3, and this is a DDR4. They’re incompatible.”

“Oh!” Hagakure says, taking it back to press it more gently against the slot. She’s right, the notch

in the chip is close, but the slot's matching wedge is just a little bit off. "Jeez, it's so close, though! Why would they make them like that? The RAM sticks would still be compatible when it's operating, right? It's probably just a marketing ploy, there were probably a lot of competitors and they wanted people to have to buy-"

"What's your blood type?" Shiori asks, pulling the other set of RAM sticks out of the third computer. It was covered in cola residue when they picked it up, and the parts from it are the least likely to be salvageable.

"Type A!" Hagakure answers.

"What's your brother's blood type?" Shiori puts the sticks into the slot. They fit.

"Type B."

"Hook up the power supply."

Shiori wants to see if they can play HeroTube videos off of what they have now as a stress test. They have a spinning drive that sticks, and the RAM works but it throws errors all the time. The cola probably ate away some of the contact points.

It almost fits, but it doesn't. It doesn't work like it should, like they wanted it to. They should probably give up on it. Throw it away if they can. But they can't, they're just too busy to do that.

The videos Shiori picks are funny.

They're really funny.

It's funny, because when you're invisible, people can't tell whether you're laughing or crying.

*

Shiori doesn't always let her come over. She has work to do, and it's work that Hagakure can't watch her do. No one is supposed to watch it. Few people are supposed to know about it. It's secured, and she doesn't want to give Hagakure the key.

Shiori doesn't talk about the job postings on her sites. They're encrypted, and they're encrypted for a reason. Hagakure knows that.

She still takes the benign ones. There are some that she can do online. She's good at finding people. Google Fu. Unsecured street cameras. There are some that aren't online, but she's still good at them. Most security cameras don't register heat signatures.

Shiori doesn't talk about the job postings until Hagakure takes one that she deleted. It would have been harder to find out what it was asking for if the encryption wasn't so basic. A video game script that they copied and pasted, with the key at the end. It's stupid.

It shouldn't have interested her at all.

"I took that shit off for a reason," Shiori growls, the cigarette clenched in her teeth makes her sound more angry, but she's angry enough. For some reason. "Shit's *black*, Hagakure, and I don't mess with black. We're gray, and you're barely even that."

"It's fine! I couldn't pick which high school to go to anyway!"

*

Shiori didn't want her to take the job, but she still helped. Even if she didn't mean to at first.

Hagakure doesn't have a quirk that's offensive enough to take down robots, but she knows robots. She knows how to know that there will be robots, which websites to go to. What firewalls to break. Shiori knows how to break them.

Shiori knew how to make a screwdriver that would fry a processor chip but wouldn't fire on human skin. She also knew how to mess up the wiring so that it didn't work after the second fire. She knew that six points would put her in the Support Department, not the Hero course. Shiori probably wanted to know what they taught in the Support Department. Hagakure probably wanted to know that too.

But Shiori taught her to check her hardware whenever there was an issue. And she taught her about wiring too.

Shiori is the go-between after that. It was her idea, and the League accepted it. Shiori knows code, she knows encryptions. She knows the ones that are easy for Hagakure to crack, but impossible for anyone else who finds them. She knows hardware too. She knows wiring.

Shiori makes her a set of gloves before her first day of school.

*

Her gloves vibrate. Morse code, parsed through a Fibonacci sequence with her home server address as filler. It's one of the easier encryptions, probably because The League didn't give Shiori much time.

'Where are you?'

'USJ.'

*

It's funny, because Aizawa-sensei has to meet her parents at the hospital. He's still dressed like a mummy, he should probably be in a hospital bed himself instead of standing there talking to her parents and her brother in a pitch dark room.

It's funny, because he acts like this is normal.

Her parents don't care about USJ. *Oh, it was horrible, but Tooru is fine. I know that's due to the heroes on staff, like yourself. We still trust you.*

It's funny, because if Aizawa-sensei used his quirk on her brother, they could turn the lights on.

It's funny, because she could probably see her brother for the first time if he did.

It's funny, because he might not be able to use his quirk anymore, and it's her fault.

It's funny, because he only visits her family, and everyone else's parent-teacher conference was done by other teachers.

It's funny, because it's almost like getting caught.

It's funny. Because she's not.

*

Her gloves vibrate. Navajo morse code, parsed through the IP address that Shiori used to find Hagakure, with a song lyric that Hagakure really liked when she was 12 as filler. They've been planning this for a while.

'Where are you?'

She doesn't know, but she sends the last kilometer marker she saw on the highway back through a Fibonacci sequence with that same lyric as a filler. She doesn't have much time after it took so long for her to break the first code. It shouldn't have taken her that long.

She knew the solution before she started solving it.

"Hagakure, hold on to me if you get scared! We've got to show those Class B dweebs what Class A is made of!"

*

It's funny, because Ojiro doesn't even know code. He's terrible at encryptions. He's just honest.

"Hey, Hagakure. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah! Super duper! My favorite show just released a new season, and I'm SUPER pumped to binge watch it! Maybe I'll eat some ice cream too! Mic-sensei's essay is kinda kicking my butt right now."

"That's good," Ojiro says, and smiles at her. His eyes always meet hers, even if he doesn't know it. He doesn't know encryptions, he doesn't know tech, but he picks up on every parity bit that she leaves, if she leaves one. "You just seemed kind of down. If you want some help with that essay-"

No one else knows when Hagakure's down.

It's funny. No one wants to.

She doesn't want him to either, just because it's him. Just because it's her, the way she is now, the mess that she caused. The mess that she's stuck in. She's not gray anymore, and no one sees that.

She's almost killed everyone in her class - twice - and no one knows that.

It's funny. She doesn't know how to stop hiding. She doesn't think she can.

It's funny, because she's always invisible. She's always been hiding. And she can't stop.

*

It's funny, because Shinsou scares her more than Shigaraki.

It's funny, because they could probably be friends. When she looks at it from a distance, when she looks at how he is with Eri, she knows he's not a bad person. That might make them similar to one another, but probably not.

It shouldn't be surprising that she turned to the black, when she's lived half of her life in a pitch black room. People probably go crazy from that.

But she knows she's not crazy.

Shiori meets her on Club Penguin. They talk in better codes there. If anyone's monitoring what she

types, it looks like she's just chatting with a peppy friend about boys on a cute little game platform.

Don't mess with him. 27 is probably a Number. It's darker than black.

Shiori doesn't stop her from putting up a job posting. She wants to know what's darker than black, but no one can find out. They're all in the gray.

A black site gives her a name. 'The Miasma.' Even they warn her away.

The Miasma is darker than black. Shinsou is a part of it.

It's funny, because she might be darker than black too.

It's funny, because she's afraid of him. Not because she thinks he'll hurt her, or hurt anyone. It's because he might see her. He might be able to help her.

It's funny, because she's *scared*.

*

It's funny, because Hagakure already placed a tracking script in Shinsou's phone and everyone else's with the Bakubot. For fun, she told herself when she did it.

Hagakure wrote the worm with Shiori years ago, and put it in the server that controls the robots. Shiori sent The League Shinsou's location, because Hagakure didn't, and Shiori is the only person who can infiltrate her computer. Shiori didn't even tell Hagakure that they asked for it.

It's funny, because he was walking around with Eri when they attacked. He probably wouldn't have fought so hard if she wasn't there. He wouldn't have gotten hurt.

It's funny, because they said they wouldn't hurt him. They just wanted to *talk*. (She couldn't say *no*.)

It's funny, because it's cold, but she stops feeling cold. Standing naked in the snow can do that.

It's funny, because even when it hurts, she keeps staring at the blood in the snow, even after the robots clean it away. It's funny, because they still don't see her. They've never noticed that she watches them, every time that she can. (USJ.)

It's funny, because she doesn't know whose hands that blood belongs on. The Miasma, The League, Shiori's, Hagakure's.

Hers. She knows it's hers.

It's funny.

*

It's funny, because she always wanted Aizawa-sensei to be the one to catch her.

It's funny, because she always imagined he'd use his quirk on her, even if there's no reason to. Just to be poetic. When she's caught, when they see her, they *see* her.

It's funny how much she wanted that.

It's funny, because he's not even on campus, he's with Shinsou somewhere, so it's just Principal

Nezu, Midnight-sensei, and the police officers. It's funny, she never even thought that Midnight would be there, even though she has the perfect quirk to counter Hagakure's. Invisible bodies still make noise when they pass out on the floor. It's funny, because Midnight-sensei didn't need to be there.

It's funny, because everyone still looks at her like they're seeing her for the first time. Like they're *actually* seeing her. Like they're shocked that such a peppy girl could have such an ugly face.

Ojiro never believed she was ugly. He tries to stop them. She tells him not to. She tells him she's sorry.

It's funny, because she's sorry that she told him that she loves him. It's funny, because that was the only honest thing she's ever told him. It's the only honest thing she's ever told anyone. He made her forget that she's not honest, forget that she's code.

It's funny, because they didn't take off her gloves until they booked her at the police station. It's funny, because in the end, she only uses morse code. It's barely even a code to her now.

I'm burned. I'm sorry. Be safe.

It's funny, because Shiori already knows.

It's funny, because she forgot that Shiori puts a tracker on everything she makes. It's funny, because Shiori wouldn't have forgotten that.

They never needed codes. Shiori never needed to ask.

It's funny, and she doesn't know *why*.

*

It's funny, because even with all the shit she had to do first, Shiori still got there before Hagakure's parents.

They left to get a lawyer, but Shiori knows they're not coming back. That's fine. She's here. She's always been here.

It's funny, because she thought she'd be done with the kid by now. Long before now. '*Two weeks, tops,*' she told herself when she tracked Hagakure's IP and found it close to home. The kid picks up new encryption techniques so fast that VPNs would be nothing to her.

It was just supposed to be VPNs, just a little protection. She was drifting into the gray, and Shiori was supposed to keep her from getting stuck in it.

Now Hagakure's stuck and she's burned.

Shiori burns herself. Officer Cool Cat won't take the harddrive until she fills out the paperwork, so she does it. He looks at her after she hands it back to him, like he wants her to fill it out again, but differently. 'Shiori' isn't her name, but it's what everyone calls her, even Cool Cat. But there's not a space for usernames on paperwork, only legal ones.

She burns herself.

Delete Face doesn't even pick up when she calls, and for some reason, she always wanted him to be there. He's one of the better ones. He's always polite as shit when he needs something, because

she's reliable. She's reliable on the black, because she's gray, and they can ignore that.

They probably don't want her to burn herself, because she's reliable, because she's been at war with the black for years. She keeps the odds fair. She doesn't know if they have anyone else. It's fine, she brought goodies for them. It's a fair trade.

They don't have a drive reader. They have to call the tech guy. Shiori chats with the tech guy while they set it up. He's a Mac head and she hates him for it, but they can talk shit about everyone else in the room. He has helpdesk tickets, she has users who spam requests when their job doesn't get picked up. They're digital people.

That's why she stuck with Hagakure. They're both digital people *screaming* into an analog world. They want someone to notice the sound, but they don't make sounds. They make codes. Error codes. There's not a tech guy around to fix them, or even read them, so they just keep making noise.

She sent out one last code, one last scream. She told him it doesn't matter if he comes home, she won't be there. It's fine, he's too analog to read it, even when she screams at him. Even when she makes it easy.

It's funny, because Hagakure used to think she liked horse races because she used those sites for her encryptions. She told her that those keys were another code. If Hagakure ever cracked it, she never asked who Giran was.

Giran is in the black, has been for a while. She's been battling him for a while. That fight's over, and he's too analog to know it.

Giran brought her into the gray, just like she did to Hagakure. Giran left her out to dry, and she's not doing that to Hagakure. They like what they see on the harddrive, and that's why she made it. That's why she's had it ready ever since Hagakure took this job.

There's a boring city code that says she's not allowed to smoke in the station, but they like the harddrive enough for her to get five 'last cigarettes' while they comb through it. It's only fair, and it's a fair trade.

She should have listened to Giran when he told her not to pick up the habit. She wants another. They talk about the city code again. She knows they're getting close to the end of it.

Hagakure is facing 2 years in prison, even after adjusting for her age. It's not Tartarus, not anymore. But it *is* The League. It's *black*.

It's funny, because smoke is gray, but it probably burns black. Cigarette smoke starts off gray and gets lighter, the more it works into the air. If there wasn't any air, it would probably be black.

When you're in the gray, you have a little air, a little white. Good intentions, usually. Everyone has them.

She had good intentions with Hagakure, but look how that turned out. Hagakure was in the white, and now she's not, despite any intentions. Shiori doesn't just corrupt disks, and she knew that before she started it. Smoke disperses, she watches it happen every day, every hour of the day. More often if her tech is giving her shit.

Her tech is fine today. What's left of it. The harddrive is the only storage device that hasn't been nuked and shattered. She's burning a lot of people here, and most of them deserve it. She sent a message to everyone else before she took a sledgehammer to her web servers. It wasn't even in

code, so they know it's real.

She knows Hagakure is going to prison if she doesn't get that last cigarette. Shiori is burning herself, and she's burned herself pretty black with everything she knows about The League. But she can burn darker than black, if she needs to. If Hagakure needs her to.

"Numbers." That's all she has to say, really.

It's funny, because she works with a lot of numbers. Everything is numbers at its core, at its most basic operation. Bits. On and off. Pulses.

These Numbers are off. They're jumpy, they're scarred. Not a lot of people know about them, even in the black, because they're darker than black. Bad things happen to Numbers, and anyone who talks about them.

The Numbers themselves are kept analog, but people talk. The people that are alive complain about the jumpy ones. Numbers are rentable, so they have reviews. Shiori kept track of them, just in case, because she knows what's useful to keep track of. She doubts all of them have reviews, but the reviews she has are informative. Descriptions and quirks on most of them.

She gets that last cigarette. They're talking about how Hagakure was just answering questions that Shiori asked. Shiori asked her where she was and she answered. The gloves were just a fun project, Hagakure thought she was dialing into a test server. How was she supposed to know? She's young.

It's funny, because in the end, Shiori is the VPN. Hagakure went to the black, she dialed in, she was acting *stupid*. But she had protection. An alibi. It wasn't her address.

It's funny. It's funny enough that she laughs when she finishes that last cigarette.

They say cigarettes will kill you.

*

Hagakure's parents aren't going to pick her up. UA won't take her back. She's in limbo, in the lobby of the police station really, and that's how she was able to say goodbye to Shiori before they take her away.

They talk in code, even now. Even if it seems benign. It takes longer for Hagakure to parse it out, because the connection isn't that great in limbo.

Shiori left her hardware. Infrastructure. Hagakure doesn't know if she wants to take it. She doesn't know if she can. She's in limbo. She's burned, and she's not.

Shiori burned herself.

The League burned her back.

The police talk in codes, but she knows all of them. It was probably the blue fire quirk guy, they're talking about a lot of infrastructure damage. Engines exploding. Melted tires. Two police officers and a witness in transit that need to go to the burn unit of the nearest hospital.

It's funny. The police end up putting Hagakure in a hospital too.

It's funny.

It's really funny.

It's funny, because they think she can't stop *laughing*.

*

The medical guardianship for all of his students shouldn't still apply to Hagakure, but he doesn't mention that, and the nurse still allows him into her room.

Aizawa isn't prepared, and he knows it. He walks numbly down the hall, and tries to blame it on exhaustion. On shock. It feels like both.

It turns sour, when he sees his student the only way he's ever seen her, just by the clothes she's wearing. A white hospital robe with cuffs tying invisible wrists to the rails of a hospital bed. It's late, and she should be sleeping.

Aizawa already knows that she isn't, even if she doesn't move, when he sits on the chair beside her bed and still struggles to know what to say. Anything other than anger, anything other than empty promises he has no way of keeping. He *knows* Hagakure, he knows his student.

He knows she had the potential to be an excellent hero.

"57. 68. 79." A weak voice, shattered and thickened as evidence of crying, nearly makes Aizawa flinch. Hagakure knew about Numbers, possibly, she at least knew about the League. He doesn't know what she's trying to tell him, or if she can at this point. "20. 64. 69. 64. 6e. 27. 74. 20. 79. 6f."

Aizawa eventually realizes it, in the numbness, that this is a *code*. Shiori has muttered numbers like this a few times under her breath, while he was hovering over her work during incredibly time-sensitive cases. He still can't believe how he never saw this, how Shiori could be involved with his *student* this deeply. "Hagakure."

He still doesn't know what to *say*, any demand for answers would come out too harsh. He wants to know *why*, why she threw away her potential and committed herself to this farce. How she could have fooled him. How it felt to be that alone. "75. 20. 73-"

"I'm too 'analog,'" Aizawa says, swallowing down the bitter taste of that word, the next visit he'll have to perform. They're in the same hospital, not that they should know that. Whatever relationship they had needs to be broken, and should have been before it started. "To know what you're saying."

He hears a sharp gasp, and sees by the way the pillow shifts that Hagakure turns her head away from him. From her voice becoming thicker and louder, her breath stuttering, that she's crying now. "65. 65. 20. 69. 74."

It's a code that Aizawa doesn't know, and he can't ask Shiori about. Aizawa finds another one, one that he knows Hagakure knows, that she can answer to. If she doesn't want to talk to him, if clear conversation is something she's hiding from, he can sympathize with that.

He knocks on the wall, watching her shoulders flinch and rise up with the first one. Watching them tremble as he knocks out the first letter. 'Why.'

Morse code. Aizawa knows it. Most heroes do, at least for distress signals. Hagakure never let him know that she knew it too. Aizawa stops after that single word, when he wants to take it back and just ask for *something* else. Anything else from his student. "Meet me in the middle, kid."

Kid. Not his student. But still a kid who has lost someone important to her, who has lost every

semblance of stability in her life, even if it was gained under impure intentions. Her family not being here is only an indication of the answer as to why Hagakure slipped this far, why she would *do that*. She still shouldn't be here alone.

Aizawa should have seen it.

"W-why," Hagakure sobs, the cuffs around her wrists shifting as she pulls. The nurse said she hasn't been combative, just unresponsive. Laughing. Aizawa knows she's not. "Why didn't you... You *saw* it."

"I didn't," Aizawa says. Hagakure was never on his list. He suspected others, and he feels guilty for that. He *never* suspected his own students, he believed in every single one of them. He performed those parent-teacher meetings at the beginning of the year, he performed Hagakure's after USJ only because he was already in the hospital. Hearing her voice, how little he could in that dark room with her family, was at times the thing he clung to to push him forward into recovering and returning to work. His students were still there, still needed him.

Hagakure needed him to see how far she was falling.

"I'm sorry."

Apologies don't come easily to him, but he feels that he failed Hagakure greatly enough to deserve it. Hagakure is so *young*, how she could have gotten involved with this is a failure from every authority figure in her life, including himself. He had poured over her records once she passed the entrance exam, he selected her for his class himself. He should have known her better than she knew herself, he should have *seen* what she could become as a hero.

He didn't see it.

"Sh-she's dead," Hagakure whimpers, her voice hollow before the cuffs rattle with two more tugs, as she seems to try to fight the sob that follows. How she falls into that void of despair. "*She's dead!* I k-killed her, my only... She's the only...."

He should have seen it.

He should have seen it in that dark room, where Hagakure's family met to be together and united with her older brother. He thought afterwards, about how that might have inspired Hagakure to be a hero in both light and dark terms, how she would have wanted to stand out to her parents through her accomplishments and how she *needed* to be recognized for something. He tried to fill that void, as little as he could, and often wondered if she would be happier if her talents could be recognized in the Support Department instead. He thought that her growing confidence was measure enough that she had found what she wanted in the hero course.

She found what she thought she wanted, in the hero course. Being recognized by villains and criminals. She wanted more than a place to belong, more than a future. She wanted to be *seen* by anyone.

And that person was apparently Shiori.

"Shiori isn't dead," Aizawa says, a statement that could become a lie in minutes or hours. "I worked with her, she was my informant. I'll do everything I can for her too."

Now that the facts are laid out, now that he *knows* Shiori was involved and with whom, he sees the similarities. He knows he doesn't know Shiori as well as he thought, but he knows who she is as a person. They both needed help, and he didn't see it. They never gave him clear signs.

“She made her choices, and she’s old enough to make them. However much she was involved, she took that risk. You can still have a future,” Aizawa says, even if that’s also a statement that can become less true. Hagakure was working with the *League*, and Shiori’s current state proves how serious they are. Hagakure is at *risk* now.

And he can’t be the one to protect her. “Wh-what... Do I look like?”

Aizawa imagines this isn’t a question in the metaphorical sense. Hagakure has been invisible in that metaphorical sense since she was born, as the second child to parents who seemed to have higher priorities for another. Aizawa should have seen her in that sense, but in another, he’s uncomfortable to answer her. “I don’t know.”

He may have cancelled Hagakure’s quirk when she broke into Hitoshi’s room, but after recognizing that his *student* was in the room and thus naked, not at all the criminal assassin that he had expected at the time, he made it a *point* not to look.

But perhaps, this has been a question that Hagakure has had for some time. As a teacher, it’s his job to guide his students to those answers. And he’s the only one who can answer this one for her.

Aizawa looks around the room, and doesn’t see a convenient mirror, and pulls out his phone. He stands up, placing the phone in front of Hagakure before he activates his quirk, and sees what he expected to see. A teenager with brown hair, with tears running down her face that she can’t catch with her wrists bound like that. Another stifled sob that breaks when she looks, a sound that an *idiot* would think was laughter.

“I think it will look better in the future,” Aizawa says, even if he can’t see that. Even if he can’t see what that future holds, maybe the girl staring at her own image for the first time in her life can see it more clearly. Hagakure knows herself far more than anyone else in her life, but that has to change. She needs someone else to guide her towards that future, beyond what a teenager can see.

Aizawa can’t be that person.

*

Tatami didn’t expect to see her teacher up this late, but when she heard a voice outside their cabin, she had to investigate. Ms. Joke was just getting off the phone, and it must have been important, but Tatami takes advantage of already being up and out in the cold to drape her arms around her teacher’s shoulders, grumbling about being woken up.

“What? Already miss the sleepovers?” Ms. Joke asks, and Tatami just sighs loud enough to *possibly* be in agreement, words are something that are beyond her in this half-awake state. Ms. Joke just ruffles her hair, the angle awkward with how Tatami is clinging to her back. “Y’know how we wanted a ward of our own?”

Words are *not* beyond her now. “Who?! Are they cute?! Do we get a cute little kid to ourselves too?!”

Ms. Joke tucks her phone away, spinning around in Tatami’s arms with a finger already raised up. “All I know is that she *is* cute, and she’s ours, and even if that cute little face is covered in tears now, it’s our job to bring a smile back on that face!”

*

The League is shit at everything, so it’s no wonder they couldn’t even burn her right. Left her at a slow burn, she’s still dying, it just takes a while. It’s just irritating, especially with the nicotine

withdrawals. It's irritating, because she can't even look up and see if there's an oxygen tank over her head. It'd be funny if there was.

They set her up with a laptop. Her quirk is called something else, but she calls it Command Line, because she was tragically raised on Windows. When she was a kid, she could only send keystrokes, but now she can send massive scripts with her mind.

They hooked the laptop up to the guest wifi, even though there's no reason to. They're not digital people, or they'd know not to do that. Given enough time, she can connect to the secured network, get into the directories, into the root. She could probably knock out everyone's life support. It would take longer, but she could probably isolate it to her own.

She probably doesn't have that much time, though. 87% is a lot, and the parts that she doesn't have anymore are kind of important. Eyes, for example, tend to melt with enough heat. She was stupid enough to open her mouth, too. Screaming, probably. She doesn't really remember. Drugs can do that, especially the ones that they're pumping into her wherever they can. Wherever there's a port for it.

It's funny, because Delete Face finally shows up. He's the only analog person who knows that no one else will. "You never told me that you knew one of my students."

'I only tell you what you ask. And she was mine first.' Shiori's back to keystrokes, but she can blame it on the drugs. She doesn't have to wonder if she'll still be able to write scripts when she gets off of them. She'll be dead when she gets off of them.

"Was she your protege?"

'A lonely kid.'

That's the funny thing about tech. It doesn't work with loneliness. It never works alone. Most people think that tech heads are basement dwellers, that they isolate. That technology is isolating. That it even *works* when it's isolated.

It doesn't. A server without clients is a dead server. An ethernet cord that doesn't have a port is just...rope.

These drugs are *nice*.

'She'd be a better me. If she wants it. She wanted to be a hero, honestly.'

Hagakure never said that, but Hagakure doesn't have to say anything when she's honest. She probably doesn't even know when she's being honest, they're both so code. They've always been code, too much of it. Bad script. Shiori never meant to write so much of it.

'I fucked her up. Her parents did too. She's a good kid. Take care of her.'

"I should have seen it," Delete Face says, mostly to himself. He talks like that when she cracks a code he couldn't. She wishes that he cracked this one himself. It wouldn't have turned out this way if he did. But he's analog.

'Deathbed confession: I was behind most of those Delete Face vendors. You have a lot of fans in the gray. I made a shitton of money. Good hardware is expensive, you know.'

"Should've seen that too," Delete Face says. He doesn't laugh, but it's hard to laugh when you're looking at someone as charred as she is. She's kind of glad that she doesn't know what she looks

like. That she can't see it. She can't even feel it most of the time. "You're younger than I thought."

'Smoking adds 10 years.'

She's 23, but he probably thought she was in her thirties. She was 16 when they met, and he probably thought she was in her twenties. She'd been in the gray for a while by that point, enough to be useful, useful to a lot of people but very few heroes. She's always been useful to him. He's just so damn analog, he needed her help a lot. He's the only analog person that she didn't mind helping.

'You know what's funny?'

He just hums interest. It sounds muffled. He probably feels bad for her, he feels the worst for the young ones, but it's not like she had much of a life left to live anyway. It was always going to turn out like this, one way or another.

'I'm type B.'

It's not really funny. There's a cut off point for skin grafts, and she's past it.

She's hospice, which is a nice way of saying that they're trying to get her so high that she forgets that she's dying. If she pisses off a nurse, she might die a little quicker, and she kinda wants to do that.

She's tired of rebooting, of bouncing the box. Force quit. Kill command. Smother her hardware by holding down the power button. Flip the kill switch on the power supply too. Unplug her, but literally.

'Don't tell Hagakure that. She'll cry. And we've already said goodbye.'

Delete Face stays for a long time, but he isn't there at the end, and she didn't expect him to be. She's not alone, though, and she didn't expect that. Whoever is with her might have tried to hold her hand, but she doesn't feel it. Doesn't know how much hand she has to hold.

It's funny. When you're dying, you don't feel anything, but you feel everything. It's impossible to parse. It's not even slightly code, it's the *break*. A full void. 0's *and* 1's.

They're not lying about seeing your life flash before your eyes. It works even if you don't have eyes.

It's a joke, it's funny. It's fine.

It's fine, because Shiori doesn't have time to see her whole life. Just the best parts. Some of Giran. A lot of Hagakure.

It's funny, because she doesn't feel anything, definitely not the hand holding her hand. Her brain is exploding on dopamine and drugs, she couldn't use her quirk if she tried. She can't connect to shit right now.

She can't even tell if they're digital or not.

If they're digital, she wants to tell her that it's okay, that she's proud of her, always has been. Hagakure deserved better, always has, she's sorry. She'd be a fantastic hero. She'd sell her merch like crazy. She's so damn *sorry*. Shouldn't have let it get this far, and it's all Shiori's fault. Should have been better, less rotten. Hagakure still has a chance. Should connect to people. Tech doesn't

work alone. Tech can be honest.

If they're analog...

He's so fucking late, it doesn't even *matter*. Fuck his horses, fuck his smokes, and fuck the black. He set her up to take the fall, but he could have just *asked*. She wouldn't have said no. She still loves him. He needs to take better care of himself, stop smoking. He's getting darker than black and he doesn't even know it. She can't tell him. No home to go to. Don't pour out a beer. She's gray. He made her smoke. Just light one for her. It's funeral incense.

It's funny. She's so code that she's coding her own death.

Set Var.Breathing == False

wait(400)

#print("I love you both. So much.")

break

*

"I want out." She's honest, she can be honest. She can't be anything else right now, doesn't remember a *single* fucking code. Her wrists still burn from nearly ripping her skin off to get out of the cuffs, but she *knew* Shiori was here. Shiori was alive, because Aizawa said so.

Giran nods, he's still looking at her. There's a plastic tent around Shiori with one window. He doesn't let her look inside, and Hagakure doesn't know him. Doesn't know if he has the right to not let her. To tell her Shiori wouldn't want her to see.

She holds Shiori's hand through the plastic sheet. He tells her not to look when he lifts it up to put a cigarette between her fingers. She looked.

"You are," Giran says. His voice is lazy, gravely. They talk the same way, smoke the same cigarettes. There's only a few similarities, but they're there. They're enough. But they're so *different*. "It's easy, you're already...."

She'd hate him if he didn't have that vacant stare. The looseness in his body, like he's barely hanging by a string from the ceiling. Barely hanging on. She doesn't know what she looks like, but it's probably a lot like that.

He looks at her and laughs, but barely. "Stay in school, kid. I don't want to see you again." She doesn't want to see him either. She doesn't want him to see her, he doesn't have the *right* to. Shiori was trying to find him for years, he never showed up, she doesn't even *like* horse races.

School. She was in a school for heroes.

She's code. It's all she's known, all she's been. She wasn't a hero. Heroes don't know code, and they've never parsed her out. Not even Ojira. He doesn't know any code at all.

Code breaks. Heroes don't.

She wants to be a hero.

*

She's a *ward* now.

Maybe they didn't believe her when she said she doesn't know anything about The League. Maybe it's just because they know Shigaraki wants to take her out too, now that she's not plugged into UA. Maybe they want to see if Shigaraki will attack another hero school.

"What's with that look?" Ms. Joke asks, and Hagakure is *trying* to not blame her for it.

She's trying to do well here, she knows this is a second chance she doesn't deserve. She worked with *The League*, everything is her fault. She doesn't know how she was able to look Aizawa-sensei in the eye, she doesn't know how she'll be able to look at *anyone* now. Ojiro....

Ojiro probably hates her now.

She hates that the students that she took the Provisional Licensing Exam with already know her, that they have questions. Questions they don't ask, even if they still have them. Tatami talks to her the most, and Hagakure feels hollow every time she finds herself imitating her. Imitating how she was, how she used to speak. *Filler*.

She's tired of it.

She's tired of wondering if Aizawa-sensei knows how normal Ms. Joke really is, that even when she dresses like a clown and laughs and shouts all the time when she's in costume, at the end of the day she wears sweatpants and watches trash TV just like anyone else. But there's still something unnerving about how she is that Hagakure can't put a finger on. Maybe it's just because Ms. Joke has to keep her eyes on the *traitor*, she has to invite her to grab a slice of pizza and sit on the couch.

Hagakure has been fake, and she can spot a fake. She can spot the mask for the injection script. She thinks that's all it is when Ms. Joke asks her about tech, when she says she can't get rid of the notifications on her cellphone. When she sees Ms. Joke reading a book about 'Tech Lingo for Dummies' in the middle of the night, when Hagakure was just going to sneak into the kitchen for a glass of water.

Ms. Joke makes a lot of jokes, and they're all lame. That's probably a way to make the villains she takes down feel worse when she uses her quirk, because they laugh harder because they shouldn't be *laughing* at that. Ms. Joke tries to find a joke that works for Hagakure, and Hagakure laughs as fake as she feels.

This really isn't the end of it. This isn't what she deserves. She shouldn't have a place to go outside of a jail cell, she's a *murderer*. She killed the only person who ever *cared* about her because she just....

She just *wanted* someone to see her.

She didn't know what else to do, she knew no one really *cared*. Her parents stopped caring when they figured out she wouldn't save her brother, she wouldn't be the piece that puts him back together and takes him out of his hospital room. Shiori cared more than anyone else and she never *saw* that, she just saw the ceiling of her room driving her insane when Shiori said she couldn't come over, she couldn't see what she was doing. She *wanted* to.

She just wanted someone to want her there. Anywhere was fine. Anyone.

And now she doesn't have that. And it's her fault.

“Wait, wait, I’ve got one! Where do naughty hard drives get sent?” Ms. Joke asks, dashing out of the kitchen from where she was cutting up a pan of brownies, her finger raised in the air. She looks like she’s really excited about this one. “To boot camp!”

Hagakure laughs. It’s just a snort at first, and it catches in her chest, before the rest of it spills out. Almost like Ms. Joke is using her quirk on her. Almost.

“And now,” Shiori sighed and leaned back, throwing her legs on top of the monitor. “We’re in boot camp. Takes 10 freakin’ tries to get to the BIOS config, but I know that fan is plugged in, it’s fine, probably not registering for some idiot hardware update.”

Shiori always called it ‘boot camp,’ when she was working with an ancient OS that didn’t have UEFI. Shiori always seemed aggravated when that happened, stalling all the work she was trying to do. All the things she was putting off, all of her work, to show Hagakure how hardware could work and sometimes couldn’t. Troubleshooting.

She wouldn’t let Hagakure try, to at least take it out of Shiori’s hands so she wouldn’t get so aggravated with it. *“No, it’s fine. I’ll show you the system logs after this, we can take bets on how many times I’ve got to bounce this stupid box before I beat the OS. I’ll disconnect the hard drive if it really starts pissing me off.”*

She doesn’t know why Shiori didn’t just do that in the *first place*, BIOS would be the only thing that would *load*, it was pointless. *Why did Shiori get involved? Why did she die? Why didn’t she just let Hagakure-*

“Hey,” Ms. Joke says, sitting next to her on the couch with her hands on Hagakure’s shoulders. It’s fine, she’s just laughing, it’s funny, she swears she’s laughing. Ms. Joke looks at her like she *knows* and then wraps her arms around her, the soft band shirt catching Hagakure’s tears. “It’s alright. It’s alright.”

No one. *No one* knows when Hagakure is crying. It just sounds like laughter, that’s just how it works, no one has to *look* at her to see the difference because they *can’t*. She’s *invisible*, no one can see her tears. Laughter sounds like crying.

It’s funny, because it almost seems like they picked Ms. Joke, the Laughing Hero, because she *would*.

*

“It still doesn’t feel real,” Hagakure says, staring at that little diploma that’s rolled up in her hands, all dolled up and proper from her middle school graduation in that black uniform.

Shiori doesn’t feel even a speck of envy about it. She didn’t graduate but doesn’t need it, but she’s damn proud that Hagakure is going on to better things, getting better hardware to run her operations on.

“Graduating, moving into the dorms at UA. Getting into the Support Department, the *best* Support Department in the country.... You... know you didn’t really have to come though, right?”

Shiori tilts her head, knowing it’s a little pointless to try to look at Hagakure and try to see something on the surface to explain whichever thing she could mean by that. Invisible and all. But Shiori feels the chill of a fresh spring breeze wash over them, her neck and chin sweltering under the old scarf around her neck, and maybe it’s weird that she doesn’t feel it. Doesn’t have that kind of moment, like she usually does outside.

For some reason, she thought she did. She thought she panicked when she saw the sun, when she was standing in front of the threshold of her door. Sure, she had a backup plan to watch Hagakure's graduation through the surveillance cameras at her school, but she knew that her parents weren't going to be there, and if they were, it would just be quick enough to check it off their list. Not being there like Hagakure deserves.

"It's nothing, kid," Shiori says, as close as she can get to letting her heart jump right past her front teeth or something stupid like that, saying that she's proud. Hagakure wouldn't buy that shit, probably just feel icky hearing it as much as Shiori would saying it. Uncomfortable and all. "You wanna pick an ice cream place or something? You were telling me about that one spot. Now that..."

This didn't happen.

"I'm here..."

Shiori stops in her tracks, because she *remembers*. She got the ice cream delivered to her apartment after Hagakure's graduation, it melted and it was awful, and it was probably the sour cherry on top of her shitty day because Hagakure left on her own instead of getting chased out per usual.

Then again, they were still prissy at each other about The League and all, Shiori was trying to be the bigger person but she just wanted to *shake* Hagakure because *Shiori* isn't good at being the bigger person, and she knows it. She knows she shouldn't be anywhere near this kid, she shouldn't think that forcing Hagakure to consent to every attack on her class is some fucked up method of *mentoring*-

Shiori grabs the scarf around her neck and rips it off, doesn't know why her hands aren't shaking because they feel like they should. She doesn't know why she doesn't feel shaky at all in all this sunlight, this wind, this *open air*, but mostly she doesn't know what the fuck to *do* with this scarf.

She hasn't seen this scarf in years. The one Giran made her for Christmas. The one she lost when her whole life fell to shit and she had to leave everything behind, her legal name and Giran and having a home.

The one she *didn't* miss because *fuck Giran*, and she'd drop it on the ground and stomp on it if she could trust herself to move right now. Because she knows that she doesn't know what the *fuck* is going on.

But she's pretty sure she *fucking died*.

"*Not* quite!" Hagakure says, hopping right beside Shiori with way too much pep in her step and her voice, it's almost mocking how grating it is. "Like, don't freak on me too much, but you definitely *were* going to die, and it kinda medically happened? Not sure how much you remember right now and it's probably not cool beans to try to remember-"

"You're *not* Hagakure," Shiori says, glaring at a skippy little pipsqueak who's *trying* to wear Hagakure's invisible mug, but Hagakure *sure as shit* has never said 'cool beans.'

"True, fair. Does it bother you if I keep wearing this illusion though? It'll be more fun for you to guess who I am when we all gather around the water cooler," Not-Hagakure says, still kicking her legs around like legs are new, while that attempt at Peppy Talk slows down until it's normal person talk by the end. "So, don't freak out too much, but you're a little dead. At least, legally. Kind of in a coma and all too, getting some *very* specialized treatment right now. Something about a wax pit, a pretty special healing quirk is on reserve for you. You can't see it right now, but it kind of looks

like that American movie with Angelina Jolie. ‘Wanted,’ I think?”

“Never heard of it,” Shiori says, because she’s not big on movies but this guy talks like he is. Now that he’s talking with his real voice, which is still pretty weird to know is attributed to this illusion of Hagakure.

“Well, I’d say we could catch up sometime and watch it together, but you’re going to be pretty busy, doing some real great work. You definitely aced an interview before that League of Villains stepped in, definitely caught our eye. Doing important work for us, gathering intel, that’s kind of my department,” Not Hagakure rambles on, and now that he’s using what’s probably his real voice mixed with a little drawl, Shiori thinks he’s mostly kicking Hagakure’s legs because he can feel the skirt somehow, or something.

This is all pretty weird, definitely some kind of quirk. It’s *weirder* because some pervert is dancing around in Hagakure’s skirt and she can’t kick him out-

“One, I’m not a pervert, but there’s this weird little attachment thing you have going on about your own memories in a skirt like this, and I’m trying to figure it out without going too deep. Two, definitely my quirk, *great* detective work right there,” Not Hagakure says, but stops dancing, starts talking a little more in Shiori’s language with the way he’s getting all bitter and snappy.

So, he gathers intel, and apparently *she’s* going to be gathering intel, she’s probably been gang-pressed into service for some shadowy organization and that’s unfortunately *not new*.

“Okay, we’re taking that... pretty well, I guess. Sure, you won’t be going outside much here, but that seems like a bonus for you. Like I said though, healthcare, room and board, we get recreational time for an hour a day starting out, until you get close to retirement like me. I guess to be fair, since I am invading your brainstem and all, I can get a little sappy and say I hope we’ll be friends? On the other side? I’m not really supposed to pop in on ya without authorization, but a buddy of mine is going to be away for a while and I’m already feeling lonely,” Not Hagakure keeps rambling on, and maybe the dancing was better than all this *talking*. “Have you ever seen ‘The Cell’ with Jennifer Lopez? It’s another American movie.”

“Nope,” Shiori says, rolling her eyes because this is going to get old *quick*. If she wasn’t trapped inside her own hardware, she’d probably have force quit this conversation, but there’s no escape. “I’m going to wake up in one of those places, aren’t I?”

‘Those places,’ the void that’s more than analog, where quite a few people she’s known have dropped off and gone dark. Shiori was born on the edge of society, a kid that no one wanted, growing up in a government-run childcare institution, and she’s seen kids that fall off the edge and don’t get found.

Fucking figures, she’s been waiting for this day to come for a while. Trying to live in the gray is close enough to black before this year got started on a shit foot thanks to The League. For some reason, she thought there’d be freedom in dying.

“A *great* detective,” Not Hagakure says, nodding her head with a little bounce of the bow holding her ponytail together. “But remember, you’ll be doing good work. I can already see how we can help you out with a lot of projects you left unfinished, you’ll be a great asset. In this digital age, you’ll probably be another me.”

There’s a way he says ‘another,’ that almost sounds like ‘better.’ That mostly sounds like ‘the next,’ which means replacement. And Shiori sure as shit doesn’t like how a guy with a middle aged voice talks about how he’s close to ‘retirement.’

“But for now, it’s all a dream. It’s your mind palace, and I’m just visiting,” Not Hagakure says with a shrug, then turns to look further up the sidewalk, even if no one’s there. Figures, Shiori would imagine she was there for Hagakure’s graduation, but wouldn’t fill the streets up with people so it’d be believable. It’d just be her and Hagakure. “And, I think this visit is coming to an end. I won’t be able to say it on the other side, but I think we’ll get along. I think it’ll be worth your while. And I’ll be laughing at whatever face you make when you figure me out.”

Not Hagakure shrugs again, and then just disappears, right in front of her eyes. Shiori can’t feel the spring breeze, she can’t understand why she’d be standing out here. If this is her ‘mind palace,’ that sounds like some way to dream. She heard some shit about lucid dreaming, but never slept enough to try it.

Might as well, now.

Shiori’s back in her nicest apartment, the one she’s been able to keep for a few years because she has a lot of shit on the landlord. She only pays rent because she doesn’t want him to get any ideas about tearing up a lease that doesn’t exist between them, when this apartment is listed as ‘uninhabitable’ on his records.

Shiori looks at Hagakure, without looking at her job boards for once, and takes the damn smoke out of her mouth to ash it. “It’s fine! I couldn’t pick which high school to go to anyway-”

“You’re better than this,” Shiori says, and even when she knows it’s not real, even when she knows this doesn’t make a *single fucking difference*, and it’s just *stupid*, she feels her heart crawling out of her damn throat and it chokes her up all the same.

Figures, she’s a sobby fucking wreck even in her own mind, when she gets like this.

“You go that far, and you’re going to regret it. I shouldn’t have started it anyway, Hagakure, I shouldn’t have gotten involved with you at the start,” Shiori says, and she can’t look up from her fucking *ashtray*. Like it’ll really break her damn heart to see Hagakure leave like she should have when it’s all a fucking *dream*. “You’re meant for better than this, you’ve got so much damn *talent* and *goodness* inside you, and there’s not a damn thing you’ll find that will make you feel better if you go down this road! There’s no one there who will see it!”

Shiori knows that Hagakure is past the point of seeing the warning signs, she’s too young to see them yet beyond chasing that feeling of being *wanted*, of being seen, of having *friends* that see her, but they’re not *fucking friends*. Shiori spent years thinking Giran was the best damn thing to happen to her, even *after* he fucked her over, but there are *friends* that are *friends* and don’t need Hagakure to do shit to recognize who she is. She’ll become something she’s *not* if she keeps going down this road.

Shiori became who she is, but she had shit chances from the start, crawling to the top of the bottom in her own little niche was the best it was ever going to be. But Hagakure deserves *better*.

“I just wanted you to see it,” Hagakure says, and this isn’t some fucking *dream palace* because that’s not on script, that’s not what Shiori wants to *hear*. “I don’t care about The League, or high school, or anything else. I just want to hear that you’re proud of me. I just want to be with *you*.”

Shiori chased her out of the apartment right after this, because she was pissed and because she had a favor from Eraserhead to make good on. She could have *fucking stopped it right there*, she *knew* he worked at UA. Hagakure hadn’t even taken the entrance exam yet and Eraserhead could have scared the *shit* out of her then.

But she didn't. Because she didn't want to burn another bridge that meant *everything* to her. She didn't want to lose Hagakure.

"Then be with me. Not them," Shiori says, and forgets that it's a dream, her room almost blips into what it could be if this was real for a second.

She'd clean up her space if Hagakure lied to her parents and said UA already had dorms, knowing they wouldn't check, and Shiori lives in Mustafu so it would be a shorter bus route. At first she sees a hardware project that she knows is for a Support Department exam, but changes it back to Hagakure's gloves, they're both working on it at her desk. Trying to figure out how to fit a full toolkit in there, because Hagakure is a hero that's *more* than invisible.

"We'll figure this shit out, I'll be a better friend, just don't *do this shit*, Hagakure," Shiori says, and she feels it like a command sent through her quirk, that dull pop in her skull that almost sounds like a dial tone, she almost convinces herself that it's *real*.

But it's not, because Hagakure isn't there, her uniform isn't standing up straight in her apartment, just like she left like she did in real life.

Because this is real life, and she'll still never see Hagakure again. Gang-pressed and all, she's alone.

Like she's been, and probably deserves to be. Corrupting everything she touches and all. Good luck to the shadowy goons when she wakes up and has to do 'good work' for them.

Shiori imagines another smoke, because the tingle of nicotine buzz is something she can imagine, not that she experiences it much anymore, and tries to think in the time she's got, locked in her own cranium until they wake her up or some shit. 'Good work,' 'unfinished projects,' 'intel gathering.' 'Mind palace.'

Eh shit, doesn't really matter right now, but if she can keep saving kids and fuck with Giran from beyond the grave, it sounds like a pretty good afterlife. Hopefully she'll wake up with eyes, even if she does most of her work blind, without monitors to reflect her quirk's actions.

Then again, with her quirk, it'll be hard to keep her in place, won't it?

Chapter End Notes

For those in the comments and discord, I did intend to kill an OC in this arc, and it was always meant to be Shiori. But, I found that I liked her a little too much after writing her backstory, which will also be uploaded to Ao3 along with a chapter as a flashback to Hagakure and Shiori's relationship before Hagakure applied to UA.

The numbers that Hagakure tells Aizawa are a code, Hexadecimal conversion to be exact. It's also relevant that the '#' in front of a print statement makes that line into a comment, meaning that command wouldn't be performed in the code that Shiori mentally writes.

Also, if you want more Shiori content, such as her backstory and a flashback chapter with Shiori and Hagakure's friendship, you can check out Troubleshooting in the Wards of UA series here!: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/26619751>

What You're Packing

Chapter Summary

Winter break begins suddenly at UA, as Aizawa attempts to be the steady presence that his students need, he's undeniably affected by the events that have unfolded, from Hagakure's expulsion to Shiori's death. Shinsou and Yamada struggle to reconnect when they both have revelations they'd rather hide from each other, but Mirio's renewed confidence draws him to reach out, and Aizawa makes a horrifying discovery after Shinsou is left unsupervised for too long.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Disturbing imagery in Aizawa's nightmare (including maggots), Mentions of Bug sessions,

Previously on Wards of UA: Aizawa believes that Shiori is dead. Aizawa learned about the torture that Shinsou went through from Bug's quirk during the cabin weekend. Aizawa repeats his current class roster as a grounding mantra when his PTSD symptoms flare up. When Ms. Joke gave Shinsou a splint and crutch for his sprained ankle, she said that Shinsou should be on bed rest and Aizawa should wear a tux and trim up his mustache to take care of him while looking like a butler. Shoji's little sister Mizuno is the first friend Eri has made that's around her age. Shinsou's mother, Shinsou Ui, will be facing charges related to selling Shinsou to The Miasma when he was 4 years old, and thus will likely not be able to take custody of him after the wardship is over. When 127 attacked Shinsou, Mirio was there and tried to convince Shinsou to run to safety, but Shinsou used ConfessionWash to make Mirio leave in order to keep Mirio from getting hurt. Shinsou has multiple quirks now due to being fused with Chisaki and Nemoto during the raid on the 8 Precepts of Death, and Mirio was present when Chisaki fused into Shinsou. Shinsou had planned on wearing a Lemillion shirt when he had to meet with Chisaki for the investigation. When Shinsou and Eri were still at the 8 Precepts, Shinsou would steal vanilla-scented soap for Eri to use, since they only had bleach provided by Chisaki. Earlier in the wardship, Shinsou was convinced that Mirio only wanted to use Eri for her quirk, and considered killing him to protect Eri, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Shinsou had been cut several times in the fight between himself and 127 that followed after 127 forced the mask on Shinsou's face again.

Aizawa knows where he is. USJ.

He doesn't feel the pain, but he feels how his limbs are trapped and unresponsive, he feels the pressure around his head. He looks and he can't see Shigaraki, the central plaza seems barren at first glance.

But then he sees her, standing in that pool, alone. Hagakure.

“Why didn’t you see it?” Hagakure asks, her arms bare and invisible from wearing her school uniform without the blazer, but he imagines they’re pulled in front of her chest. He can see her face, as though he’s always been able to see it. He sees the tears running down her face. “Now, now I can’t...”

*She can’t. Not now. Her potential, however much she didn’t see it at the time, he **did** and there’s nothing for it now. She can’t become a hero with this stain on her record.*

“And Shiori.”

Aizawa looks towards the rasping sound, even when he feels how much he doesn’t want to like a boiling heat inside his body. Shiori, not as she should be, laying on the central plaza covered in leaking gauze without even a hospital robe for decency. A sight he can’t forget, however little he could stomach to see in that hospital room.

“I’m type B,” Shiori says, in her own voice, a voice she can no longer use, a piece lost to an inferno that still left its mark in his dream. “I could have turned out different. All this shit could have been avoided, Delete Face. You just didn’t see it.”

*He sees it, and he fights to break the Nomu’s hold on his limbs, he fights to turn his head away but he feels that the Nomu has them too, rotting hands holding his wrists and his head are **squirming** with the same small maggots crawling from under the oily gauze wrapped around Shiori’s body.*

“Don’t blink,” Shiori says, in a tone she never used with him, solemn as it is pleading and desperate. “Don’t blink, you’ll miss it.”

*“Shinsou!” Hagakure screams, and Aizawa **doesn’t** blink despite the burning, despite the fruitless thrashing in the Nomu’s hold, but he turns his head just enough to see Hagakure with her hands held to her face in a silent scream, her fingers clawed with desperation. He follows her gaze to see Hitoshi standing in front of him.*

His arms bleeding, the skin ripped away from his scars. Like they were before. His eyes glowing. “You’re too late.”

*Aizawa tries to find the words to say, to argue that he’s not, to fight the static in his skull and the Nomu’s hold on him, to fight the burning in his eyes and only finds himself able to gasp, dragging each breath quicker than the last, his mouth open for it, but he feels his tongue **twist** like it’s no longer his tongue, it’s a **maggot**-*

“Shou, baby-”

Aizawa throws himself back before he even feels the bed below him, or recognizes his husband’s voice or words. He only remembers both when he’s sitting on the floor, feet pressed to the carpet, a sting in his shoulder where he might have hit the nightstand. Still trying to catch his breath, collect himself enough to realize it was a nightmare, and lock up every piece of it that still remains in his mind.

He bends his head forward, towards his bent knees, bracing his arms against his thighs in a bid not to look at Hizashi yet. It’s been months since it was that bad. “I... packed your medicine, right?”

*Aizawa nods, even if he has to hold his breath, even if he has to feel **angry** at himself for being **afraid** to speak. Afraid to find that his tongue was a maggot, like in that horrifying dream. “Skipped the dose. Night before last. Probably why.”*

He knows it's not. He knows missing a single dose wouldn't bring back these nightmares this vividly, but the medicine isn't meant to stop them entirely. Just make it less likely that he'll have nightmares, make the nightmares themselves feel less terrifying. If the medicine is taken along with a regular sleeping schedule.

Which Aizawa will *never* have. "What time is it?"

Aizawa finally risks looking at his husband, only able to because his still electrified nerves seem to convince him enough that asking for the time is a good enough shield to hide from the questions he knows his husband has, how much he wants to talk about it. "7:30, but Nezu went ahead and cancelled classes for the week. We'll just start a week earlier after winter break. Homeroom teachers are supposed to be on dorm duty today, in an hour."

Hizashi looks up from his phone, his concern too apparent now. Aizawa still forces himself not to look away. Not to blink.

"You can let me handle it. My schedule is cleared, and I got along swell with the herolets over the weekend," Hizashi says, and Aizawa barely opens his mouth to argue before his husband predicts the argument. "I know, you feel like it has to be you, and it can be. But you can take a day for yourself to be there for them tomorrow."

Aizawa shakes his head, dropping to brace his forehead against his arms. "It has to be me. *For* me."

He won't be able to put it to rest until he sees them with his own eyes, until he sees all of his students in whatever state they're in. Until he meets them where they are.

When he can count off every name on his attendance sheet, he can begin to forget the one who won't be on it when winter break ends.

"It was a bad one this time," Hizashi says, and Aizawa imagines that the Nomu's hold on him wasn't *just* in his mind. It's rare, but when it's 'bad,' his body tries to fight before his mind wakes up from the nightmare. He's lucky that he married a pro hero with good enough reflexes, that he's never made a bruise he'd *never* forgive himself for putting on his husband.

Aizawa lifts his head slowly, taking in the tangled mess of the bed, Hizashi's worry still wordless but no less present. It's the same familiar question that Aizawa can't bring himself to answer, he can't bring himself to *talk* about it. To describe the nightmare that trapped him inside his mind.

There's another nightmare, one that's not in his mind, but still present in that one. He hasn't told Hizashi everything about what happened in the mountains, everything that Hitoshi told him. The oatmeal diet seems *far* easier to tell Hizashi than the other torment, one that Aizawa can't put to words himself. Not when he only hears it in Hitoshi's voice when he tries. *B-Bug's maggots*.

But he has to find those words. He can keep his own secrets from his husband. But not secrets about his ward. "Hitoshi told me more about what he had been through. At Miasma."

Aizawa looks at his husband one last time, before he finds a spot on the mattress to stare at when the words come to him.

Even if he has to say it, he has to look away.

*

Hitoshi wakes up alone, in his own bed instead of Eri's, to the sound of a door opening down the

hall. With his eyes barely open, his face somewhat burning and too sensitive from sleeping on his stomach, he pulls his phone from the nightstand to check the time. He's slept for about four hours.

He pulls himself out of bed, and puts on whatever clothes his hands fall on when he reaches out. Black pants that feel tight around the waist, and a gray turtleneck knitted sweater. He should leave to brush his teeth, comb his hair, help Yamada make breakfast, but he doesn't.

He doesn't want to see Yamada right now.

It's frustrating, how much it's *frustrating*. He feels like he barely has skin when he's around Yamada, he feels too *raw*, too seen. He feels like Yamada already knows, because at this point, he's sure Yamada knows. Aizawa probably told him everything, especially about how Hitoshi can speak freely now.

Hitoshi knows that when he opens that door, Yamada will look at him and expect that. Expect Hitoshi to talk to him, because he can, even if he *can't*. He can't bring himself to do that to Yamada, to change *everything* so drastically and in such a terrifying way, it makes his gut twist at just the thought.

Hitoshi has to unpack from his trip, in order to use his backpack for school, so that's what he does instead with his extra time. His laundry basket is empty, but he puts the folded up clothes he used on his trip in there, including the hoodie that had been in his stash, still crusted with blood. He puts 50 back on her rightful place on his desk, right beside the picture of Eri. Just in case he didn't come back to UA, he wanted to make sure he kept those things.

Now he's back, and his room feels more strange than it did before he left. He still feels like none of these things are really his, not the books on his shelf or the cat figurines on his desk, or the laptop. Or the troll doll that Bakugo altered to look like him.

Or the cat keychains.

There's so many things that aren't really his, that were gifts, that are pieces of other people, and just looking at them *sickens* him. He doesn't want any of it, he doesn't *need* any of it. His room is too cluttered now.

Hitoshi kneels on the floor, to pull out his stash box, the black metal lockbox that Yamada bought for him to keep even more useless connections inside and out of sight. The key for the lock is always beneath the box, just in case anyone wanted to root through his things again and mock them like Hari did. He'd know if the key was moved.

It's never been moved, it's still pressed into the carpet like it should be.

Hitoshi picks it up, unlocks the box, and starts cleaning up.

The troll doll is the first thing, but the keychains are next. The notebooks and pens that he got are still useful, and he doesn't know who got them for him, so they don't bother him as much. But the books that he knows the 1-A students got him, all of their little trinkets, and all of the useless and horribly well-suited gifts that Quirk Thief has gotten him this month that have been stuffed under a corner of his mattress also need to go.

He keeps forgetting things, until he sees them, because he's been lazy recently with his collection. A wrapper from a snack that he got when he went to Yamada's radio show one weekend that was just sitting on his desk, one of Eri's hairbands that she had dropped on the floor in the hallway and he hadn't put back rests on his nightstand. He looks in the drawer in his desk and finds more

useless things, like the recipes from Mrs. Midoriya, and her phone number that he can't call because he doesn't have a SIM card. He puts all of those things where they belong, in his stash box, before he locks it.

He puts it by the door, so he can get rid of it when he has to leave, but he hopes Yamada goes back to his room for some reason so he won't be there when he gets rid of it. He knows Yamada might be disappointed that he doesn't want the box, and maybe he should keep the box for that reason, to not offend Yamada. But everything inside of it needs to be thrown away.

He can't *stand* it in his room anymore, and the stupid feelings of attachment to the *trash* worst of all need to be thrown away too. This is the way to do it.

He only keeps what he knows is useful, like the headphones that Mandalay gave him. He knows it's stupid to not want to use them, even though he was so irritated that he couldn't on Friday because it would have 'ruined the surprise' of the training that Aizawa planned.

The surprise that came after the training, 127's visit, shouldn't be the reason that he doesn't want to pack the headphones to listen to his lectures. He just knows that the hero students might bug him because they haven't seen them, because they're stupid enough to *forget* that he doesn't want anything to do with them.

But he packs them, because that's the reason, and he doesn't care about what they do. If they're stupid, then he'll have to say it again, more slowly for them. And if there's another reason that he doesn't want to use these headphones, he's going to have to get over it, because it's a stupid reason.

He finds the knife that he almost forgot about at the bottom of his backpack when he does, and clips it to the inside of his waistband like he usually does. Like he *always* did, until Aizawa found out about 50, and then he stopped carrying his knife as much. He felt like he didn't need to. He hadn't even moved the knife from his drawer in almost a month, until Friday when he packed it. *After* he was attacked.

And he's not going to risk getting caught off-guard like that again. Even if Aizawa says he's not going to be alone, he's not going to be unescorted, he would be stupid not to have the knife anyway.

Hitoshi flinches when the door opens, when he knows it's Yamada coming in to ask why he was still signing to him if he could talk and what kind of disrespect he means by that, but instead, Hitoshi sees that it's Aizawa, and he shouldn't be awake this early. "You're up early."

That's honestly the *stupidest* thing that anyone has ever said to him, and Hitoshi barely knows how to respond to it. "It's a school day."

"It's not," Aizawa says, before he closes the door behind him, glancing at the stash box before he looks at Hitoshi again. "Winter break has started early. School won't be back in session for a month, which means I'll be spending more time at the 1-A dorm. I'll be there all day today, and tonight."

Which is *almost* meaningless, because Hitoshi doesn't care *where* Aizawa is or what he's doing, but if he's at the 1-A dorm and Hitoshi isn't, that means he's basically '*unescorted*.' Free to live in peace because of that.

"Which means that I'm trusting you not to run off like you did last night," Aizawa says, like he has a mind-reading quirk. "You shouldn't walk without the splint either."

Hitoshi rolls his eyes, walking to his bed and pointedly putting his weight on his injured ankle just to spite Aizawa. He's supposed to 'heal on his own.' It's *stupid* and *irritating*.

"If you need anything--"

"You won't be there," Hitoshi interrupts, running a hand through his hair while he glares at the closet. "I'll need someone else to look stupid in a tux."

That might have been a step too far for some reason, because Aizawa's feet shift as he shifts his weight, and out of the corner of his eye, he can see Aizawa's arms cross in front of his chest. "Why aren't you talking to Hizashi?"

A question. A question that Hitoshi doesn't want to answer, and it's almost *more* irritating because of that. "Make me."

It's too easy to keep him from talking, they either have the mask still on hand or they saw enough of it to know how simple it is to make. Just two bars under his chin, held on his face by the top part that rests above his cheekbones and nose, a metal band around the back of his head to hold the entire thing in place. It's *easy* to make sure he can't talk.

It's impossible to force him to talk, and Aizawa knows that.

"I was asking what your reasons are--"

"I'd rather you didn't," Hitoshi says, wondering in the back of his mind how far he can push today while he reaches over to get his phone, to wonder if the hero students have said anything about him in that chat, or if they even have it anymore. There's another chat where he's not included, and they've probably gone back to it.

He's just curious about whether they have, and he's not afraid at all that he's pushed too far already. Aizawa is back at UA, back in his place of strength, and all those things that Hitoshi got away with during the weekend could be punished now. *Easily*. "We'll talk later, then."

Hitoshi doesn't look up until he hears the door close, until he knows that Aizawa is gone. Leaving. To go watch the hero students all day and all night, and basically be gone that entire time. He can hear him open Eri's door, probably to tell her the same thing, maybe invite her to go with him if she's upset by it.

Not that he invited Hitoshi. Or that he would think to do that.

The groupchat with 1-A is missing from the app now.

*

Ojiro heard the knock on his door. He saw the message in the groupchat, and the text message from Iida to gather downstairs in the common room for whatever speech Aizawa wants to make about Tooru.

Hagakure.

It takes a while to work up the nerve to pull himself out of his bed, not that he's slept much despite not leaving his bed. Ignoring all of the knocks on his door, and the messages from his classmates who hadn't paid this much attention to him all year, compared to the last 48 hours. Or however long it's been.

He should probably keep track of how many hours have passed since his girlfriend was arrested under the suspicion that she compromised the security system at UA leading to a villain attack that wounded four people. Especially because if Aizawa is making a speech about it, it's probably more than just *suspicion*.

Ojiro doesn't notice until he's halfway down the stairwell, that he's still wearing his pajamas. It's probably not what he should be wearing, but he doesn't trust that he'll leave his room again if he goes back to change.

When he opens the door, he finds he's not the only one still in sleepwear. Only a few others besides Iida are wearing their school uniforms, even if the news that winter break was starting early came a while ago. Maybe yesterday. He doesn't really remember.

Aizawa looks at him, because he's the last one to arrive, and it shouldn't feel so easy to not care about disappointing his teacher. But Ojiro takes his place next to Shoji, on the edge of where everyone is gathered, some sitting down but most standing.

Aizawa looks tired, but he actually shaved, which he only did when he was a part of that press conference after the summer camp incident. Maybe he had to have another press conference about Tooru.

Hagakure.

"Your first year as students at UA has been unique," Aizawa says, and Ojiro fights not to let his eyes glaze over. He knows Aizawa won't give them a long winded, flowery speech about how they need to pull through despite that, but just listening to his voice is exhausting. "There has never been a class at UA that has been targeted and attacked by villains like you have. From the beginning of the year with the USJ incident to the summer training camp. The League of Villains has placed a heavy burden on you."

It doesn't feel like that, most of the time. Ojiro hasn't been 'targeted' the same way other students were in those attacks. He wasn't kidnapped like Bakugo. He didn't get nearly disintegrated like Asui.

"That, along with the incident Friday night, was due to a spy who enrolled at UA to leak information needed to orchestrate those attacks," Aizawa says, and Ojiro feels his blood run cold, the first thing he's really felt since Tooru was taken away, before he even says it. "Hagakure."

Pft, 'Hagakure' sounds like a loogey. I really don't mind if you call me Tooru. His tail thrashed so bad and his face *burned* when he said she could call him by his given name too, before he had the nerve to *say* the things that were still true at that time.

That might still be true. The things he still feels, even when he knows it only rips him apart. "Hagakure was your classmate, and I don't expect this transition to be easy for any of you."

"She really did that," Bakugo says, almost like he's laughing, but too bitter for that. Like he's the only one affected by it, he's the only one who was kidnapped so he's the only one suffering now. He never said a word to Tooru except to hiss and growl and call her an 'extra.' "You're saying that bubblegum chewing preppy little *bitch* really-"

"Dude," Kirishima hisses, and Ojiro almost feels the eyes on him. Almost. He knows they're there. He knows it doesn't matter.

"At this point, law enforcement is only certain of her actions, not the degree of her culpability,"

Aizawa says, crossing his arms in front of his chest like he's daring anyone to interrupt again. It's the least stern that Aizawa has ever looked, because he just looks so *tired*. "She might have been blackmailed into this situation, and law enforcement will take that into account."

"Sensei," Midoriya calls, raising his hand too. Like this is class. Like this is the press conference that Aizawa shaved for, and Midoriya is the reporter. Like any of this *matters*. "The incident... where a villain with a blue fire quirk attacked a police caravan... Is Hagakure okay?"

Ojiro clenches his teeth, staring at the ground with his fists knotted. He hasn't actually read any notifications that came over his phone, but if he really *ignored* that Tooru was *attacked* like that-

"Hagakure wasn't involved," Aizawa says, quickly enough to reassure everyone, all of his classmates who probably knew about it and wanted to talk to him about it. They were bugging him this entire time because they thought that Tooru might be *dead*. "She will be placed in protective custody regardless. But she will not be able to communicate with any of you, or return to UA."

That's it then.

Ojiro's first girlfriend turned out to be a spy who betrayed his class to villains, got arrested and expelled, and now they can't even break up properly over *text*. "This is a sudden beginning for your winter break, and you'll have the day to plan accordingly. The revised schedule for your home visits and internships will be made available once I get them."

That's it then. Aizawa doesn't even bother dismissing them, just starts walking towards the stairs to go to the room with all the surveillance cameras. He just told everyone that Tooru *did that*, that she won't be coming back, and ended it with a bulletin about their winter break schedule like it's *normal* to say that one of their own almost got everyone *killed* a couple times.

Ojiro sees Kouda look at him from the other side of the room, and Ojiro decides that he'll be the first to leave, to avoid any invitations to spend time with all his *precious school friends* who will want to talk about how *horrible* it is that they didn't see it coming. Only, they'll probably want to ask if he *did*. He was the only one that knew Tooru was thinking about breaking into Aizawa's dorm to spy on Shinsou.

Only, no one knows that he told her she shouldn't do it, that she was just being paranoid. She always seemed so worried about Shinsou, so scared of him, almost. She always jumped to the worst conclusions, she was *convinced* he was up to no good whenever they weren't around.

Isn't that funny?

Ojiro doesn't even notice it, until he's standing in front of the door that leads to the girl's side of the third floor. His dorm is right behind him, and Tooru's is right in front of him past that open door. And her door is open.

Ojiro feels more than he has in days, or however long it's been, when he sees Tooru's door has been left *open*, like anyone could just walk in and take her things, take whatever they want, just because she's not coming back. They don't know what's most important to her, they don't even know the name of that little cactus Ashido gave her, or how often Tooru would fret about how much she should water it. How much she *cared* about that little cactus, how she shouldn't leave it behind.

Ojiro has his hands fisted at his side while he stalks towards Tooru's room, nearly shaking with rage when he thinks that something could already be missing.

But all of that cools when he sees Aizawa's back turned to him, his teacher crouched on the floor as he folds a cardboard box into place. To pack up her things of course. Probably, to send them to her family.

Ojiro must have been a pretty awful boyfriend, because he doesn't even know what her parents look like, how they are. Tooru never told him about them.

Ojiro feels the end of his tail hit the wall when Aizawa turns to look at him, when he really doesn't know what to say. Whether he really wants to argue that he should be the one to do this, Aizawa might have been Tooru's teacher but he doesn't *know* her like Ojiro does.

No one knew Tooru like he did, and he didn't even know her.

Aizawa doesn't say anything, but he waves his hand to invite him inside. Ojiro takes it, taking a step that doesn't even feel real to him as he takes in how *different* Tooru's room seems, when he knows she's not there to breathe life into it. He almost closes the door, just out of habit, but leaves it open enough.

He doesn't know where to start, in this conversation or with packing all of Hagakure's belongings away when he doesn't feel like he has the right to *touch* them.

"You were closer to her than my other students," Aizawa says, still staring at the box while he tapes up the bottom, setting it aside to use for packing. "She regrets what she did. She won't be charged, and the protective custody is for her own safety."

Ojiro just stares at Aizawa's back, waiting for words that he knows won't come. Even if Aizawa met with Hagakure.

She probably didn't have anything else to say to him. Nothing but her final words to him. *I'm sorry.*

"She didn't... tell me anything about that," Ojiro says, like he needs to absolve himself of any suspicion to his teacher. Somehow, halfway through saying it, his intention changes to something else. Something that aches in his chest, like talking about it is suddenly too *much* now, now that he's trying to. "She wasn't... *like that.*"

Aizawa looks over his shoulder at Ojiro, but he has to turn his head away. That giant blue teddy bear that a friend gave her in middle school, still sitting right in the middle of her bed next to the wall. The cherry-patterned curtains that she picked, because her favorite flavor was cherry. Just artificial ones, she didn't even like the jarred kind. "It wasn't your responsibility to see it."

Aizawa stands up, like he doesn't know where to start either. Probably the banners hanging on her walls, probably her plushies. Her bedding could go in the same box, all the soft things packed together like that. They'd need tools to take apart her bedframe, they'd need to be careful with her laptop.

Her laptop is missing.

Probably *evidence.*

"You don't have to—"

"I want to," Ojiro insists, interrupting his teacher before he can remember himself, that he really shouldn't overlook their relationship just because he's overwhelmed right now. Aizawa is his teacher, and deserves more respect than he gets from his classmates sometimes.

But Aizawa just turns to look at him fully, the bags under his eyes seem more dark than ever. “You don’t have to blame yourself. Hagakure made a choice. One that affected you. But it’s out of your control.”

Ojiro nods, even if he’d prefer being scolded rather than reassured like this. He’s made a habit of not getting overwhelmed, acting unseemly when he wants to prove himself as a hero. He’d rather only have Aizawa’s attention when it’s earned positively, when it’s nothing but praise and calm, measured criticism meant only to help him improve.

He takes his hands that feel too shaky, and puts them to better use taking down the banners on her wall. Tooru’s room was clearly well-decorated, even if it felt a little crowded at times, a little too ‘cutesy.’ As much as she was cute, as much as she seemed to play it up in front of other people, there was so much more to her than that.

He doesn’t know if anyone else got to see that side of her, that could be serious.

He doesn’t know if what he saw was the real Tooru, or just another side of a fake.

Aizawa starts with the curtains, pulling off each end of the rod to slide them off, even if he folds them a bit haphazardly before piling them in the box. Ojiro puts the banners in too, before he grabs the plushies on her shelf. He bought one of them for her, the purple penguin with the green tie, the one that looks the most out of place when everything else is soft pastels and pink and *cute*.

He remembers what she named it, and doesn’t let himself remember it when he sets it in the box. Aizawa starts setting up another box.

“Sensei?” Jirou calls, standing in front of the cracked door, Yaoyorozu standing behind her. Jirou shared the same floor as Tooru, but almost seemed like the most reluctant of the 1-A girls to talk to her. Tooru wondered if Jirou just hated her, or if she was just shy. If maybe Jirou thought she was a little too much sometimes. “We can help, if that’s... alright.”

“That’s fine,” Aizawa says, carelessly. As if anyone can touch Tooru’s things now that she’s gone, now that she can’t speak for them.

But when Jirou and Yaoyorozu make a beeline for Tooru’s clothes packed in her drawers, Ojiro turns to look at the bed with a burning face and thump of his tail. He’s a little grateful that neither himself or Aizawa have to do that part.

“Did...” Jirou starts and stops, after Ojiro hears the slide of the drawer opening. He glances over his shoulder to see her holding a T-shirt that Tooru used as sleepwear, but only when she decided to stay in for the night, when it wasn’t a study night or ‘girl’s night.’ He told her before that it might clear things up better between her and Jirou.

“She liked that band,” Ojiro says, pulling the pillowcase off so it can be properly folded, even if it won’t really make much difference than packing the pillow with it on. “She worried that you’d think she was trying too hard to be friends with you if you saw her wearing it.”

He doesn’t want to know what Jirou thinks of that, if she feels bad for every time she walked down the hall with her earbuds in, already dismissing Tooru when Tooru just wanted to *talk*. Tooru thought it was a great opportunity for them to be best friends as floormates. That they’d have so much *fun*.

Jirou doesn’t say anything, and maybe she feels that regret. Maybe she just feels awkward voicing that.

“Here,” Yaoyorozu says, setting down a laundry bag, the perfect size to store all of Tooru’s bedding. Something that Yaoyorozu probably made. “I don’t think we have enough boxes.”

Aizawa doesn’t say anything to that, and it doesn’t seem like he brought these boxes in with him. Maybe they’re from a supply closet, maybe they’re just on hand for when they move out of this dorm, so that there won’t be any confusion or panic when they don’t have enough moving supplies.

Maybe there’s boxes on hand, just for this kind of occasion. When someone gets expelled, they can get cleared out quickly. One for each room, just in case.

“Do you guys need any help?” Uraraka asks, even though there’s already enough girls to pack away Tooru’s clothes. Even though it’s unfair that Ojiro knows he’s the only guy that will offer to help, the only guy that Tooru really ever talked to, he’s the only real *friend* she had even when the girls hung out so much. They always seemed to ignore Tooru, when she talked about all of the jokes they said, but didn’t really talk about anything she said during those get-togethers.

“Sure,” Aizawa says, agreeing again like he wants to just get this over with. Like he’s too tired, he wants to take another nap like he does during homeroom, just as soon as he checks ‘packing Tooru’s room up’ off his list.

Ojiro tries to argue with himself that Aizawa has more of a right to make that decision than he does, he has more right to decide what happens to this room because he’s their homeroom teacher.

But he grits his teeth, because it still feels *wrong*.

“Maybe, we could get a smaller box for her cactus?” Uraraka asks, probably focusing on her desk. Ojiro folds Tooru’s comforter, knows that he’ll put her teddy bear in last to pack up her bedding. This is moving along quicker than he expected. “It wouldn’t be good for it if all the dirt spills out-”

“She’d probably want Ashido to have it back,” Ojiro says, because he doesn’t know what ‘protected custody’ means, but it probably means that it would be a long trip for that cactus to make. Everything will probably be shipped to another city, another prefecture.

And Tooru would probably cry if she saw that Needly died on the trip, no matter how well it was packed. She wanted to take care of it.

“It doesn’t... really feel like it should end like this,” Yaoyorozu says, quietly. Her voice is so quiet, but it startles Ojiro into looking around the room, to see how empty it is already, how much more empty it is than it was before. How there will be nothing left of Tooru in this room, in this dorm, at UA or in his life.

She didn’t even say *goodbye* to him. She didn’t give him a single *reason* for what she did, if any of it was real. It probably wasn’t. It was probably just a part of her plan.

Hagakure didn’t say goodbye, but he has to. And he has to do it properly.

Ojiro clenches his jaw, and pointedly doesn’t look at Uraraka or Yaoyorozu when he slips between them to open the drawers of Hagakure’s desk. The seashells she collected on a trip to the beach, the necklaces she never put up properly, official schedules and papers that accrue from being a UA student, the same ones he keeps in a folder in his own desk drawer.

And then the incense he gave her, that she asked to ‘borrow’ when he mentioned that it helped him meditate sometimes. Sandalwood, his favorite, a plain incense and it looks like she used a few of those sticks.

She won't want them to be packed, anyway. She didn't tell him goodbye, but she meant it. She never meant any of it to be real, and he was just a fool.

Ojiro lights one, the rest of the package and the lighter still on the desk, the incense holder is only meant for one stick at a time, but he knows he's the only one who has the *right* to say goodbye. And he does, with a clap of his hands, his hands still shaking in front of his chest when he offers the shallowest bow, still filled with anger. "It's ending anyway. I wish her well."

He wishes it was that easy. If there was just an end that made sense, some explanation to smother the shaking rage he feels too brightly. *Why?* Why would Tooru do this? Why didn't he see it, why did she never *say anything*?

The reasons that make sense, that Hagakure never intended to make friends and that's why she never did, except for him because he was *stupid* enough to overlook everything else about her and just think to himself that she seemed *lonely*. He doesn't know what was fake, what he really has, which memories are just *deceptions* but he wishes all of them could burn up in smoke. He wishes he could start anew.

He wishes he never fell in love with her, so his chest wouldn't hurt this much.

"Oh, Sensei, I can help-" Midoriya's voice calls from the doorway, and Ojiro opens his eyes even if he fears that someone will see how they're watering, but everyone is watching Aizawa leave with the only full box they have.

"It's fine," Aizawa says, after he's already walked past Midoriya's open hands. Ojiro stares at his teacher's back.

He's heard Aizawa's voice in many tones, many moods.

He's never heard Aizawa sound like that.

"*God*, I was so *stupid*," Jirou growls, backing away from Hagakure's dresser and onto her unmade bed, the bare mattress, almost guided by Yaoyorozu's hands that are reached out and obviously trying to catch her. Jirou holds her hands around her face, trying to hide it, but her anger is clear enough to hear. Her hands are shaking too. "She was *blackmailed*, Aizawa-sensei said it himself! All those times she tried to talk to me, and I... I thought it was just Tooru being *Tooru*."

They didn't *know* Tooru enough, to know she wasn't always *Tooru*. She wasn't always jokes and invisible smiles and giggles and she could be close to *tears* sometimes when she talked about how no one else seemed to see her. *You're kind of the only one who gets me*.

He didn't get it. Maybe that was a puzzle he was meant to solve, maybe he should have been *smart enough* to figure out his girlfriend was forced to be a *villain*.

He was right beside her when they entered USJ for the first time. He can still hear her gasp of amazement.

He still has no idea if that was fake, if she already knew what would happen. Or if she leaked that information after. How they even forced her to do it.

How he *never saw it*. He could have *saved her*.

"Where is he taking her stuff?" Ojiro asks, the words feel numb as soon as they enter his mouth. He feels like he's asking another question, a question no one can answer for him. He feels like it's a mistake to have so many eyes on him right now, as he wipes at one of his eyes, already an excuse

in the back of his throat that the smoke is irritating them.

“I don’t know, but he...” Midoriya trails off, still standing in the doorway like he needs permission to come inside. Like the person who should give that permission isn’t here, won’t be here, *she’ll never come back*. “He was crying.”

Ojiro turns to look at the open windows, so barren now without the curtains. The wall completely cleared of Tooru’s things, a sign of what’s to come to this dorm. He thinks it’s better if they find that odd, instead of finding another tear spilling over despite his wince.

“It’s probably hard on him... Since Sensei believes in us so much,” Uraraka says, her voice so quiet now, so devoid of anything that he wishes he could get angry at. “That time we watched a scary movie late at night... Sensei was the one to walk her to her room, because she was scared.”

“She thought there could be a quirk that would make someone look like that monster,” Yaoyorozu says, a creak of the mattress and the sound of rubbing fabric probably means that Yaoyorozu is comforting Jirou right now. Ojiro can’t bring himself to look around, as much as he can’t bring himself to leave when he wants to. When he doesn’t want to hear these *stories*.

“She wanted to be friends with all of you,” Ojiro says, the words numb, not half as hot as he wants them to be. How *accusing* he wants to be. “But you thought it was just Tooru *being Tooru*. You never saw past that, and I-”

Ojiro has to swallow, his hand wrapping around the back of the chair. Not Hagakure’s, not anymore, just a thing caught in limbo between the blissful life he lived three days ago and *now*.

“I didn’t see it either,” Ojiro admits, probably admitting more when he sniffs, when he realizes he can’t *be here*. “What a *pathetic* excuse for a hero.”

He feels like he can’t find mourning in this room, he can’t find the explanation or the thing he just didn’t *see*. If there was a piece that was missed that was evidence, that was a *clue* hidden in plain sight, it isn’t there.

Neither is Tooru.

Hagakure.

He feels the eyes on him like stove fires setting him over boil, and turns to leave, past his classmates, past Midoriya. Past the open door to the boy’s side and back to his own dorm, right in front of hers.

He’ll still see her door, every time he leaves his room. He used to smile so much when she tried to time it right, so they’d both leave at the exact same time in the morning before class.

Maybe that’s why he doesn’t want to leave his room anymore. His plain room, with no decor, nothing beyond functionality on the surface. Everything that’s sentimental or not immediately useful is locked in a drawer to preserve these clean lines that caged him in and just made *sense* once. Things that made him feel *peaceful*.

But Tooru’s room had been a better version of peace. When they sat and talked for hours, watching movies, studying together. When he could just smile at the way she’d fidget sometimes, when he pictured her smile because he couldn’t see it himself.

It never bothered him, to never see her smile. Not when he could hear it in her voice.

He folds himself in the center of his room, unwilling to crawl into bed again, admit defeat just yet. He folds his legs, just like he'll meditate in search of calm, but knows he finds nothing but these hot and shameful tears, this sorrow burrowing into his chest and he feels like he'll never reach the *bottom* of it.

He can't just forget her, even if he should. Even if it would be easy, to box up all of these memories and feelings into clean lines that make *sense*. Keeping this senseless burning out of sight at least.

He's supposed to be a *hero*. And his girlfriend was working with *villains*. And he'll never see her again to even ask her *why*.

Ojiro doesn't know how much time has passed, from these silent, angry sobs that melt almost into calm, until he finds them again. The closest measure of peace he finds is when he's too tired to cry. Too tired to wipe away his tears.

He hears knocks on his door at times, almost but not really. Too numb, or too sharp, he can't pick which one it is right now. The voices that call for him, worried, can't penetrate his neat little *box* he wants to stuff himself inside.

But he feels that freezing numb with this knock, before Aizawa's voice has him scrubbing at his face. "*Ojiro*."

Ojiro almost trips over his leg that's fallen asleep, balancing himself on his tail as he rushes to open the door. Aizawa shouldn't know that he's a mess right now, that he's acting senselessly. He doesn't want to bring shame on himself as a student.

Ojiro bites his lip when he opens the door, hoping that Aizawa just won't see his reddened eyes, how tired he is because he can't even force the barest smile of reassurance. But he sees that Aizawa's are worse.

He *was* crying.

"Here," Aizawa says, raising his hand with his fingertips barely touching the rim of the pot that holds Tooru's mini-cactus. Needly.

"Ashid-" Ojiro stops himself, rubbing a hand against his cheek again as if that will help him clear his throat, his voice as broken and choked as it should be, but he doesn't want his teacher to hear it. He straightens his shoulders, hears the ghosts of his prior martial arts instructors echoing in dojos he hasn't visited in years or months. "Ashido should have it back. Sensei."

Aizawa still holds out Needly, and seems to glance around Ojiro's plain room as if that much is an argument, that he does need some decor even if it was practically stolen from his expelled ex-girlfriend. "You need something. Whatever you choose to do with it is your choice. But trust me when I say that it helps."

Maybe it's just the respect that he has for Aizawa, that he doesn't want to insist a second time. Maybe it's that word, 'help,' that Ojiro can't bring himself to silently argue he doesn't need. He takes the bottom of the pot, feels the smoothness there and the weight of this plant that feels greater than he can manage. *What if I can make the spines grow so long, they get soft, and I have a little cactus bush just like your tail?*

He doesn't know when or if he'll ever *want* to stop hearing Tooru's voice, despite how much it doesn't make sense, how much it would be simpler if he just forgot her. But he nods, he'll find a

place for Needly. He'll try to give it another name, to start. To start moving past Tooru's memory.

Hagakure's memory.

Aizawa doesn't linger, doesn't offer any more words of advice, as if he knows that Ojiro doesn't want them. Ojiro can see by how his teacher is slouched even further as he walks, that something is bothering him deeply, something as exhausted and frustrated and agonizing as Ojiro feels, and maybe worse. Aizawa probably had to return to Tooru's room, to make sure all her things were packed, and Ojiro couldn't bring himself to do that.

Ojiro closes the door, and the room feels suddenly bigger when he does. When he sees flat and clean lines, so many spaces. His windowsill, behind the edge of his curtain, makes enough sense right now. His cactus needs sunlight, and sometimes he might need to hide it from his own sight.

It makes sense, without straight lines and plain surfaces, that his first love would leave a mark on him. Not like this, he knows, it shouldn't have turned out like this, but it did, and he can't bury it so easily.

Ojiro feels something other than exhaustion for the first time in days, what he knows were days now, and he checks his phone but he doesn't bother with the groupchat. That would be too much.

Uraraka doesn't ask questions, thankfully, even if he knows she has them, but she says that she's excited for a spar. He doesn't know if he'll regret it immediately, if he'll only make it to the gym or only halfway before he regrets it completely, but he wants to try.

He can take something with him, but he doesn't want to lose himself. He wants to take part of himself back from this haze, he wants to break out of this smothering fog.

Uraraka: Gonna ask sensei if we can

Uraraka: WAIT

Uraraka: Did u kno that sensei smokes???

*

Hitoshi is trying not to feel like this sprain is just like one of Bug's restraints.

He has to lay down all day with his foot propped up, taking pain medication every four hours, with ice packs on it in accordance with a schedule that Yamada knows better than he does. Even if Yamada explained it to him, Hitoshi couldn't really pay attention.

Somehow, this uncomfortable buzzing under his skin has gotten worse since Yamada caught him trying to throw away his stash box.

He tried to do it when Yamada was out of the room, but the trash can in the kitchen just wasn't big enough to fit it inside. Hitoshi grabbed some paper towels and threw them in there to hide the box, but Yamada still found it, and pulled it out of the trash, asking him if he was *sure* about throwing it away. That it was still his possession, it's okay to keep it or not keep it, and Hitoshi couldn't quite *breathe* until he nodded his head, and Yamada seemed to accept it. Even if that meant the box was still thrown away, that it was possibly insulting to Yamada that he would do that.

Hitoshi can't put a finger on it, but Yamada has just been *off* all day. He just seems quieter, and every time he's nearly silent when he takes away the ice pack or refills Hitoshi's water glass, Hitoshi can practically hear him *screaming* to know why Hitoshi won't talk to him. He hears

Aizawa's voice asking that too.

Eri had been watching cartoons with him on the couch, insistent about crawling inside his shirt with her head popping out of the collar, which is apparently a *habit* now. Even when she wanted to go to her room when her friend Mizuno called, she wanted Hitoshi to go with her, which Yamada *should* have said no to, but didn't. Eri and Mizuno have been having these little virtual playdates for a while, sometimes watching the same show or movie while Mizuno's face is on Yamada's phone, sometimes drawing together or showing off their stuffed animals.

Eri has some *important business* this time with Mizuno, and Hitoshi is dragged into it to accommodate her.

Yamada's phone is set up on Eri's table, so Mizuno can see the massive pile of stuffed animals that Eri has, so she can see Hitoshi sitting on the floor and picking up the ones that Eri wants to examine closer so Eri doesn't have to get out of his shirt. Eri doesn't want to part with the two biggest unicorn plushies, which Hitoshi uses to prop his foot up, Eri braced by one of his arms holding her folded legs.

Eri hums as Hitoshi holds up yet another rabbit plushie for the two little girls to weigh in on. "One of the nurses at the hospital gave me Mr. Whitus, but I don't think he gets along with the other bunny stuffies. I think Mr. Whitus would be happier with Todo."

"*Yeah! All the other bunnies have colors, and he doesn't, and Todo has half of his hair white, so they'll be happy together!*" Mizuno says, following the same logic as most of her other arguments, purely based on hair color, about which plushies should go to the 1-A students 'because they're sad that Haga can't go to school anymore.'

That's the story that Aizawa told Eri, apparently. Just that Hagakure 'can't go to school anymore,' and even if Hitoshi knows the full story, he's not going to tell Eri. She doesn't have to know.

Eri only slips out of his shirt to put the selected plushie on her bed, along with the rest of them. He's pretty sure this project only has half of the pure intentions Eri claims, because while he doesn't doubt that she wants to give away some of her plushies to help them not 'feel sad,' she probably wants to see the 1-A students too when she gives them away. It's only been a few days since she's seen them, but she might regret staying at the dorm today instead of going with Aizawa to the 1-A dorm.

Aizawa shouldn't have asked her when she was in bed and freshly woken, and not thinking clearly about the consequences of staying where she was comfortable. He should have waited, so she wouldn't feel compelled to give away her things.

Even if she still has a *mountain* of plushies.

He doesn't know why, but he pulls out his phone, as though he expects to find the groupchat suddenly there again, as though he just misremembered not seeing it earlier this morning. As though he wants to send them a picture of Eri, or tell them what she's planning to do, which he doesn't want to do at all.

But it's still not there.

Midoriya has messaged him recently, but Hitoshi is sure he doesn't want to read whatever he thought about what he said to the other hero students. Bakugo messaged him too, on Sunday, before he got back.

:---) changed their name to *FUCK YOU I'M A HERO*

FUCK YOU I'M A HERO: LISTEN FUCKHEAD YOU NEVER FUCKING CHECK THIS CHAT AND MICSEI SAID YOU DON'T HAVE ANY FUCKING RECEPTION IN WHEREVER THE FUCK THEY TOOK YOUR ASS

FUCK YOU I'M A HERO deleted this message.

FUCK YOU I'M A HERO deleted this message.

FUCK YOU I'M A HERO: BUT YOU BETTER BE FUCKING OKAY.

FUCK YOU I'M A HERO: AND GET YOUR SHIT SQUARED BECAUSE I'VE GOT MY FUCKING LICENSE NOW. THOSE FUCKERS TRY TO FUCK WITH YOU AGAIN AND THEY'RE DEAD. EXPLODED. FUCKING GONE.

FUCK YOU I'M A HERO deleted this message.

Bakugo just got stupider, then. He finally got his provisional license, possibly the last one to do it unless Todoroki failed to, and he wants to promise to keep Hitoshi safe. A fledgeling egg trying to fling itself at *The Miasma*.

He's surprised that Bakugo hasn't said anything else since then, hasn't even threatened to kill Hitoshi after seeing his quirk being used on Ashido. Ashido has messaged him since then, but Hitoshi skips over her chat. She'd know if he opened it, since there were a few times he didn't respond to her messages and she seemed irritated by that.

Monoma's chat with him still hasn't been set up. It's at the bottom of the list, and he did intend to use it to tell Monoma to stop annoying him before everything happened on Friday. So Hitoshi does it.

He sets his own name, and changes Monoma's accordingly, and waits for a while. But as soon as he sees those three dancing dots at the bottom of the screen that show that Monoma is typing a message to him, he closes out of the application.

He doesn't *really* want to stoop that far.

Hitoshi glances up when there's a ringing sound from Yamada's phone, which Eri runs over to answer. She knows how to answer calls on this app, and how to hang up on Mizuno, but he should have told her not to answer calls from other people, who might be trying to get in touch with Yamada instead of her.

And Hitoshi is pretty sure that Rat Boss doesn't want to talk to Eri or Mizuno. "*Ah, I see that I'm interrupting something. It's good to see that you're doing well, Shinsou and Eri! And Miss-*"

"*Shoji Mizuno!*" Mizuno answers with a salute for some reason. She does the same thing whenever she and Eri have to end a call. "*Mr. Mouse man, you're very cute! And in charge! Are you in charge of all the stuffed animals in the world?*"

"*Oh, if only I was, but I hope to achieve that one day,*" Rat Boss answers, smoothing the front of his suit with his paws. "*For now, I'm only in charge of a hero high school that I believe your older brother attends, and due to that, I'm afraid I need to get in contact with Yama-*"

"Mr. Nezu, I can take the phone to Yama, but I just want your help really, super quick!" Eri pleads, her hands folded in front of her chest and her eyes *begging* the Rat Boss to agree. Hitoshi already

has an idea of what she wants, and she *really* shouldn't impose that on Rat Boss.

"He needs to talk to Yamada," Hitoshi tries to scold, tries to remind Eri that she doesn't run the *entire* campus, she just rules over the 1-A class and most of the students. But the heroes and Rat Boss can't be ordered to her whims that easy.

"But Mr. Nezu's the cutest stuffed animal man ever, and he can help us pick plushies!" Mizuno argues, with Eri's nodding agreement, because they've spent enough time together to practically have a hive-mind about these things.

"You can use my phone to talk to Mizuno instead of Yamada's," Hitoshi *tries* to argue, to both of them, but he has to glance away with just the beginning of Mizuno and Eri's combined pouts. "It'll only take a-"

"Hey guys," Yamada calls as soon as he opens the door, and Hitoshi's jaw snaps shut, at first hoping that he hadn't heard, and next hoping that if he had, he thought he was only talking to Eri. "Did you get a call on my phone just a minute ago?"

"I'll be with you in just a moment," Rat Boss says, holding up one paw while the other cups his chin. *"I believe I have time to pick exactly one plushie for your endeavors."*

"Okay!" Eri nods, becoming serious as she takes the phone to show Nezu the mountain of stuffed animals in the corner of her room better. "I'm trying to pick a plushie for Momo, and it's got to be a *really* good one! I know she likes tea, and smart things, and science, but I don't have plushies that are like that."

"Hm, that is quite a conundrum," Rat Boss mutters, playing along with Eri's game. *"Perhaps, Yaoyorozu would appreciate a smaller stuffed animal, maybe even small enough to sit in one of her tea cups as a companion? And I see that there's a small brown bear on top of the white tiger's head that seems somewhat tea colored."*

"That's perfect!" Eri cheers, picking up the small teddy bear that fit perfectly in her small hand, her finger picking at the pink flower sewn next to its ear. Eri turns the phone around to smile at the Rat Boss. "Thank you Mr. Nezu!"

"It's no trouble at all," Rat Boss replies, though he's probably talking to the floor as Eri carries the phone to Yamada, who looks nervous. *"I believe you have a laptop that can handle our discussion, so that we're not interfering with this most important matter. Do expect a call in the next 50 seconds."*

Yamada pulls a panicked wince and hands the phone back to Eri, almost forgetting to pat her head, as he sprints out the door to catch Rat Boss' call. Mizuno hasn't hung up, but Hitoshi is pretty sure that Yaoyorozu's plushie was the last one to be picked. Not that he's been keeping track.

Not that they've asked for his opinion much. He's apparently just here to keep Eri warm inside his shirt, and hold up plushies so they can get upset that he picked the wrong one.

He's just sitting here with Eri, who doesn't entirely need him to be here while she has Mizuno on the phone, while Aizawa spends all day with his students instead of working to find The Miasma, even though Hitoshi *told him* where they are. Yamada has just been avoiding him, and it's obvious now, it's obvious that he's *not* okay with Hitoshi throwing away his stash box like he said he was.

He feels the irritation building like a buzz underneath his skin, rattling his bones, and when Eri looks at him like she wants to crawl back inside his shirt, he realizes that feeling is ill-suited for

her. He doesn't want to feel that way around Eri, and he doesn't want to disappoint her by leaving, but one of the two is worse. "I'll... be back in a little bit."

He has to pull his leg off the unicorn stack with his hands, after his knee has grown so stiff, and Eri still walks towards him like she can really help him get up, something he needs to brace himself against her bed to do. "Okay, but we're gonna color together when you get back!"

Hitoshi doesn't know *why* his skin prickles with that expectation, why he would ever want to disappoint Eri out of something as ill-suited as *spite*. He just *doesn't* want to color with them, even if it's usually enjoyable. He's just weird right now, weird enough to feel sick. He should probably just stay in his room until he feels different, at least his own level of normal.

Whenever Yamada needs to do something to him to treat that sprain, he'll find him on his bed, and Hitoshi can explain that he just doesn't *want* the stash or the box, but he still appreciates that Yamada got him that box. But Yamada should be happy that he doesn't keep trash like that anymore, that he's more normal now. If Yamada wasn't angry, or *whatever* he is that makes him act so weird and seem to try to ignore him, then Hitoshi wouldn't feel this way with Eri.

He gets to his door, before he decides that he'd rather go to the kitchen and have a small snack first, since that seems to help with this feeling sometimes. It's odd, the way he feels hunger as either a sudden, immediate ache in his stomach sometimes, or a gnawing thing that almost feels *worse* than when he was actually hungry. It's like he's forgetting how it was before he was rescued, when two meals a day would be enough, now he's getting *gluttonous*.

"-also possible that Shinsou's quirk wouldn't be able to affect me, given that there are quite a few differences between my own mind and a human's," Rat Boss says, almost completely muffled by the office's closed door. Hitoshi balances himself on one leg when he stops, when he tries to understand what he's saying. *"Hound Dog may also be an option in that regard, as we would try to keep Shinsou at UA in any eventuality."*

"That's... good to know," Yamada says, like it's not *entirely* good to know for him. He's not excited about it, but he's definitely worried about something. But he says it's good to know.

But it's not good to know. That *this* is why Yamada has been acting weird all day.

Yamada is trying to get rid of him.

It doesn't matter if he was insulted by the stash box, if Aizawa told him that he's able to talk now, *whatever* Hitoshi did and it could be a *million* things, *Yamada is trying to get rid of him*. Pawn him off on another hero who could take him in and control him because his quirk would be useless against them, either Rat Boss or Hound Dog, and then there were *other options outside of UA*. Heroes that don't live at UA, that aren't close to Eri, that they're trying to pawn him off on.

Hitoshi bites his lip when he changes his footing as he walks, the tension when he walks with more pressure on the front of his feet hurts his ankle more, but with the carpet, he moves quietly. Almost silently.

And he opens Eri's door just as quietly, and Mizuno is the first one to spot him as Eri decided to start coloring her book before he returned, waving at him from Yamada's phone. *"Hi Toshi! That mouse guy was kinda weird, but kinda nice. Is he nice to Mezo too?"*

Hitoshi doesn't know if Rat Boss is nice to Shoji or not, Eri would know better than him, and Eri just looks confused as to why he's here so soon, looking up from her coloring book at the same small table where the teapot braces the back of Yamada's phone. "Toshi's not best friends with

Mezo yet, but he's working on it! They're both just really quiet!"

Hitoshi feels more quiet than he has in months, he feels the words trapped behind his teeth but can hardly bring himself to say them. He wishes he didn't have to come to Eri with this. "Can I talk to you without Mizuno, Eri?"

Hitoshi closes the door behind himself, biting his lip when the door knocks against the heel of his foot. Eri frowns at him, lopsided and confused, but tells Mizuno that she's got something important to talk about with him, so she'll call Mizuno later to tell her what it is. Eri already knows how to hang up on Mizuno and send her video away, even if she still needs help to answer the call sometimes. "Yama said you're not 'sposed to walk like that, Twenny! You need to lay down so you get better."

Hitoshi huffs, probably the fullest breath he's taken since he heard what the Rat Boss said, and dutifully walks to Eri's bed, but just to sit, folding his hands in his lap and pressing his thumb against the heel of his opposite hand, trying to work up the courage to say it. "You know how you want to get better at using your quirk?"

Eri nods, standing up already to walk in front of him, almost like she knows what he wants her to do, and he wishes it could be that easy. He wishes he could look at her horn, still long enough to curve, still mysteriously devoid of any aches that she wants him to remedy.

He wishes he could get rid of the words 'using Eri for her quirk' from his mind. But he knows, there's a way that she wants to do this, and he *has* to use it. That there is no other way. "I can help you practice."

He'll be *very* good practice, for what he knows she wants to do as soon as she can control her quirk herself.

*

Yamada laces his fingers together as he waits what he knows *isn't* a suspicious amount of time for Nezu to call, but what *feels* suspiciously long. As an elective teacher, he's not really going to be put out of whack by the abrupt schedule change like Shouta and the other homeroom teachers are, so he really doesn't know why Nezu wants to talk to him.

Except, there's another reason he would. Hitoshi.

Even if the traitor has been ousted, UA's security was compromised just to attack Hitoshi, and Yamada doesn't doubt that the incident has brought the principal's attention to his ward in a way that Yamada *won't* appreciate. Nezu can be, to put it unkindly, a little cold and a *lot* sadistic sometimes, especially when the safety of the students is on the line, and he *doesn't* want to hear anything about 'get this wardship sorted out and get this liability *gone*.'

There's just too much to think about, especially in that aspect. Yamada should feel *elated* that they have a clue about where Miasma is now, especially to go with that list of what could be every single operative who ever worked for Miasma, all those Numbers that had reviews on Villain Yelp. Yamada looked through the file briefly, and knows that Sansa and Naomasa are definitely combing through it to make estimates on which Numbers are still alive or not, what they should expect at the raid. Heroes that should be tapped to be involved in that operation, to counter opposing quirks to the best of their abilities.

There's just too much to think about, with that and other things. With Hitoshi's *scars* most of all, and Yamada worries that Hitoshi has already seen him struggling with that.

He can't imagine it, as much as he can't get those words out of his head. The implications, *hours and maggots*, and he just wants to....

Yamada doesn't know *what* he wants to do, he just wants to do *something*. Anything, anything at all to make it so that didn't happen, maybe in the most selfish way, he kind of wishes that Shouta didn't *tell him*.

He's a hypocrite for that, and he knows it. He told Shouta several times not to hold anything back about Hitoshi, and he never regretted it.

Maybe he does now, because he knows he's just rattled too much from a horror he can't do *shit* about, and knowing that there's nothing for it just makes it *worse*.

"Ah, *that's much better*," Principal Nezu says, as soon as his video call connects. "*Don't worry about the pleasantries or flattery, I've just been told I'm adorable enough times to last my ego well through the holidays. And it seems that Shinsou came back from the mountains with a slight injury?*"

"Oh, yeah, the security system in a squatter's shack didn't work out too hot," Yamada answers, trying not to *seethe*. Trying not to blame his boss when he knows the blame belongs squarely on his *idiot* of a husband's shoulders. "It's just a sprain, so we're going to try healing up normally. Shinsou's had a lot of quirk healing, apparently. Always risks involved with that."

Yamada *knows* there are risks, but he'd much rather not risk having a kid on his couch as spooked as Hitoshi is for the next six weeks. Every time Yamada sets eyes on him, he sees Hitoshi *stiffen* in fear, in overwrought nerves that Yamada *knows* are going to be touchy for a while, he got *attacked* and all, but Yamada is also sure that this little 'exercise in learning the limitations of your body' thing is making it *worse*.

It's so ridiculous that Yamada *can't* laugh at the thought of Shouta trying to teach Hitoshi to be careful with himself. *Shouta* being a paragon of self-care and all.

"Well, *as pleasant as the mountain trip must have been, I imagine that the transition back to UA will be an unfortunately difficult one*," Principal Nezu says, folding his paws in front of himself on his desk. "*Perhaps, it wouldn't surprise you to know I had some ulterior motives with that decision.*"

Yamada doesn't know anything to say to that confirmation other than 'No shit,' so in order to keep one of his most high paying jobs, he keeps his mouth shut.

"*I had hoped that a bit of distance from campus could prevent Shinsou from seeing it as a retraumatizing place, associated deeply with the memory of that attack, but I'm afraid that I'm bringing concerns of exactly that, in the most unfortunate way*," Nezu says, before his screen minimizes into a corner, and the grayscale view of the surveillance camera mounted on the ceiling of the 1-A common room comes up. And Yamada's eyes catch on the sight of Hitoshi, standing on the threshold of the common room with Bakugo's wrist in his hand.

Yamada knows that *Hitoshi* knows not to do that, Hitoshi is one of the few people in Bakugo's age group that knows not to grab him by the wrist. "*Shinsou, I'm sure that you're angry and hurt that we didn't...*"

"*I'm not angry, or hurt. I'm tired of all of you.*"

It took Yamada too long to figure out who was speaking. Who was talking in such an exhausted,

irritated tone.

He can't even reconcile the image on screen of Hitoshi with the kid who *asked him* for permission to see his friends, because he was so worried that he knew he wouldn't sleep until he saw them with his own eyes. Reconnecting with them, after the fact. After the attack. *"I unfortunately have to live here, and deal with you during school. But don't mistake me, I'm not going to tolerate your attempts at pity anymore. It's insulting."*

Unfortunately. That word rings like an accusation in Yamada's head, even if he tries to rationalize that Hitoshi doesn't *mean it* like that, he probably doesn't mean any of this. He doesn't know how Hitoshi put on such a good act with him, making him truly *believe* last night that Hitoshi was hardly worse for the wear, a little shaken but in kind of a good way. This kid tried to *hug* him last night, and hours later he was trying to alienate his friends. *"Shinny-"*

This explains the stash box. *"Why are you doing all of these annoying things for me?"*

Yamada nearly flinches at how *wrong* Hitoshi's voice sounds there, it's close enough to know that it's his kid, but it's just...*wrong*. Like a goddamn horror movie moment or something. *"I want to be your friend. I want to make up for everything bad that happened, and make you happy."*

Every word that Ashido says nearly brings tears to Yamada's eyes, almost proud of that particular herolet who honestly hadn't made it a secret that she was trying so hard to make Hitoshi happy here, re-write that awful past, as determined as Yamada in that same goal. But 'everything bad' catches in his ear, because he knows that Hitoshi doesn't want to hear that. Not when there's a bad way to take it. *"Shinsou-"*

"Oh, I remember that she wanted to be Brainwashed, but that's not my quirk anymore. Whatever I ask, you're forced to answer. And I can make you admit your deepest insecurities, the things you don't want to admit to yourself. That would have been useful to have, before one of you invited 127 in."

Yamada only *thought* that Hitoshi's voice sounded warped and awful when he used that quirk, but hearing the unguarded anger in his words now was like a knife to the gut. Painful enough that Yamada didn't *want* to believe this was real, he wanted it to be doctored somehow. *"That wasn't us! Dude, I get that it was really messed up that you were attacked, but you hurt Tsuyu-"*

"I'll cut her tongue out next time." Shit. "So again, fuck off. I'll ignore that you exist, but if you invite my attention, you'll suffer for it. I'll unfortunately see you around."

The video ends right as Hitoshi turns on his heel after dropping that bomb, and Principal Nezu couldn't look any more 'principal-y' if he *tried*. Yamada *had* to explain this. *"He doesn't mean that, at all, he wouldn't hurt a fly-"*

"I've been running this school long enough to know every explanation for a terroristic threat," Principal Nezu explains, his head tipping down to hide how his mouth is usually shaped into a smile naturally, and Yamada absolutely *hates* that word being attached to his kid, he almost wants to argue it didn't happen. Despite the video evidence. *"Obviously, every child in my charge is different, every threat has a sliding scale of probability. But I am concerned about this one."*

Hitoshi *wouldn't*, Yamada knows that, and he doubts that even Nezu could explain how he was worried about Shinsou's state of mind and go *directly* into thinking that he meant any of what he said there. *"He just got back that night, and he's worried. Hitoshi is terrified that someone is going to get hurt because of him, because he's here, so he's trying to scare them all off."*

It's such a classic move that Yamada is almost *disappointed* in how he didn't see something so *predictable*. Given that there's a wide ravine in his relationship with Shouta, a steep divide between pre and post Shirakumo's death, he wishes he could show this to Shouta and *laugh* about how his kid outdid him.

Blowing off 18 friends at once to make sure he doesn't get hurt again, a *nuclear* sized pre-emptive strike. Shouta couldn't even manage to shake off one.

"Still," Principal Nezu says, his folded paws falling forward to rest on his desk. "*You are aware that someone who doesn't believe in giving leniency due to circumstances would be unnerved by this. The threat of bodily harm, coupled with the demonstration of his quirk? This is a matter to be taken seriously.*"

Yamada knows. Yamada knows that as much as Hitoshi is mixed up right now, that's not a pass for what he said or what he did, the *intentions* behind why he did it and why he probably picked Ashido to do it to.

The poor girl is probably a mess right now, and Yamada doesn't know if he could possibly explain it in a way that wouldn't break her heart further. It's already been made too clear that the herolets were *devastated* that Hitoshi was hurt, on their campus and in their minds, on their *watch*, and knowing that Hitoshi was in that much pain to say those things would just make the hurting double.

"Of course, he's just gotten back and things have been... really shaky," Yamada says, and doesn't want to say more on it. How he doesn't know if he's blowing hot and cold, or if Hitoshi is, how he still doesn't know how to *settle* himself when he knows he has to for his kid. Especially with what he knows now, how *bad* it is underneath what he thought was just *nerves*. "We're going to have a talk about that."

"*I think we're due for a talk as well,*" Nezu says, and he honestly couldn't say anything more *threatening*. Especially right now. "*I haven't meddled as much as I would like, but I take, shall we say, a 'personal offense' to this group that attacked my campus, and acted accordingly. I imagine you haven't had time to get fully up to date on your emails, but I've asked to help coordinate the finer details of this investigation, and I've been briefed accordingly by Detective Tsukauchi.*"

Yamada swallows, his stomach twisting around what feels like a block of ice, and he *hates* that he has to meet those words like it's a *bad thing*. Nezu is one of the *best* consultants for any heroic operation to have, he has pulled off miracles time and time again, with success almost a given and predictions about the enemies' movements so accurate that Nezu could rival *Sir Nighteye*. He should be *elated* to know that Nezu was going to be working so closely with them to bring down Miasma.

But, that raid is a bigger precipice than it should be for Yamada now. It's not as simple as wanting Hitoshi to be free, to be safe, to honestly work out some vengeance on his behalf in a way that Yamada positively *aches* for. It's the start of a timer.

Hitoshi's wardship won't end as soon as the raid is done, after the Miasma has been brought down. But after they're taken down, the next objective is supposed to be finding Hitoshi a new home, a new family. Shinsou Ui is *solidly* out of the picture on that front, but Yamada has made a *promise*. He promised that Hitoshi would stay, after the investigation, he'll stay *here* with Eri and with every person he's met and connected with since coming here, he'll keep this peace that he's found and Yamada will be there through *every step* closer to the happiness that Hitoshi has always deserved.

But that's going to require Shouta to change his mind, about Hitoshi needing a clean slate, a separation from the bad things that have happened at UA. It's hard enough to change Shouta's mind about *anything* once he's made it, but especially when he thinks it's the right thing to do for a kid's health and safety. *"But, before we get into that, there's another small matter to discuss."*

Yamada can't really argue against logic, no matter how hard he *tries*, when the facts of the matter still state that Hitoshi thought Shouta *owned him* for a good chunk of his wardship so far. That's not exactly a funny story to share around the holidays.

"With Shinsou speaking, and demonstrating the use of his quirk, I imagine that the validity of your wardship with him will be tested soon," Nezu says, and Yamada feels like an *idiot* when that seems to drop over him like it's *news*.

He *knew* that, in the back of his mind, ever since Shouta told him that he used his quirk on Mirio that night, but he still... worries. Even if Shouta said that it didn't work over the radio, Yamada won't even have to go fully deaf to follow the letter of the law, to take out his hearing aids to make sure Hitoshi can't wash his brain and all, because the hearing aids should keep the quirk out too.

But as much as Yamada has dreaded the certainty of that test, something new prickles at the back of his mind. Something he doesn't even want to acknowledge, doesn't want to feel it fully. *"In that regard, I wanted to offer some reassurance that if worse comes to worse, it won't come to **the** worst conclusion. Even if it's almost certain that the wardship will be upheld, it's also possible that Shinsou's quirk wouldn't be able to affect me, given that there are quite a few differences between my own mind and a human's. Hound Dog is also an option in that regard, as we would try to keep Shinsou at UA in any eventuality."*

"That's... good to know," Yamada says, almost numb to that. Of course, it's nice to know that Principal Nezu would be willing to take Hitoshi in, and apparently Hound Dog would too. It's nice to know that they've put thought into that, discussed it, making sure that Hitoshi wouldn't just be in limbo or tossed out if somehow the wardship test *didn't* work out.

But it doesn't matter if Hitoshi is just moving next door to become Nemuri's ward, even if Yamada still sees him every day, even if Hitoshi is in his classes. The possibility that Hitoshi wouldn't be living with him, that Yamada couldn't see that sleepy bedhead popping off his pillow every morning, couldn't cook breakfast next to him, couldn't hand him a cup of coffee, everything about that is *unfathomable* to Yamada right now. And Yamada doesn't know if Nezu has *ulterior motives* to remind him of that, but Yamada doesn't appreciate the reminder.

If Yamada doesn't get Shouta in agreement about Hitoshi living with them after the investigation, *soon*, that horror will still become a reality. In a horrible, permanent way.

"But of course, the quirk specialist appointment will shed quite a light on that," Nezu continues, and Yamada knows there's something beneath the surface of that statement that he's in *no* place to suss out, and knows that might be intentional. *"It's set for Friday afternoon on campus, and I'm sure that won't be an issue?"*

"Nope, clear schedule and all," Yamada answers, too quickly, his hands raising up to sweep out and *fuck that's too soon*.

Hitoshi talked to the herolets. He threatened them, verbally. Yamada didn't recognize it before, he just *assumed*, but there were certain things that Shouta said, repeating what Hitoshi told him, that Yamada knew wouldn't be translated like that in sign. Hitoshi might be talking to *Shouta*. But he *signs* to him.

If Hitoshi doesn't talk to him, if there's a *reason* Hitoshi won't talk to him, if Hitoshi is no longer selectively mute to *everyone but him*, Yamada doesn't know what to *do*. The Commission *knows* that Hitoshi is able to talk now, *and* use his quirk, because he used it *on* that Commission representative, and Yamada *still* wants to throttle Shouta for letting that happen.

If Hitoshi *can't* talk to Yamada, for whatever reason, Yamada has to fix it before they test the wardship because losing Hitoshi before the raid even *happens* is something that Yamada doesn't even want to *imagine*. “*Good. Now, aside from the list of operatives, Shinsou also divulged that this Miasma operates out of a warehouse on the coastline, and he knows that because, I quote, ‘the water tastes salty.’*”

Yamada *still* doesn't know exactly what that means, if Hitoshi had been drinking unfiltered salt water from the *ocean* since the age of four and hadn't died within days, or if they dunked him into the sea sometimes, but he can't exactly *ask*.

Apparently, they're not on speaking terms, not that Yamada got to know that before now.

“Yep, once things settle down with the herolets, Shou said he'll do some walking around on Google maps with Hitoshi,” Yamada answers, knowing that he *probably* should have done some digging himself by this point, trying to find how many warehouses were on the coastline to try to narrow things down. To soothe his nerves with the near certainty that those warehouses would look pretty uniform, and that there's still plenty of investigating to be had.

“*Ah, that sounds productive,*” Principal Nezu says, oddly. There's definitely something there he's *not* saying about that tactic. “*Then, I suppose I'll focus on the list of operatives for now. It's quite expansive, yet still possibly incomplete. And there's the complicating factor that we haven't recovered very many bodies before the Nomus were spotted and identified. And there's almost certainly more Nomus that we haven't captured or seen.*”

There were almost a hundred in Kamino ward, more than a hundred people who were used to *create* those things. Hitoshi obviously isn't the only Number left alive, but Yamada knows that there's apparently a lot of ways that Miasma disposes of ex-members.

Before the number tattoos were found on the Nomus, they had only found three bodies or bodyparts that had number tattoos. Hitoshi said that he didn't know how Nomus were created, Miasma probably got involved with that *after* he was sold, *thankfully*. But that means that they still don't know what they're dealing with. “*I'll let you know of any significant progress, and I hope you'll do the same.*”

“Of course, we'll keep in touch!” Yamada says, snapping out of his thoughts in time to see Nezu hanging up on the call. The investigation was heating up, but it wasn't a done deal, it was still going to take some time. Time that Yamada needed, in too many ways, first with getting Shouta on his same page but *more importantly* finding a way to tell Hitoshi that he *knew* he was talking, and threatening his friends which was *not* a good thing, and trying to figure out why Hitoshi wasn't talking to *him*.

Hitoshi... didn't blame him, did he?

Yamada was his assigned hero, it was *his massive fuck up* in the line of duty that led to Hitoshi getting hurt like that, getting sliced up and having that *mask* forced back on his face, and as much as Yamada blamed himself for going out on patrol that night, he still didn't really think that Hitoshi would blame him. Somehow, in a way that didn't really make sense, he didn't think that Hitoshi would connect those dots. Especially with how he acted when he came back, those ‘leans’ and that little attempt at a hug, that's *not* how a kid who's angry and betrayed would act towards the

irritating betrayer.

Maybe, Hitoshi just doesn't want things to change between them. Yamada wasn't the only person who signed to him, but apart from those books, he was his primary teacher. While Shouta is fluent, Yamada has a special connection with the language that he used to talk to his mom when he was growing up, and Yamada feels that same connection with Hitoshi. Yamada himself knows that it would be a pretty big thing for *him* to transition to speaking instead of that, kind of letting that go in a way, but for Hitoshi, it wouldn't be the same.

Maybe, with all these changes erupting around him, out of his control, Hitoshi wants one thing *to* control, and that's whether he talks to Yamada or not. Yamada could totally get that reason.

He just can't really *give* that to Hitoshi, when the fate of the wardship rests on Hitoshi talking to him, and trying to use his quirk on him to make sure he can't succeed.

While Yamada is hopeful that Eri will still be on her playdate call with Mizuno at this point, so maybe he can have a chat with Hitoshi about this, about a lot of things honestly, but mostly trying to impress on Hitoshi that he *understands* if he doesn't want to talk to him, but he'll need to do that in two days, he flinches and freezes when he hears a knock on the door.

While he now *understands* why any of the herolets would want to drop by the dorm to have some *words* with his kid, and he's grateful that Principal Nezu wouldn't leave him in the dark about that, he does *not* want to get into that right now. Hitoshi needs to patch things up with his friends, pretty quick, but there are other, bigger holes in this boat that need to be seen to first, without rocking that rattling raft too much.

Yamada leaves the office, just in time to hear the front door close, which is *not* a good sound right now. Shouta might have *said* that Hitoshi is on house arrest for now, and while Yamada warily agreed with the 'needs to be escorted' part before, he's *definitely* on board with keeping Hitoshi at home until some things are straightened out.

There is no Hitoshi on the couch, but there is a little bean huffing as she stomps over to that couch, kicking her feet after she takes a seat and glowering at the fish in their snazzy aquarium on the kotatsu. And Yamada *definitely* has some questions about that pouty mood. "Did... Hitoshi leave just now?"

"*Mm-hmph*," Eri answers with a sharp nod, and Yamada is *definitely* concerned about those quickening kicks. That sharp little way that Eri answered, like her tiny little teeth are locked tight around a grenade that just one little insensitive comment could set off.

That's *not* the usual mood post-Mizuno date. "Who did he go with- he didn't take his crutch either," Yamada notices, that crutch still leaning against the wall beside the door. Yamada imagines he *should* bundle the little bean up for a hopefully short search party, but something about that mood is raising some hairs on the back of his neck.

It's only when the kicks suddenly stop that Yamada notices it. Eri's horn.

Is *shorter*.

*

Mirio's not really sure where to start, even if Shinsou did come along a little easier than he planned. "Jeez, I can't believe I left the mochi plushies in my room!"

Mirio kind of *purposefully* left them behind, because he wanted the excuse to have a talk with

Shinsou one on one, and Shinsou went with it pretty quickly. He answered the door with that black facemask on, which was already kind of a sign of a rough day, and he didn't say a word when he tugged his shoes on right after Mirio mentioned he needed to run back to the dorm and invited Shinsou to come with him.

So now, he has Shinsou right where he wants him. It's just them, walking to the 3-A dorm. *Plenty* of time to talk to Shinsou about how Mirio could have protected him from that lizard guy, that he's *absolutely* still a hero without his quirk, he stopped that Saito lady from getting mugged and everything. Mirio felt like he didn't miss his quirk at all for the first time in *months* before this moment.

But right now, with his hands in his pockets and Shinsou staring straight ahead instead of saying a word to him, or even looking at him, Mirio feels too much like he did that night. Like he's not cut out for this situation, *at all*, but he needs to find a way to force through to the solution.

"Are you sure it's okay to leave without letting Yamada know-"

"I-it's fine," Shinsou interrupts, his voice coming out a little strained, kind of worried. Mirio's pretty sure that's mostly on his shoulders, since Yamada has always been fine with Mirio taking both wards out for a bit. Before the attack, but. He hopes things haven't changed with that.

"So, I just..." Mirio feels the words dying on his tongue, and brings a hand to scratch the back of his head, like the perfect words could just rattle out. Exactly what he feels, what he wants Shinsou to believe. Aizawa said something about Shinsou 'doesn't want anyone to get hurt' protecting him, but that still boils down to one thing.

Shinsou still thinks that Mirio can't handle himself, or handle protecting Shinsou if it comes down to it. Maybe Mirio made that worse with the way he answered that question, how he *said* he'd die protecting Shinsou, but that's in the worst-case scenario. If it came down to Mirio or Shinsou, he'd pick Shinsou, but there's a lot of scenarios before that.

"I'm glad you're talking now!" Mirio says, starting off with something he's confident in saying. Shinsou has been too scared to talk until now, Mirio *knows* how much he struggled with that, and maybe it's weird that the fear he must have felt that night might have rattled that out, but it's still good progress.

"I'm not," Shinsou says, kind of confusingly. He's... talking. About how he's not talking.

Mirio looks at Shinsou, who's still staring ahead, but picking at the bottom of his face mask now. He's definitely uncomfortable with this, and Mirio kind of figured he was. He doesn't *seem* like he's so anxious that he's talking, but he does seem like he's close to it.

"Just... to you. I'm not going to use my quirk, and it might not work through hearing aids," Shinsou says, mumbling at the end. With Yamada being his hero with the wardship and all, that's a pretty good thing that his quirk might be ineffective with that, but it's just a little weird how Shinsou says it.

Yeah, he's definitely still uncomfortable around Mirio. "Well, that's good, with the hearing aids and all. Yamada can still protect you as your hero and... so can I, you know?"

Shinsou finally glances at him, so quick that Mirio almost missed it. It looked like he was pretty wary about how this conversation might go, but Mirio needs to say it, to at least clear the air.

"Aizawa said that you were worried that I was going to get hurt, and I kind of get where that was

coming from. Without my quirk, I'm just a big beefy bonehead, but the beefy part still counts for something," Mirio says, working up a grin to hope that Shinsou gets that joke, instead of seeing Mirio as a joke of a hero without his quirk. "Something at least close to a hero. And I know that what I said to answer you was kind of scary, it didn't really come out the right way."

"I didn't mean to use that," Shinsou says, and Mirio can see that he's glaring, he can hear the anger in his voice, how Shinsou is probably speaking louder with it than he's ever heard him talk before. "I didn't know it would happen, how my quirk changed. How- that... I'm a Nomu."

A cold chill runs down Mirio's spine, because that's *definitely* not what Shinsou is. "I'm... not mad at that at all, but... You're not really a Nomu."

Shinsou looks at him like he's telling him that his hair isn't *purple*, and Mirio has *no idea* if Aizawa and Yamada know that Shinsou is thinking something this messed up about himself, but he *hopes* that he's right about his assumption. That Shinsou has *no idea* what he's talking about.

"Like, Nomus seem to have multiple quirks, but a lot of them. And they look like *monsters*, big hulking monsters with exposed brains and everything. That's not you at all, so I don't think you're a *Nomu*," Mirio says, and wonders if he should mention that Shinsou could google it, and find pictures of Nomus from news articles. He's just worried that might bring up USJ, which he's pretty sure Aizawa doesn't want Shinsou to know about. "I probably look more like a Nomu than you do!"

A joke about how they would have to get 'mixed up together' to come out looking like a Nomu *definitely* isn't funny. Because he knows *why* Shinsou thinks he's a Nomu. Because he *did* get mixed up like that, in the raid. And came out with that Confession guy's quirk.

And that's Mirio's fault. "And I'm... sorry about that. If I was a little quicker, or if I could have stopped him. If I just grabbed Overhaul before he grabbed you--"

"Stop," Shinsou says, turning to glare at Mirio, his narrowed purple eyes seem even harsher with the black mask under them. He still doesn't know *why* Shinsou would wear something like that, willingly. "*Talking* like that. You saved Eri, that's what you were supposed to do. I was just distracting him and it worked--"

"That wasn't your *job*," Mirio argues, horrified that Shinsou *thinks* that it was. "I was the hero, I was trying to save you *both*. If I could have just... done that. This wouldn't have happened."

Shinsou stares at him, and Mirio has no idea what's going on inside his head. If he's finally realized that Mirio *isn't* the hero Shinsou seemed to think he was before this, not the kind of guy that he should have some hero merch for, not the hero whose image could have protected him when he had to face down *Chisaki* again, Mirio doesn't know what took him so long.

Mirio isn't an *amazing* hero, but he's a hero. He failed Shinsou, he *messed up*, but he wants to do better. Selfishly, he just wants Shinsou to see that he *can*. Even if he *didn't*, and he never has.

"You're an idiot," Shinsou decides, rolling his eyes, and Mirio honestly doesn't know how to take that insult with no heat behind it. "I'm not the kind of person who can be saved. You're not the first one to fail, and it's not your fault. You just have no idea what you're dealing with."

Mirio *doesn't* know what he's dealing with, he has no idea who these *Miasma* guys are, but that doesn't matter. He knows that they hurt Shinsou before Chisaki got involved, he knows that they *still* want to hurt Shinsou, and that's the only part that matters.

If those Miasma guys think they can hurt Shinsou now, *they* don't know what they're dealing with.

Mirio stops in front of the walkway to the 3-A dorms, because he doesn't want to get interrupted when he means this. When he wants to make sure Shinsou understands. He crosses his arms, smiles that Lemillion smile, and for once he can actually *feel* his strength under his hands, coursing through him. Ready to convince any doubters that he's strong. "I don't have to know who I'm dealing with. Being a hero means I'm ready for anything, and even though I've still got a few months of school left, I'm ready to do anything to protect you."

He sees how Shinsou's eyes get a little bit wider, the glare falling away, but not in the *right* way, and Mirio kind of wishes it wasn't this complicated. If maybe Shinsou could just be a little more selfish.

Because it looks like Aizawa was dead on. Shinsou *doesn't* want Mirio to get hurt like that. "Well, not anything! Kind of, anything, but I won't have to—"

Mirio raises his hands up, but doesn't have a clue what to do with them. He *kind of* just wishes he could do *something* with his hands to convince Shinsou to believe in him, that he's a hero, and maybe try to convince Shinsou that he wouldn't die to keep him safe, even if Mirio isn't really convinced because every time he imagines that kind of desperate situation, he knows exactly what he'd do.

He'd take a bullet for Shinsou, just like he'd do for Eri. "I'm not going to die that easily, y'know? I guess that's what I'm trying to say, I can still handle myself and handle protecting you, because even without my quirk, I'm still strong. I'm still Lemillion."

"Of course you are," Shinsou says, almost like that's mocking, almost calling Mirio an idiot again, and he probably is, but his tone is just deadpan enough to be calling him an idiot in another way. Oddly enough, in a way that Sir Nighteye would probably use to say it. "I know you're a hero."

Mirio can't help but nod, feeling both a weight off his shoulders and a puff in his chest before he sighs all of that out. Now that *that's* over, "And I got a surprise for you too!"

It's not exactly surprising that Shinsou follows him pretty close through the dorm, up the stairs to Mirio's room. It's another 'little kid' habit that Mirio can't help but notice about Shinsou, and fight not to call kind of cute, but Shinsou tends to stick pretty close to him whenever they're out and about, especially when he's out of his comfort zone.

If he got just a little closer, close enough to hide behind him, Mirio might honestly mistake him for Tamaki.

Mirio opens his door, seeing the plushies right on his desk, practically hiding the picture of Sir Nighteye with how big they are, and realizes that while Eri has spent some time in his room when Yamada and Aizawa were working, he's never properly introduced it to Shinsou.

"Welcome to my room! It's a little messy right now," Mirio says, glancing at the All Might calendar he hasn't changed the month for yet, the clothes that just kind of scatter around until Tamaki reminds him that they're supposed to be sorted into 'dirty' or 'clean,' when Mirio prefers to offer the option of 'still kind of decent to wear' if it hasn't gotten too sweaty. His bed is mostly made up, since his pillows are at the head of the bed where they're supposed to be instead of falling off, and his bedsheets aren't pulled out of the corners.

But just a glance at Shinsou reminds Mirio that Shinsou lives *much* tidier than he does. And maybe he's kind of a bad influence on him in that regard.

“But, I’ve got a brand new, top of the line, squishy soft mochi plushie for Eri,” Mirio says, grabbing the vanilla scented white one that he’s been waiting for over a *month* to arrive at the toy shop. It doesn’t really have a design apart from the little blush marks on top, but it’s *huge*, big enough for Mirio to wrap his arms around it and still squish it from all sides, and the *best* part is the soft-squish. It’s *just* like eating a really chewy mochi, but just squeezing it. “And, a soft squishy mochi for you!”

Mirio tosses the light purple one that he’s pretty sure is the same color as Shinsou’s eyes to him, and sees the exact moment when Shinsou catches it and catches that *amazing* squish. His eyes widen just a little, eyebrows rising. Mirio can’t really tell with the face mask in the way, but Shinsou just looks a bit more like the cute kind of kid he should be, who can appreciate the simple pleasure of squishing something that soft.

“And it’s lavender scented too! That can help you fall asleep easier. And they didn’t have any apple scents, but I thought the white one was kind of cute for Eri, and I’m pretty sure she likes vanilla,” Mirio says, giving Eri’s plushie another good squish and *trying* to tell himself that will be the last one. He got Tamaki and Nejire both a mochi of their own, but he might need to double back to the toy shop and get himself one, because it’s a little *addictive*.

“She does. It was her favorite. Back...” Shinsou trails off, still looking at the plushie in his hands, and he doesn’t have to say it. Mirio honestly doesn’t want there to be a ‘back then,’ at least not the way he knows about it. He knows that it’s a good thing that Eri and Shinsou met, that Shinsou wasn’t just left to those ‘Miasma’ guys, but he still wishes it could have been better.

That everything could have just been vanilla scented. “It’s kind of a good thing, that she doesn’t remember the smell like that,” Mirio says, catching how Shinsou’s eyes glance up quickly to his, as though he’s interrupting something running through Shinsou’s head. And he’s glad that he’s interrupting it, because he’s sure it’s not pleasant. “Sometimes, smells can kind of set off the worst kind of memories about bad stuff. But, she told me about how you got her favorite soap, and we figured out that it was vanilla. With Neji’s help and all, she has a lot of perfumes and lotions and stuff.”

Eri didn’t have them a lot, but sometimes she’d have a ‘Twenny fit,’ before Shinsou came to UA. Maybe Mirio would read a story ‘wrong,’ or maybe Eri would have a nightmare, but it would start by asking where ‘Twenny’ was or saying that she wanted ‘Twenny,’ and no amount of hugging it out or distracting Eri would really put that tearful fit down until she cried it out. But the one thing that seemed to do the trick sometimes, was Nejire’s bottle of Warm Vanilla lotion, which Mirio *probably* should have given back to her before now.

“I’m glad that Eri had you to get her that soap. To make sure she had good memories back then,” Mirio says, and he doesn’t miss Shinsou’s hands tightening in the mochi plushie, how he’s staring at it like that, how that’s *definitely* not a good squish. And since Shinsou’s not that great with tearful fits, Mirio looks at the wall to find his closest ‘distraction.’ “I never showed you this picture though! Eri drew it before you came to UA, wanted to make sure her hero got to be a proper sidekick!”

Mirio looks at the picture, *actually* looks at it and feels like a bucket of ice was just dumped on him as he realizes why he *shouldn’t* have called Shinsou’s attention to it. Eri’s drawing of him in his Lemillion costume, his red cape definitely *bigger* than it really was with his arms stretched over his head isn’t the bad part. It’s not Shinsou, who Eri decided was going to be a cat-themed hero with that same red cape behind him.

It’s the black mask drawn over Shinsou’s face. Eri drew it before she ever saw Shinsou without it

on. “Eri just really thinks of you like her hero, you know? And, her birthday is coming up soon, I actually wanted to know what you think about what I got-”

“Hey, Togata!” Shizuo calls, as they open the unlocked door to Mirio’s room, which is *kind* of a bad habit Mirio has been meaning to call them out on. Holding *another* bad habit in their scaly hands, *Mirio’s* protein powder that he’s okay with sharing, but only *one serving* a day, and Shizuo always wants to get another one. “Can I hav....”

It’s a little terrifying, honestly, when Mirio feels that static crash over him and how Shizuo’s voice just cuts off into *noise* instead of words that he can understand. He feels his arms fall slack, dropping the mochi plushie, and his body almost seems to disappear after that. Even though he couldn’t move his head, couldn’t blink, couldn’t even *speak*, he saw when Shinsou noticed, looking at him with wide eyes, looking *horrified*.

Jeez, Mirio wanted nothing more than to tell him it was okay, because a quirk slip like this is *definitely* understandable right now, but as much as he tries to fight this hold over his mind, trying just makes him a little nauseous. Mirio hears other voices, but he can’t understand what they’re saying. He’s still stuck staring at Shinsou, watching him look at Shizuo, who’s saying something and stomping towards Shinsou, watching Shinsou look at Mirio again and hesitate on his feet before he turns and nearly breaks into a run.

Mirio can only watch Shinsou veer around and run past Shizuo, still staring at the door and the wall and Shizuo who marches over to him, until there’s something sharp on his shoulder that shatters the control, and he flinches back. “Shizuo, *what did you do?!*”

Tamaki has that kind of tone he gets when he’s in ‘Bulldog Tamaki’ mode, and it’s not softened at all by the yellow mochi plushie he has in his arms, running over to Mirio and grabbing the shoulder that feels a little *stabbed*, and Mirio looks to see that he kind of *did* get stabbed. There’s a few holes in his jacket and he can’t see it too well, but he feels a small trickle of blood. Tamaki, since he’s looking at Mirio’s shoulder from a better angle, definitely looks *murderous* like Mirio *did* get stabbed.

And Shizuo has their hands up, dropping the protein powder on the floor, like they just realized that using their spines from their Horned Toad quirk might *not* have been the best way to break the control. “Togata’s eyes glazed over and he got this weird look on his face, so I figured it must have been the ward kid’s quirk, but he didn’t say anythi- *what?*”

Mirio is *smiling, technically*, when he puts a hand on Shizuo’s shoulder and tightens his grip just a *little* too much. “Shizuo. I know you mean well. But don’t scare Shinsou like that again. *Ever.*”

“I didn’t *scare* him,” Shizuo argues, their mouth twisting into as much indignation as they can manage, but being a lizard mutant quirk tends to make them pretty inexpressive. “I just asked him what he did! I’m not going to scare a *ward*, what kind of hero-”

“Just,” Mirio starts and stops, feeling the realization drop like a lead weight to his stomach. “Stay away from Shinsou for a while. I need to find him.”

Tamaki nods, following behind Mirio, and neither of them think about the open door or leaving Shizuo in there when the hallway is empty, and Shinsou could be *anywhere* right now. Tamaki seems to read his mind, seems to have a better handle on the situation than Mirio does right now when he says he’ll check the dorm, but Shinsou would only stick around if he got too worked up to run further away. There’s nowhere in the 3-A dorm he’d run to if he got scared.

And apparently, no *one* he’d trust in the 3-A dorm either.

Mirio fumbles with his phone, because he doesn't *want* to make that call to Yamada and tell him he lost Shinsou that easily, but Shinsou must have made record time back to the staff dorm because Yamada is already calling him. "Hey, I'm sorry, I didn't think that Shizuo would come to my room or-I didn't really put it together that it was a bad idea--"

"*Mirio, what's going on?*" Yamada asks, but Mirio kind of wants to ask what's going on on Yamada's end, because it sounds like a lot of screaming. "*Is Hitoshi with you?*"

"Uh." Mirio doesn't know what makes it worse, Yamada asking him that himself before Mirio could fess up to it, or Yamada calling Shinsou 'Hitoshi.'

It's not entirely a surprise, not that Mirio's thought about it. He's thought a lot about how he'd like Shinsou to stay at UA, where he can be with Eri and where Mirio can know he's not going to get hurt anymore, and Shinsou clearly likes being around Yamada. So, it's not really surprising that Shinsou might stick around, in a 'Hitoshi' kind of way.

Mirio's brain turns to static but *worse* when he realizes where his train of thought went just from hearing Yamada call Shinsou 'Hitoshi,' when Aizawa has called him that too, when they've *both* called him 'Mirio.' "No. He... ran. After accidentally brainwashing me. And getting scared."

There's a pause in the screaming in the background too, and Mirio almost misses it. "*Okay. Eri and I are gonna be in Gym Gamma, so if you run into him, just... let me know?*"

The uncertainty in Yamada's voice at the end makes Mirio feel like *Yamada* doesn't have a plan for this either, so Mirio falls back on his training. "I'll let Aizawa know too!"

Mirio calls Aizawa after Yamada hangs up, but it goes to voicemail, which Mirio counts himself lucky for when he looks around outside of the 3-A dorm and realizes there's too many footprints in the snow to really know where Shinsou went. He asks some underclassmen if they saw him, and they point him in a direction that Mirio was really hoping he wouldn't go.

Not towards the dorms. But towards USJ.

Mirio runs, knowing that Shinsou's purple hair would stand out in the crowd, and probably even more so if he hasn't dropped the purple mochi plushie. He knows there are other buildings, other places that Shinsou *could* go to, but he doubts that he did. Even if it doesn't make sense on a logical scale that Shinsou would want to go back to the place he was attacked by that lizard quirk guy, after Shizuo's lizard-based appearance scared him, Mirio knows that Shinsou probably isn't operating on *logic* right now.

Shinsou is scared out of his mind, *just* like he was that night. But this time, Mirio can't let him run away and face it alone.

As soon as Mirio sees him in the distance, crouching in the snow next to the P.E. track *almost* exactly where Mirio thought he would find him, he sends a text message to Aizawa just telling him the location, but keeps running. He only remembers to slow down when Shinsou turns his head to look at him.

Shinsou is holding the plushie against his chest, and despite everything, Mirio feels his smile become more honest at the thought that at least Shinsou seems to *like* it. "Hey, it's okay! I was just worried about you, and it's okay that you used your quirk--"

"*I didn't!*" Shinsou argues, springing to his feet and backing away, backing up *pretty* fast which reminds Mirio that Shinsou can still take off sprinting again, and he can see on Shinsou's face how

bad that could go. Even just seeing the top half of his face, the black facemask still covering most of it up, the panic is too clear to see with the shaky way Shinsou runs a hand through his hair, how wide his eyes are. “I *didn’t*, that’s not how it *works*, I can’t- I’m not...”

Mirio still hasn’t gotten close, but he can *hear* how fast Shinsou’s breathing now, how he probably can’t talk with the panic getting that bad. Mirio just raises up his hands, trying to find the balance between too soft and condescending and too rough for Shinsou’s rattled nerves in the tone of his voice. “Shinsou, it’s okay. I’m here, and I’m here to help. Just take a deep breath-”

“*I’m not too stupid to fucking breathe*,” Shinsou yells, his hand pulling away just to throw it out to his side, pure frustration that’s definitely getting to be too much for him. “You just think I’m *stupid* and *weak* and you don’t know *anything* about what I’ve been through! Anything! You have *no* idea what I can do-”

“Then, show me,” Mirio says, even if he worries that Shinsou will show him that he can take control of him again, which will *not* be fun given that Aizawa would probably have to knock him out of the brainwash and *not* be happy that they have no idea where Shinsou would have run off to. “Show me what you can do, and I’ll show you that I can protect you.”

Mirio *knows* that Shinsou can fight. The kid flipped him nearly on his head when they sparred, and even if Mirio knows he was holding a lot back, he doesn’t know if *Shinsou* was holding back too. If this might be the best way to do this.

If Shinsou doesn’t think that Mirio is strong, strong enough to be the person to run to, then maybe it’s easier to show it with a demonstration.

Mirio walks forward, still with his hands up, the blood trickling down his arm under his jacket from where Shizuo broke his skin, and he’s not surprised when Shinsou pulls out his knife. In a way, that kind of makes it better. Even if it’s a completely different feeling from facing that lizard villain, *especially* with Shinsou still holding the mochi plushie to his chest with one hand. “Get the fuck away from me. I *swear*, I *will* kill you this time.”

“You don’t have to go *that* far,” Mirio says, hesitating before he takes a smaller step. Shinsou holds the knife in front of him defensively, at an angle in front of his chest. His first move from that position would be a slice, but could move quickly into stabbing, probably at Mirio’s left side. Which means that Mirio could drop into the ground and come up behind Shinsou on the right, grabbing his arm from behind to take him down, *if* he had his quirk.

But Mirio doesn’t, so when he sees the knife move, just wavering, he strikes quick to grab Shinsou’s hand and force the knife out of his grip with his thumb in a pressure hold, grabbing Shinsou’s shoulder with a forearm against his collarbone that could force Shinsou to fall backwards on the ground, could put pressure on Shinsou’s windpipe, the perfect hold for taking down a vocal type villain.

Shinsou starts to fall back, but Mirio only has the barest warning before Shinsou locks his leg in front of Mirio’s to use as leverage before he turns and forces his arm completely straight, dropping the plushie when he breaks Mirio’s hold on his shoulder pushing his arm away. Shinsou tries to use his grip on his wrist as an anchor point for an arm bar, his free hand on the back of Mirio’s shoulder, but Mirio finds it too easy to just throw him onto his back in the snow in front of him. Away from the knife, just in case.

He doesn’t even have time to see Shinsou’s expression before he’s on his feet again, and Mirio has to back up to get a split second to predict what his next move is.

Shinsou is an unpredictable fighter, but only to a point. Mirio knows that Shinsou has the same strategy that he did before, to find *some* hold or grapple to force Mirio down, but Mirio realizes it for the first time that Shinsou doesn't use *any* offensive strikes at all. No punches, no palm jabs, no kicks, Shinsou just wants to become an octopus and choke him out at *some* point.

But Mirio has sparred with an *actual* octopus, who is now his boyfriend, so Shinsou isn't pulling out anything he hasn't seen before.

Mirio doesn't want to hurt Shinsou, as much as these defensive grapples seem to indicate that Shinsou doesn't want to hurt him. Mirio fights almost the same way he did before with Shinsou before Shinsou had to meet Chisaki again, he never throws a punch that he *wants* to connect and nothing is at his full power. But he still wants to show Shinsou that he *is* powerful.

Shinsou finds an opening, a momentary distraction in the fight, to jump onto Mirio's back with his feet digging into Mirio's hips, one arm tight around his neck and the other probably trying to complete the sleeper hold, but Mirio hooks a hand into the bend of Shinsou's elbow with another under his knee to twist and throw him off. Before Shinsou gains his footing fully, still kneeling on the ground, Mirio slides the hand holding his elbow to his wrist to twist it behind Shinsou's back, stepping behind him in one of the most basic restraint holds. Still loose, he doesn't try to force Shinsou closer to his knees or the ground, because this is a restraint hold, but not a villain take down.

This is Mirio trying to prove that he could have done this before, that night Shinsou was attacked, if he could have *trusted* him.

There's just a moment of Miro fighting to catch his breath, trying to find the words to say when Shinsou has gone still and quiet, probably irritated about losing first and foremost before Mirio can explain things fully, before Mirio hears Aizawa's voice. "*What*. Did I say. About not running off?"

Mirio turns his head so fast that he practically *hears* himself pulling a muscle, because that kind of Aizawa tone? *Always* means punishment with a capital P. "This might look kinda stupid, but Shinsou's okay, he's fine, you're fine right-"

"Why didn't you ask me to go to the 1-A dorm?" Shinsou asks, his tone unnaturally flat and rough, and Mirio starts to cover his own mouth to see if that would stop the quirk's effect, but apparently, it's not meant for him.

"Because my students are dealing with enough right now, I'm dealing with enough, and you need to sort things out with Hizashi," Aizawa answers, before his eyes glaze over under the influence of Shinsou's quirk, and Mirio doesn't even have a second to consider how to break Shinsou's control before Shinsou takes advantage of how Mirio's hold had loosened further to twist and stand, pulling Mirio's arm by his elbow into a joint lock behind his back.

Mirio knows how to get out of it, easy, because this is kind of the worst grapple Shinsou has tried to pull so far, but feeling Shinsou press his forehead against his shoulderblade stops Mirio from doing that. Just listening to how ragged Shinsou's breathing is. "I need to leave. They're trying to get rid of me."

"What?" Mirio asks, before he remembers that's not exactly a *great* thing to do right now. Shinsou took control of him at the dorm without asking him a question, Shinsou's quirk has clearly changed in some big ways that Mirio *kind of* needs to know about now, and Shinsou's control might not be the best right now. Not when he sounds legitimately convinced that 'they're' trying to get rid of him.

“Aizawa said it himself, he doesn’t want to deal with me, and he *had* to tell the truth, and Yamada is planning to assign me to another hero, and-” Shinsou cuts himself off, before he pulls back just to headbutt Mirio’s back, frustrated but kind of gentle, in a weird way. “*Fine*, I deserve it, but I don’t want... that to happen.”

“Look, Shinsou,” Mirio tries to reassure, but it’s kind of awkward when he can’t look at him, and even when he tugs at his arm, Shinsou just holds him tighter. So Mirio sighs and relaxes into it, if this is the way Shinsou wants to have this conversation. “I think you might be a little confused about what’s going on? I’m a little confused too, so that’s okay, but I do know that with that part of your quirk, things come out *really* wrong sometimes. Aizawa probably meant that he’s just got a lot on his plate right *now*, since his students have a lot going on, but that doesn’t mean he wants to get rid of you.”

Mirio looks at the knife on the ground, since he can’t look at Shinsou with his insistence on the tactical hold, and *kind of* understands that Shinsou might be ‘a lot’ right now. Not that Mirio can blame him, because Shinsou’s clearly got a lot on his own plate, but Aizawa is probably dealing with *a lot* if the rumors are true about one of his students.

“And Yamada *definitely* doesn’t want to get rid of you, he actually called me to ask if you were okay before I found you,” Mirio says, and doesn’t ignore how Shinsou turns his head where it’s pressed to his back, his grip tightening for a second. There’s definitely something that Shinsou didn’t mention before he left that easily with him, *probably* to do with the weird screaming in the background. “I know you’re worried right now, and it’s probably scary to face Aizawa and Yamada on your own to straighten things out. So, I’ll stick with you for moral support! If things really are that bad, and they are trying to move you to another place, then I’ll be there to talk some sense into them.”

Mirio is absolutely *sure* that’s not the case, and this might be Shinsou acting *so much* like Tamaki, not just with the hiding behind his back but letting worries spiral into horrifying monsters inside his head. And even if the monsters aren’t real, they’re just as scary, and Mirio has been ready and able to face them with Tamaki since they were kids.

He just kind of needs to get his arm free first. “Sounds good? If Aizawa gives us any trouble, I think I can take him.”

Shinsou raises his head away, only to drop it one more time, but his hand and arm falls away from the joint lock that Mirio’s elbow had been stuck in.

But Shinsou is still hiding behind Mirio, his head moving to press against the back of his arm, and there’s the smallest tug on the end of Mirio’s sleeve that he has to look down to confirm that Shinsou is picking at his sleeve, *so much like Eri does*, and Mirio kind of wants to cover his face because it’s just weirdly *adorable*. Especially for a guy that tried to threaten to kill him a while ago.

Shinsou glances around his shoulder, and Mirio looks up in time to see Aizawa crossing his arms again, apparently out of the control. Aizawa looks like he definitely needs some explanation, and it should be pretty easy to take some of the pressure off Shinsou at first. “It was my fault, sensei! I asked Shinsou to come with me to my dorm, because I wanted to talk to him, and Shizuo kind of scared him-”

“I wasn’t scared,” Shinsou argues, probably just for argument’s sake, and it sounds muffled against his arm but still draws Aizawa’s attention to him.

“Shizuo was just kind of the wrong person to run into right now, and I take full responsibility for

that,” Mirio says, and he’d bow to try to chip off a little more of Aizawa’s irritation, but that would mean that Shinsou’s human shield wouldn’t be able to defend him fully. And he doubts that Shinsou would react well to that.

Aizawa doesn’t really seem like the irritation has been chipped off *at all* with the way he hasn’t moved a muscle. When Aizawa gets *still* like that, that means *nothing* but trouble. “You seemed to be holding your own well against Mirio. Especially with that sprained ankle.”

Mirio feels a *real* urge to bow and scrape, because he must have *forced* Shinsou to come with him to the dorm in the first place without meaning to. He had no idea that Shinsou was still hurt, he thought his ankle was already healed by Recovery Girl, since he couldn’t get that taken care of in the mountains with Aizawa.

“*Especially* since Eri seems to have burned through some of the reserves of her quirk, after possibly Rewinding someone,” Aizawa says, and Mirio’s blood runs cold as he struggles to wrap his head around what Aizawa was saying. Shinsou *wouldn’t*, Shinsou is the *last* person who would-

“Four days,” Shinsou says, and Mirio turns his head to see Shinsou pulling the face mask down, revealing scabs on top of his scars, scars from that *mask* he wore before. Mirio had to ask Tamaki, had to *beg* Tamaki to tell him how Shinsou *really* was at the end of that fight when he had been forced to leave under the influence of Shinsou’s quirk, and he said that lizard quirk villain put *another* mask on Shinsou’s face. Another cruel mask that cut him like that. “That was the limit she was comfortable with. It might take repeated tries to Rewind Mirio-”

“You either *allowed* Eri to use her quirk on you, *without* supervision, or you used your quirk on her to control it, *again* without supervision or knowing the consequences of that,” Aizawa says, and Mirio understands *exactly* why Aizawa was so still, *exactly* why he’s using that tone. Aizawa was probably scared to *death* when he heard about that.

“She wanted to practice,” Shinsou argues, and Mirio hears the snow crunching under his shoes where he shifts on his feet, hiding a little further behind Mirio, even if he’s not picking at his sleeve anymore. “And you weren’t going to heal me any other way, so I’d have no way to run when you and Yamada tossed me out.”

“Which, is another problem. Probably a big misunderstanding,” Mirio says, kind of hopeful that Aizawa and Shinsou can have that discussion about using Eri’s quirk like that *without* him there. Literally caught in the middle. “Shinsou thinks that Yamada is trying to reassign him to another hero, which is... why he did that, I guess.”

Mirio is *guessing* that Shinsou also wasn’t a fan of having a sprained ankle either, and *maybe* wanted to use himself as a test subject for Eri’s quirk, which is *not* a good decision at all on his part. But Shinsou is a pretty bad decision maker, honestly.

And Mirio might have decided on the wrong words to explain, as Aizawa rubs his eyes before pinching the bridge of his nose. “Hizashi is the last person who would try to reassign you to another hero, he was probably discussing what would happen if the wardship test failed. Which we could test beforehand, if you would talk to him.”

Mirio glances at Shinsou again, seeing him glaring at his feet, and he can’t understand *any* of this. Shinsou using Eri’s quirk to heal himself from a *sprained ankle* of all things, being convinced that Yamada was trying to get rid of him. And talking to Mirio, and Aizawa, but not talking to *Yamada*? He was talking about how his quirk probably couldn’t work on hearing aids earlier, that was one of the first things he said to Mirio.

“And this *misunderstanding* doesn’t excuse you from leaving the dorm without permission or recklessly endangering yourself using Eri’s quirk,” Aizawa says, and *Mirio* feels himself sweating under Aizawa’s glare right now, even if he’s not talking to him. He’s not sure there’s enough paper in the *world* that could take down the essay that Shinsou will probably have to write to make up for this. “You don’t seem to understand that these limits are there for your own wellbeing. Get on the track, warm up, and start running. Only stop when you’re tired.”

Not an essay then, but that’s still an Aizawa Classic. Mirio looks at Shinsou, who’s glaring at Aizawa now instead of at the snow, who still has that black facemask dangling off his ear and several scabs on his face. But Mirio is *pretty sure* Shinsou has some other wounds if Rewind took his body back to the very night he was attacked. “Uh, sensei, Shinsou might still be hurt from that attack-”

“Just from the mask,” Shinsou grumbles, before he reaches up and balls the facemask up in his fist before stuffing it in his pocket, heading for the track behind them. Accepting Aizawa’s punishment, but apparently counting Mirio’s support out now. Maybe he doesn’t need it.

But Mirio’s still following him to offer it, smiling when Shinsou looks over his shoulder and seems surprised by that.

The first thing that villain did, apparently, was put the mask back on Shinsou’s face. Before he started using that knife. Right after Mirio was forced to abandon Shinsou.

He’s not abandoning him out of his own free will this time.

The stretching is silent, if a little bit rushed. They probably should have stretched before that ‘kinda-spar, kinda-fight,’ and when Shinsou does start running, Mirio easily keeps pace with him on his right side. So that Shinsou can’t really see Aizawa, if he still feels scared of him.

But the closeness also lets Mirio keep track of how Shinsou’s doing on this run. The weather isn’t the best for this kind of exercise with the cold air, early evening chill. The track has grown patches of snow since it’s only cleaned up in the morning if it’s not scheduled to be used. Shinsou might look a lot better than he did when he arrived at UA, still skinny but not *scary* skinny, but he doesn’t train like the hero course students do.

Mirio recognizes the fire burning behind Shinsou’s narrowed eyes when it gets brighter, the more he seems to be getting a little winded. Shinsou hasn’t trained enough to reach that point, but he’s still pushing himself like he can do it.

“Stop,” Aizawa calls out from his place on the edge of the track, after they round the bend that came after Mirio *really* started worrying how far Aizawa would push Shinsou, or how far Shinsou would push himself. Shinsou stumbles when he stops and Mirio catches him with a hand on his shoulder that Shinsou jerks away from, still breathing too hard. But right after that, Shinsou braces his hands on his knees, almost like he’s about to collapse.

Shinsou’s exhaustion seems to get worse *after* he’s stopped, like he wouldn’t let himself realize the fatigue wearing on him until he was allowed to. Mirio sees that, and realizes how *bad* that is, because all first year hero students have to learn *how* to learn their limits before they go beyond. Pushing *beyond* the beyond, or in Shinsou’s case, *beyond* the *beyond* of the *beyond*, can only lead to trouble.

“Run another lap,” Aizawa orders, and both Mirio and Shinsou turn to look at him. Aizawa is calm as ever, and Mirio knows there’s no malice behind it. Aizawa likes to *prove* a point when his words aren’t taken seriously, and that’s why practically everyone in the hero course realizes at some point

that they've *got* to listen to Aizawa.

But Shinsou *isn't* a hero course student, he's a winded kid who probably needs to cool down at this point. Even if he can fight, even if he's fought a lot before and probably made such a *habit* of pushing past his limits to survive that he can't recognize them now, Mirio doesn't *really* want to see Shinsou even more exhausted.

But Shinsou pulls himself up with half a growl in the back of his throat, and starts running again. And Mirio catches up to run with him. And he realizes it.

This is kind of like breaking a horse.

Not that Mirio knows a whole lot about that, just from some movies, but when there's a horse too wild to be ridden or even get close to it, the cowboys in old westerns would just put it inside a corral with a length of rope tying it to a pole in the middle, and make it run in circles. Even if the horse started out *wanting* to run, it would eventually get tired. That's when they'd make the horse keep running, just running in circles until it was too tired to fight when someone would get close and take it back to the stable to care for it. Eventually, the horse was supposed to learn that listening to the cowboys was better than listening to its instincts.

Shinsou's instincts seem to be pretty bad ones right now, and Mirio is still trying not to think of how *bad* it could have turned out if Eri's quirk Rewinded Shinsou *way* more than four days. Shinsou needs to listen to Aizawa, and probably learn to listen to his own limits.

Shinsou drops into a stumbling jog on the last few steps, still bent over when he stops, but he keeps clenching and unclenching his hands like he doesn't want to brace himself again, like he doesn't want to seem that exhausted in front of Aizawa. But Mirio knows that Aizawa sees that too. "If you stopped when you felt tired, you wouldn't feel like this."

Shinsou's hands clench longer, his panting breaths turning almost into another growl. But he still won't look at Aizawa, staring ahead like he's expecting *another* lap.

"If you don't know your limits, you'll get hurt from unnecessary recklessness," Aizawa continues, folding his arms in front of his chest again. "Healing from a sprained ankle is easier than healing from a worse injury."

"Wasn't... me," Shinsou gasps between pants. "Your... crazy grandfather... did that."

Aizawa just tilts his head, and Mirio *kind of* wants the story behind that, but he's not going to interrupt right now. "And after that, you proceeded to ignore your injury, *run* and *climb a tree* with that sprained ankle, and wanted to take a three hour hike on foot after all of that. *You* did that, because you think that injuries won't affect you later on when you can be quirk healed over and over."

Shinsou turns to look at Aizawa, pulling himself to stand, but Mirio sees how he drags his leg to face him instead of stepping. Walking back to the dorms will *not* be fun for Shinsou. "'Pain... is the best teacher,' huh. That's not... a new one."

Mirio is honestly impressed that Aizawa doesn't react to that. Whether Shinsou means that honestly, if he thinks that Aizawa only meant to *hurt* him with this exercise, or whether Shinsou was saying that to make Aizawa feel like he was just like the villains that hurt Shinsou before, *Mirio* feels sick to his stomach. But Aizawa doesn't even blink. "And you *wouldn't* be hurt, if you ran until you were *tired*. You're coming to the 1-A dorm, with me, and that's *not* an invitation. And your walking privileges have been revoked."

Mirio doesn't really know what that last part means, but Shinsou seems to. And Shinsou seems to find that to be the worst part of his punishment, as he throws his head back with a growl under his breath to roll his eyes at the sky. But, since that seems to be the end of it, Mirio does some cool down stretches and eventually Shinsou catches on to do them too.

Mirio gets his answer about what 'walking privileges being revoked' means when Aizawa turns around and crouches, and Shinsou throws himself on his back for a piggy back ride. Neither of them seem happy about that.

Mirio doesn't know what he feels about it either. At all.

It's probably time for him to leave, then. "Don't forget the mochi plushie! And the knife!"

Mirio picks up both items out of the snow, and while Shinsou raises a heavy hand to take the plushie, Aizawa takes the knife. Mirio *definitely* wants to take his leave when he sees how worn out Aizawa looks, now that he's close enough to him to see it.

"And I'll talk to you later, Shinsou!" Mirio says, walking faster to make sure he makes it to the 3-A dorm before they pass him to the 1-A dorm. *Pretty* sure that Yamada already got the details from Aizawa, but he sends the text anyway to confirm that Aizawa has custody of Shinsou now.

He's *very* interested in why his sweet and perfect boyfriend happened to have a yellow mochi plushie in his arms the last time Mirio saw him, because Mirio definitely feels like he *needs it*. And the said boyfriend. And some nice cuddling to unwind.

And trying not to think about what Shinsou getting Rewound by Eri really means right now.

*

The walk starts silently, which Aizawa takes advantage of and extends by offering Hitoshi a jelly pouch along with the knife to be put away. The jelly pouch is not just an adequate meal replacement, but should help rehydrate him after exercising to that extent.

And as Aizawa expects, Hitoshi's biting words come right after he finishes that jelly pouch.

"You smell like cigarettes," Hitoshi says, leaning on his elbows into the top of Aizawa's shoulders just a *bit* too hard. It hurts a bit, but Aizawa has been hurt *far* worse, and he's too exhausted to think about calling Hitoshi out on it.

"I smoke occasionally," Aizawa answers, too exhausted to consider whether that's a bad influence on an impressionable youth. Exhausted isn't the right word for what he is right now, not when the most strenuous thing he's accomplished today is packing up all of Hagakure's belongings to be shipped to Ms. Joke once the wardship begins, but it's the one he'll use to sum it up.

Aizawa and Hizashi both smoke occasionally, they have a 'stress stash' of cigarettes that Aizawa tells himself he's allowed to burn through. When that half-full pack is finished, he won't buy another one. He'll let Hizashi do that, if he feels the need to.

When those cigarettes are gone, he'll have to put Shiori to rest in his mind. He would have helped her, he wouldn't have let it come to this. He could have saved them *both*. But he didn't.

He doesn't know whether he's calling Shiori a friend now just to salt his own wound, when he always thought of her as a reliable informant and a pain in his ass and a tragic person who refused to get help with her clear issues all at once. But he regrets that he'll never step foot in her apartment again, he'll never be met with that foul mix of cigarettes, trash, and body odor. He just wants to

remember the way she looked before she was attacked, when he thinks of her.

Hitoshi's elbows pull away from his shoulders, replaced by his forearms. He knows that Hitoshi is fidgeting, likely uncomfortable with this method that's only barely disciplinary. Hitoshi pushed himself too far, and Aizawa isn't in the right state of mind to not feel responsible for that. And he knows he'd feel worse if Hitoshi injured himself from being pushed further in walking to the dorm. "I'm not angry with you. You're allowed to make your own choices here, up to a point, and willfully going against my instructions to keep you safe is one of those points. And using Eri's quirk on yourself...."

When Aizawa saw Hitoshi and Mirio fighting like that, when he saw that Hitoshi was doing more than not taking into consideration his sprain, that he was fighting like he didn't *have* it, and put together the reason why Eri was having an emotional meltdown as the backlash of using her quirk and why Hitoshi left his crutch at the dorm, he was *terrified*. Even if the moment had passed, even if he could see that Hitoshi was *alive*, he still felt that terror like Eri's quirk was being used on Hitoshi in that moment.

"You could have been killed if you were Rewound too far. *Eri* would have *killed* you," Aizawa says, and he doesn't want to *imagine* the horror that would have unwound from that. He knows that Eri could never recover from it, Hizashi would blame himself. Hizashi didn't realize what had happened until Eri started lashing out, he would have only realized what had happened by Eri's *screams*. "You can't do that, ever again."

Hitoshi's silence is unnatural now, and the too-loose weight of his arms on Aizawa's shoulders rings with an accusation Hitoshi already leveled. That Aizawa went too far with that discipline, he acted too *familiar*.

"Are you hurt?" Aizawa asks, and he realizes he should have asked before. He shouldn't have just *assumed* Hitoshi wasn't injured by the way he was fighting, because Hitoshi has proven time and time again, *recently*, that he doesn't know when to stop when he needs to.

Aizawa sees Hitoshi's answer, rather than hearing it. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Hitoshi signing '*no*' with his right two fingers moving up and down. Hitoshi *signing* to him.

Aizawa doesn't know if this is a cold shoulder, or a sign that he *has* gone too far, but he'd rather have this discussion verbally. Especially when Hitoshi can't sign much when he's draped over Aizawa's back. "If that exercise was something familiar to you, I'm sorry for telling you to run. You can tell me when something like that--"

Aizawa watches Hitoshi's hand go limp, before his skull smacks into the back of Aizawa's head. Aizawa would think that Hitoshi was now communicating displeasure by headbutting, certainly a *unique* sign for JSL, but the way that Hitoshi jolts back and nearly pulls Aizawa off balance by how he's carrying him seems to suggest it was an accident. "Not that."

Those two words, as quietly and rushed as they were spoken, provide more questions than answers. Aizawa fights not to stop walking as the silence drags on again.

Finally, Hitoshi sighs. "*Fine*, I was stupid. I thought I could use my quirk on Eri if she went too far, but I couldn't. I was lucky that she stopped on her own."

Unbelievably, horrifyingly lucky. "And you did that because you thought Hizashi was trying to place you somewhere other than UA."

One of Hitoshi's arms withdraw, and Aizawa can picture the teenager rubbing the back of his neck

in his usual habit. “I didn’t like being injured either. Even Chisaki and Bug healed me.”

Both of those names are ones Aizawa doesn’t want to be compared to. Or thought to be worse comparatively. “Healing done by a quirk isn’t standard medical care. It has risks from overuse. Apart from a few exceptions, most people have to deal with a splint for six weeks.”

On an industry standard, most heroes are exempt from that and usually placed in the front of the line for any doctor who has the license to use their quirk in medical care. A triage system follows that, dire civilian cases can be treated with quirk healing. An ankle sprain is *not* that.

It’s a system that Hitoshi will have to get used to, at some point.

“I know,” Hitoshi says, *like* he knows, but Aizawa knows full well he’s never experienced that. It’s something that Hizashi and himself have probably enabled too far by bringing Hitoshi to Recovery Girl for every injury. “Chisaki probably would have killed me, if I disobeyed him. Bug too. If I was lucky she just would have beaten me.”

Every inch of that horror that Hitoshi describes like it’s nothing to him doesn’t sound like an accusation, or an attempt to discuss his experiences frankly with the outer appearance of trying to unnerve Aizawa to gain pity, instead of admitting he’s overwhelmed. It honestly sounds like an admission of where they stand, a retraction in too many words.

That at the very least, Aizawa *isn’t* as cruel as those criminals in Hitoshi’s eyes now.

“We can see Recovery Girl for your face. That isn’t intensive enough to be dangerous,” Aizawa offers, even if his reasons behind it aren’t so benign. He doesn’t want to add more scars, to know that Hitoshi has them because he decided against that course of action. Hitoshi signs ‘*no*’ again, but Aizawa won’t take that as another retreat into silence. “How far back did you want Eri to go?”

He has to ask, and the pressure on his shoulders when Hitoshi stiffens is almost an answer in itself. The answer he offers isn’t surprising. “Far enough. My hair would be messed up again, but my pants would fit better.”

Aizawa suspected it, but the confirmation is still unnerving.

Hitoshi wanted to Rewind himself before the raid.

Before he was fused with Chisaki and Nemoto. Before his quirk *could* have mutated with Nemoto’s, a desperate action especially when there was a near certainty it wouldn’t work.

If Eri’s quirk was able to reverse that, Hitoshi wouldn’t have a mutated quirk in the first place.

“There are no easy fixes like that,” Aizawa says, because as much as Eri’s quirk is powerful, it’s also flawed. That’s another reason that Hitoshi can’t return to the dorm tonight, when Eri will likely not be in a mood to see him given that she tends to have a lingering anger after these quirk outbursts. “You could lose a great deal more than you would gain if you attempt something like that. You’ve moved forward in ways you can’t clearly see now.”

Aizawa stops in front of the 1-A dorm, knowing that at this hour, it might be better to scale to the rooftop access or the window he left open on the sixth floor, when he still *doesn’t* want his students to see Hitoshi right now. Not today, when they deserved at least *one* day to mourn Hagakure’s parting.

“And we’ll buy more pants,” Aizawa mutters, at least grateful that wasn’t the *reason* Hitoshi risked Rewinding himself out of existence.

Without an answer to that, Aizawa adjusts his grip behind Hitoshi's left knee before he throws his capture scarf, picking the window. He hesitates long enough for Hitoshi to see what he's doing, and feels Hitoshi wrap his arms loosely around his neck to steady himself.

After making sure the plushie was secured between them, pressed tighter against Aizawa's back.

Aizawa has to trust that Hitoshi knows how to hold onto him when he pulls himself to the window in one fluid movement, catching himself on the windowsill to make sure that he doesn't knock Hitoshi off of him by accident. He winds his scarf back around his neck and closes the window, but even on solid ground, Hitoshi's arms remain wound around him, underneath the scarf. Aizawa's hands go back to Hitoshi's knees, but he starts to feel Hitoshi's weight more solidly against them.

Before Hitoshi's head drops to Aizawa's shoulder, and Aizawa realizes what happened. The kid has dropped into a dead sleep on him.

Despite his best efforts, Hitoshi's leg falls when Aizawa has to open the door to the Safe Room, but the thud of Hitoshi's shoe isn't enough to jolt him awake. Once inside, Aizawa awkwardly tries to deposit Hitoshi on the cot, more successful than he should be, stripping off his shoes even if his jacket will have to stay on, or risk waking him.

Aizawa only sees Hitoshi move when he puts the purple plushie next to him, the teenager curling towards it with an arm falling short of cradling it almost instinctively. Mirio should probably know how well received his gift was.

Aizawa takes a picture, with a little spite, but sends it to his husband to help soothe his nerves. Hizashi insisted that he would be better equipped to wind Eri down right now, rather than switching duties at the dorm, but he knows that his husband is still worried about Hitoshi.

Aizawa can't say he's not worried either. Hitoshi's every action recently has nothing short of *worrying*, and often far beyond that. As much as he knows that Hizashi can't take that on in the present moment, when Eri would likely lash out at Hitoshi like a trapped and vicious kitten with some *reasonable* offenses to iron out, Aizawa isn't sure if he can handle him either. He knows that he needs to get to the bottom of why Hitoshi is refusing to talk to Hizashi, he knows he needs to help Hitoshi cope with that recent attack when Hitoshi is clearly suffering profoundly, evidenced by these abrupt changes in his demeanor. Lashing out at every opportunity, when before there was only silence.

Hitoshi mumbles something in his sleep, trying to curl himself closer to the plushie, and Aizawa takes the blanket folded up on the end of the bed to lay it over him. Before he takes another cigarette to take to the rooftop, where he won't be spotted by his impressionable students at the window like he was by Uraraka.

Hitoshi is a mess, but he's also Aizawa's responsibility. His mess, in a way.

He'll have to find better ways than smoking to cope with that.

Rule of Law

Chapter Summary

Aizawa begins a new method of investigating The Miasma, with Shinsou's help.
Ochako considers the upcoming voluntary internship period during winter break.
Shinsou faces the first 'family meeting' to discuss rules that he knows he's broken, and consequences, which will require further testing.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Shiori mention in Aizawa's POV, Casual mention of suicide that is not intended to be serious in Shinsou's POV

Previously on Wards of UA: After Shinsou left the dorm with Mirio, after Eri used her quirk to Rewind him 4 days to heal his ankle sprain and accidentally revert him to the point where the mask had cut into his face during the 127 attack, he was taken to the 1-A dorm to be closely watched by Aizawa. Shinsou used his quirk without talking for the first time on Mirio, and has been using sign language sporadically since. Ojiro and Hagakure were dating prior to Hagakure being revealed as the UA traitor, and Ojiro took that revelation particularly hard. Eri picked out plushies from her massive collection to give to the hero students, after hearing that Hagakure 'couldn't go to school anymore.' Monoma created an Advent Calendar for both Shinsou and Eri, to give them a gift every day in December, which was created with the goal to make Shinsou realize that he's a kind person who doesn't just want to Copy his quirk. Shinsou does not feel confident about his ability to cook, and feels that Yamada lies to him any time that he tells Shinsou that he made a meal well. Shinsou has also recently started growing facial hair, and he particularly hates having stubble on his chin like Aizawa. Aizawa Shoga, Aizawa's grandfather, threatened Shinsou saying that he would 'pickle his fingers and eat them,' which was a threat that Shinsou was particularly impressed with and wanted to use at the soonest opportunity.

Hitoshi hardly moved while he slept, as far as Aizawa knew. Aizawa tends to stay awake during dorm shifts to make sure he won't have to rely on his students coming to him with an emergency or issue. Most teachers don't stay awake, they actually use the cot and trust the automated system to alert them to true emergencies.

But he fell asleep in his chair, now blinking blearily at the door until he woke up enough to find the edge of the desk digging into his temple uncomfortable.

Aizawa checks the video feed with still blurry eyes, finding a few students in the kitchen making breakfast and the doors for his other students' rooms still closed. No alerts about mixed sex gatherings, no fire alarms that he wasn't aware of.

He pulls himself to stand and stretch, and starts making a pot of coffee with the machine that

Hizashi purchased for him, knowing that this eventuality would come to pass multiple times. He's sure that with Bakugo in the kitchen, there's a perfectly good pot of coffee he could invite himself to downstairs, but he frankly doesn't have the energy for that.

He fills the pot with water from the bathroom sink, meets the half-full package of his special blend of coffee grounds with deep gratitude as he pours half of it into the machine and sets it to the strongest brew strength. He watches the steady drip of pitch black liquid slowly fill the pot, still considering whether he should swap it for his coffee mug for greater efficiency, before he sees a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye.

Hitoshi jolts awake and to sitting, pulling a hand to rub at his face, before his eyes fall to and focus on the coffee pot.

Aizawa at first wants to pettily guard this coffee that he needs, because he has responsibilities that Hitoshi doesn't, before he realizes that there's a distinct possibility that Hitoshi hasn't had a drop of coffee in the past four days. Not while they were in the mountains, and if Hizashi hadn't given him coffee yesterday, this could be a simple solution for taking the edge off some of the teenager's irritation.

When the drip falters to those last few drops that Aizawa will willingly sacrifice to the heating element at the base in exchange for coffee in his hand a few seconds sooner, Aizawa pours the coffee into a spare mug that he's nearly sure is Hizashi's, then his own, before he holds the first out to Hitoshi. The teenager moves faster than he should at this early hour to crawl to the bottom of the cot and take it, pressing the mug to his lips to test whether it's cool enough to drink from yet.

Aizawa has long since learned to drink through the pain when necessary, familiar scalding on his tongue soothed by the taste, and when he blinks afterwards, he actually feels awake.

He checks the time, and sees that he has a few more hours before Toshinori will take over, and a few hours after that a training exercise will be held that's *described* as voluntary but *is* in fact mandatory, which he's sure that his students will understand with voluntary internships starting after New Years Day. That means that their lunch will likely come from Hizashi, depending on how Eri is doing, but breakfast will take place here, in this room most likely.

Since Hitoshi is still waiting for the coffee to cool, still inhaling as much of the smell that he can, Aizawa pulls out another jelly pouch from the drawer full of them, and tosses it towards the cot, though Hitoshi catches it before it lands. He watches the teen blink and stare, before he seems to understand it's for his own consumption, moving to open it, made awkward by his hold on the coffee mug.

Aizawa thinks that at some point, he should wake up enough for them to exchange words, but when he has half of his first cup left and Hitoshi finally takes a sip of his own after finishing the jelly pouch breakfast, Hitoshi seems to make his preference known. *'Good morning. How is Eri?'*

Aizawa watches Eri's unique name sign being signed out, again awkward with Hitoshi's coffee mug held between his knees. He knows the reason why Hitoshi would prefer to ask that question in sign, given that his quirk control when asking questions is worse than it was at the start of this wardship.

But he still worries that this silence is more than that.

'Good morning. Not awake yet. Hizashi will text me.'

For two different reasons, both wards were exhausted enough to go to sleep early yesterday. While

Hitoshi had run several laps under Aizawa's instruction, passing beyond his physical limits, Eri spent nearly an hour screaming with Hizashi in Gym Gamma, the toll of using her quirk finally left her with exhaustion. *'Investigation.'*

Hitoshi takes another sip of coffee after he signs that, something that *shouldn't* be his second thought upon fully waking up. Aizawa passed along the information that Hitoshi gave him about Miasma's whereabouts to Naomasa, he glanced over the list that Shiori gave Naomasa briefly before he needed to excuse himself for a smoke break, and hadn't looked at it since. He knows that Nezu is also coordinating on this now, but the final piece is dependent on Hitoshi.

Hitoshi not only knows that Miasma operates out of a warehouse on the coastline, but he should be able to recognize it if he sees it. They'll likely need to visit the location, or several, to confirm it in person, but Aizawa is hopeful that this method might bring about a few leads.

While Aizawa knows *intimately* that warehouse districts are unnervingly similar to some degree, and hot spots for criminal activities, he hopes there's something unique enough about Miasma's base that can be spotted on Google Maps. "Here."

Aizawa stands up after pulling up a warehouse district on Oshima Island in Street View, which will allow Hitoshi to 'walk around the area' without actually having to travel to the location. Hitoshi sits down and toggles between a few steps, demonstrating that he knows how to use it. This location should buy Aizawa a few minutes.

"I'll be back," Aizawa says, picking up the pack of cigarettes from the desk, and with a glance sees that this pack he's allowed himself won't last the length of the investigation. Even thinking of the list that Shiori exchanged her life for is enough to stir up these feelings.

He has enough reasons to want to be done with this investigation.

*

Ochako rolls over in her bed, the pleasant strain from sparring with Ojiro yesterday reminding her that she's a step closer to her goal of being a hero. Even if Ojiro seemed down at first, sparring seemed to breathe some life back into him, and he definitely needed it.

Ochako still jolts when she hears that violent rapping at her door, and a painful groan from her empty stomach makes it worse. "*Oi, your lazy ass gets room service until you start waking up on time.*"

Ochako flops backwards onto her bed when she's sure that Bakugo has left, *definitely* leaving her a serving of overly spicy breakfast in front of her door. It's probably not some mild form of bullying, because as much as Izuku has been snipping back and forth with Bakugo recently, Izuku must have had time to tell Bakugo something she *asked* him not to tell anyone about.

She didn't get enough money to buy food this week.

During the school week, she gets a free lunch included with her tuition to UA, and there's breakfast offered too, not that many students take advantage of it. Her parents send her enough money to cover dinners and weekend meals, but the decision to start winter break early was sudden. She hadn't told them when they sent her the usual 6,000 yen.

She knows not to tell them, either. The winter holidays mean that her parents can't collect their usual overtime, and she knows the third week of the month before her dad collects his salary on the last day is the hardest. She can pull through just fine, she has a small savings for this kind of

situation.

She knows that she shouldn't *have* to worry about that, when everyone already arranged to contribute to a dorm-wide grocery fund before winter break began. The number that Iida told her was everyone's responsibility was a lot *smaller* than the one that YaoMomo put in the 1-A chat. And she's pretty sure that YaoMomo is still contributing the most to that fund.

Maybe, she shouldn't care where that food comes from, or whether she deserves it. She needs to eat well so that she can train harder, and skipping the breakfast placed right outside her door will mean that the toll she took from her body yesterday won't be paid back, and it will strain her health for that.

But she wishes that she could see it that simply, that Bakugo brought her breakfast and she should just *eat it*. That it's the same breakfast everyone else gets, it's not like the elementary school leftovers that she ignorantly bragged about taking home to her peers that *weren't* enrolled in a program that allowed them to do that. That Bakugo *isn't* wearing that weird, pitying expression that so many of her friends used to when they said that they'd pay for her meal if they stopped at a fast food place, or said that she didn't have to buy anything for their birthday to come to their party.

She wishes that she wasn't the only person who sees everything with a price tag, even gifts. Even well intentioned ones.

She wishes she could just afford it on her own.

There's another knock on Ochako's door, and she knows it's not Bakugo trying to enforce that she eat breakfast. He's been doing that a lot lately, if he's not training then he's cooking and probably disregarding who's food he's using to make it nearly inedible, he's trying to feed someone. She knows it's not Izuku, because he doesn't knock just once, and not that softly.

Ochako pulls off her sleeping mitts to answer the door, and sees Tsu wrapped up in a blanket, her eyes barely opened. A plate of food in both hands. "Good... morning. Kero."

Ochako finds a half-smile that she hopes doesn't come off as pitying. Despite everyone's efforts, the cold weather still gets to Tsu, and it's probably the reason that Bakugo is apparently delivering room service to her too. "Ugh, I overslept too! I wonder if Bakugo's going to get fed up with this 'room service' thing, and start making it even spicier."

Ochako steps away in invitation, which Tsu takes as she drags herself towards Ochako's bed. She almost collapses on the still-warm sheets where Ochako had been sleeping before tucking herself into her blankets too, before holding out one of the plates. Just from the color, it looks like the spiciest one.

Ochako knows Tsu well enough to know she's not always blunt when she speaks. She's blunt without having to talk at all, especially these days.

And she's very bluntly asking Ochako to eat the spiciest breakfast, because her amphibian tastebuds are more sensitive to it, and for some reason, that makes it easier when Ochako sits down and takes it from her.

If Tsu was trading which serving was hers, then Ochako is doing her a favor to make sure that Bakugo doesn't hear that she didn't like it. Tsu can weather Bakugo's sparks as well as any of them, but it's honestly exhausting to put up with sometimes. That kind of favor is worth the 20 yen for rice, 19 yen for instant miso, 200 yen for the filet of fish, 30 yen for two eggs, 200 yen for a portion of fried tofu with sauce.

She doesn't know how much the sauteed vegetables cost, because her parents always find it cheaper to get the frozen mixed bag, but she knows that whoever went grocery shopping probably got fresh produce. She doesn't know how much the spices or sauce cost either, but she knows that buying spices can be expensive, before adding in how Bakugo probably buys specialty brands online.

"Ocha," Tsu grumbles, and Ochako stuffs the bite she had been hesitating over into her mouth. Maybe she shouldn't care about how much Bakugo spends to make every bite *agonizing* to eat. "I don't know what to do about Eri's birthday party, kero. Shinsou has made things very awkward."

Ochako frowns and puffs out her cheeks a bit when she sees Tsu take the glass of water that had been on her bedside table to take a drink, especially since she *really* needs it. This red fish is *coated* in chili flakes, enough to be crunchy. "He probably won't say anything, since it's Eri. But I don't think you have to go just because Satsuki will be there."

Samidare apparently had some issues with being invited to playdates with Eri, which he told to Tsu rather than telling their parents, but the last time that Ochako heard about it, it seemed to be ironed out. Samidare might still be a kid at 10 years old, but it's understandable that he would feel uncomfortable among a small gathering of 6 year olds. 10 is an awkward age, between childhood and longing to be a teenager already. "Shoji is going, though. And Kota might be there too, kero. If Kota starts any trouble with Tsuki, I feel like I should keep him in line."

Tsu hands Ochako the glass of water, and Ochako flusters for just a moment before taking it. It might be an 'indirect kiss' to share a drink like that, but they're just friends. Just girls, who are friends. Tsu probably doesn't care about that kind of thing.

And Tsu cares about a lot of things, that she probably doesn't have to.

"I think Aizawa-sensei and Mic-sensei can handle it, but Ragdoll or Mandalay should be there too to watch Kota," Ochako says, and she hasn't asked, but she wouldn't be surprised if Izuku was going to be invited to Eri's birthday party too, but on his own merit instead of accompanying a younger sibling. She knows that there might be a few of her peers that might be invited, even if Eri should have more friends her own age to fill a birthday party, instead of being friends with teenagers like them.

The 1-A girl's chat already arranged to go to the mall tomorrow to buy something for Eri's birthday, a milestone bigger than Ochako's budget can really accommodate. Even if she knows that Eri might not care how much money is spent, that she might not remember this day when she gets older, this is Eri's *first* birthday after being rescued. As a member of the operation that freed her, Ochako feels like her gift should stand out, it should be *meaningful*. It should be everything that Eri deserves that day.

She hasn't even seen her options at the mall, but her savings is already arguing for something out of a discount bin.

Tsu slowly wilts on her bed, curling up more and more into her mountain of blankets until Ochako realizes that she could use a few more hours of sleep and warmth before All Might's training exercise today. Ochako grabs both of their plates and the glass, making a note to get another so they don't have to share when Tsu wakes up. Because Ochako knows for a near certainty that Tsu will probably curl close to her if Ochako sits on the other side of her bed, while her best friend naps.

And, that's not weird, to cuddle with a good friend like Tsu. Tsu needs to be warm during these cold months, and cuddling with a friend is a good way to get it.

Ochako opens the door to the common room, and sees that there's more people than she expected to see, and a few that she didn't *really* want to see this early in the morning. Eri is here, and Ochako always wants to see Eri, but for some reason Monoma is standing beside her holding a bag. And Ochako only has a few seconds to wonder what's in that bag, and why a few of her classmates are lined up in front of them, before Eri reaches into the bag, so far that she nearly falls into it adorably, then pulls out a yellow fuzzball with a folded up piece of paper tied to it. "Ugo! This is your plushie friend!"

Bakugo turns around with a weak sneer from whatever he's cooking on the stove, as Eri runs over to him to present the fuzzball held over her head. Bakugo stares at it, almost threatening to hurt Eri's precious feelings, and Ochako is already walking over to put up her dirty dishes and make *sure* he doesn't, but Bakugo finally takes the plushie, flipping open the card to read it.

Eri turns around and catches sight of Ochako, and Ochako nearly melts at how happy she looks, how wide she's smiling. "Ocha! I got you a plushie friend too!"

Ochako can see that *everyone* seemed to get a plushie friend from Eri. Todoroki has a white rabbit with a tiny bow around its neck, placed on his head though he doesn't react to it being there. Kouda has a small pink butterfly in his hands, and Shoji has *something*, but he's holding it too close to his chest with both hands for Ochako to tell what it is.

And Ochako tries to just *melt* at how cute Eri looks when she holds up a pink jellyfish for her, with that folded up note tied to a tentacle. Eri beams up at her, seeming so proud. "I didn't have a flower plushie, but the pink jellyfish head looks kinda like your hero costume!"

Ochako nearly drops the dirty dishes in her hand, but Ashido slid on her knees to grab them before Ochako herself dropped to wrap Eri into a hug. *Her hero costume*. "I love it, Eri! That's so thoughtful!"

She doesn't want to think about it. How much plushies usually cost, how Eri was just giving them away freely. How Eri wouldn't be impressed by any gift that's under that price range. She just tries to smile and pet Eri's hair, her chest exploding with warmth when Eri reaches up to hug her back.

She could die happy. In a cute, adorable, fantastic little girl's arms. If that wouldn't also be horrifying.

Speaking of horrifying. "Of course, I *hope* that 1-A can raise their gifting standards a tad for Eri's birthday, seeing as she had to clear out the useless debris cluttering her room by regifting."

"Mono," Eri deadpans and turns around, and Ochako gets to see the *vengeful* sight of Monoma withering at that, the smug look falling off his face as though that *hilariously appropriate* nickname hit as hard as Kendo's hand. "You *promised* you wouldn't be a dark face! You're a hero, and heroes are supposed to be friends!"

Monoma bites his lips and closes his eyes, the hands holding Eri's bag becoming fists as though withholding himself from arguing with a *five year old* was physically painful for him.

But Eri turns around, Ochako's arms still wrapped loosely around her, and her wide eyes and cute *cuteness* are enough that Ochako wants to smother her in another hug just from getting her attention. "And I didn't pick the plushies that my friends gave me, because I want to keep them, but I got a whole lot from the big test week from people I don't know. And I like them! But they don't get enough 'tention from me, so I think you guys should be friends with them."

Ochako loses the fight in self-restraint, pulling Eri into another tight hug, barely holding herself

back from crying. Eri is so *pure*.

Ashido is *not*, as she slides back over to Ochako's side with a hand shielding one side of her mouth "Hey, Eri-berry-horn-sis-erita, you know how heroes should be 'friends with everyone?'"

Ochako rolls her eyes and pulls back, even if she wants to shield Eri from this *really* desperate ploy written all over Ashido's face. Eri nods.

"You know, Shinny's being kinda weird, and he's not talking to us, and he doesn't seem to think that he *should* be friends with us, and I think that's a problem that you could sort out pretty quick," Ashido says, clapping her hands together and dusting them off like the problem was already taken care of. They've *talked* about this.

Shinsou said he doesn't want to have anything to do with them, in *far worse* words than that. If he doesn't come around, Ochako won't *really* miss it. Maybe, she'll miss out on the chance to fight him one on one again, to *really* go at it sometime, but most of 1-A is perfectly fine with Shinsou deciding to have nothing to do with them, even if it makes things awkward sometimes.

Ashido thinks it's perfectly fine to use Eri's influence on Shinsou to *make* him make amends, and even if that works, it would only spell trouble. Shinsou would probably still act the way he wants to whenever Eri's not around, he'll probably say *worse* things to Ashido for instigating it.

And Eri sounds like she's going to turn 30 instead of 6 when she sighs, and lays a hand on Ashido's shoulder. "I'm sorry Ashi, but Twenny's a teenager now. He decides to do a lot of dumb stuff, 'cause of hormones. And sometimes it's okay for him to do dumb stuff, but sometimes it's not. But you gotta tell him how it makes you feel, and he can get smarter eventually."

Eri is *so smart*. So *perfect*. Ashido might be stricken, now that her desperate plan has been laid to waste by a 5-almost-6 year old, but she just doesn't *get it*.

Eri would never hurt them with cruel words, or threats, or force them to wake up in the middle of the night just to hear them. And that's why Eri is so *perfect*.

Ochako doesn't know what being a 'teenager now' means with Shinsou, or what 'dumb stuff' he did to Eri, but if Eri says the word, Ochako will pile drive him through the floor until he comes to his senses. But that's not to be today. "Twenny!"

Eri sprints out of Ochako's arms and runs past Monoma to the staircase, where Aizawa-sensei and for some reason *Shinsou* are standing. She had no idea that Shinsou was here at the dorm, how or *why* he snuck in, or why he has that giant purple pillow in his arms. Why he would wear that black facemask now, based on what Izuku told her about the attack.

But Ochako scoots a little bit to her left to get a little closer to Ashido, to try to keep her from inviting any kind of 'attention' from Shinsou that he made it clear, *they don't want*. Especially Ashido.

And if the loud clattering from the kitchen is any indication, Bakugo doesn't want to get into it either.

"Twenny, I understand that you're going through a lot, being a teenager, and being dumb," Eri says, and Ochako puffs out her cheeks trying not to let the laugh escape from that last word, said so innocently and *accurately*. "But it hurt my feelings when you went with Mirio without inviting me. It made me really mad. And sad."

Ochako turns around to level a glare at the guy who *might* have more knife skills, but definitely

had *no right* to make Eri feel that way, only to see that he already knew that. Shinsou drops to crouch in front of Eri, and though Shinsou doesn't usually look like much other than bored or tired, he looks *depressed*. "I know. And I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you."

Eri nods, holding out her pinky for a swear that Shinsou shakes on, before she looks up at Aizawa-sensei. "But I want Zawa to carry me, as a punishment."

Punishment. And it looks *highly* effective from how the life practically drains out of Shinsou's eyes. "Okay."

That's a pretty clear sign that even if Ashido wanted to talk to Shinsou right now, now was *not* the time. Even Bakugo, who acted like he wanted to deck Shinsou in the face at the soonest opportunity, wouldn't tempt it right now. Everyone *knows* how Shinsou is about Eri, and sometimes it's the most charming thing about him.

Monoma *doesn't* seem to know that, digging through the bag to reach into the bottom before he carelessly flings it at Todoroki. "I'm elated to hear you've decided to preen through your so-called friend group, much like Eri has with her plushie collection. Here's the gifts that I've unfortunately been unable to give you, that I'm sure *no one* in Class A would think-

Ochako doesn't know any JSL signs other than the basics that were appropriate to learn for Shinsou, like 'yes,' 'no,' 'good morning,' and 'die,' but she spots one of them from Shinsou after he stands up to glare at Monoma. She's guessing that Monoma knows that sign too.

She's guessing that Kouda is not going to translate half of what Shinsou is signing, from the way that Monoma is gaping, or how Aizawa-sensei raises an eyebrow, before cutting Shinsou off with a hand on his shoulder. "That's enough."

Aizawa-sensei seems to glance *through* Monoma after that, scanning the room to look at the rest of them with Eri held in one of his arms.

"Do your best with Toshinori," Aizawa-sensei seems to decide to say, instead of anything else. Anything about whatever is going on with Shinsou, or escorting Monoma out, which means that as Aizawa-sensei leaves with that hand still guiding Shinsou to the door, Monoma is *still* standing there, gaping.

Ochako feels like she's not the only one waiting for him to leave, slowly realizing that *Kendo* is usually the one to 'guide' Monoma onto that route, when he slowly raises one finger before he turns, that maniac face in full swing. "What the *hell* did you *imbeciles* do to him?!"

This is the first time Ochako has heard Monoma swear, and it sounds like his first time swearing by how awkwardly his voice drops when he says it. Ochako might have to shove past Monoma to get to the stairwell and escape back to her room, but she definitely feels like doing that as Monoma continues on.

"You *ingrates*, you *self-absorbed swine*, you-you you!" Monoma points at Todoroki, apparently blaming him for whatever has gotten him this riled up. "And *you!*"

Ochako tilts her head, wondering what *she's* to blame for.

"*You ruined it,*" Monoma snarls, his hands curling in the air in frustration before he curls them into fists, turning his head away. "I was *this close*, I was *so close*, I've already won over the adorable sweet Eri, the golden avenue into Shinsou's trusted inner circle, but *whatever* you've done to him has waylaid all of my plans, all of the effort I've put into the advent calendar, selecting the best

gifts suited to their tastes, the *bidding wars*, you have no idea how vicious eBay can be in collector's circles--"

Ochako stands up, because she's heard this tune before. It's grating, on a nerve that Monoma *doesn't* want to step on.

You could afford to be a little grateful, you know. I'm the one who bought that album you had your eye on, the least you could do is- "And after *all* of that, you *cretins* did *something* to make Shinsou--"

For some reason, even though Monoma seemed to blame *her* for something, he didn't seem to notice that she was approaching until she reared back and delivered a judo chop that she was *hopeful* was an off button. And it seems like it, momentarily, before Monoma turns to look at her with her hand still resting on the part of his hair.

"You *cannot* imitate our beloved Kendo like this! This is an insult to the superior class, Class B--"

"We didn't do anything to Shinsou, but it sounds like you haven't done anything to deserve being friends with him either," Ochako says, because as *sad* as Monoma's entire existence seems to be, as much as she knows her words probably won't be heard from a guy like him, she has to say them. "Especially if you think that you can just buy friends with gifts. You can't just spend money on people until a friendship pops out."

"*Nice guy*," Todoroki adds in English, a pretty *accurate* description of Monoma if he thinks that he's supposed to be rewarded for his 'kind efforts' with Shinsou's friendship. Even if Ochako wouldn't really be surprised if 'friendship' was just the word he was using with them, when Monoma seemed so passionate about it.

"Of course, 'boundaries' and 'Shinsou is his own person with his own decisions' and-and all of that," Monoma says, his fingers moving to quote the most reasonable words he's ever said mockingly. And it's still weird that he hasn't tried to shake off her hand, but it still seems to mellow him out a little, so she doesn't pull it back just yet. It might be the secret to making Monoma chill out. "You know, I've been learning JSL - *fluently*, mind you, not that *you* would think to become fluent in the only language by which Shinsou can converse, you *animals*. My intentions are pure, and it's only a matter of time before Shinsou recognizes that--"

"And if he told you to get lost?" Ochako asks, because she's pretty sure that's *exactly* what Shinsou said, and if Monoma *is* fluent in JSL, he'd know that.

"Of course I would *respect* that," Monoma scoffs, crossing his arms like the accusation hidden there is ridiculous, or he hasn't realized it was there. But then he squints his eyes at her, pouting when he *does* realize it. "...But I'm not a quitter."

"You need to quit," Ashido adds, which is *pretty hypocritical*. "Because Shinny has decided to be *wrong*, about not having *friends*, and you're just *dragging this out* for all of us! Leave. Shinny. Alone."

Each pause is punctuated by a clap, but Monoma rolls his eyes and scoffs at it. Before that twisted grin starts to rise over his face again, pointing at Ashido. "Ha! *Now* I understand perfectly! *You're* going to try to use me against Shinsou to win him back, but *I* see the perfect opportunity to make him come to his senses! Truly, it seems that the uncouth and irresponsible degenerates of Class A *are* indeed useful as a comparison to the brilliance of Class B!"

Monoma just keeps pointing at Ashido, maybe waiting for her to taunt him back. Maybe waiting

for something else.

Ochako gives him another pity chop, and it seems like that *was* what he was waiting for, as he scoffs again before turning to leave the dorm.

She rolls her eyes, as *sad* as Monoma's entire existence seemed to be, they all have the opportunity to get a break from it. Even if winter break started off unpredictably, and there doesn't seem to be a real break from campus and school for the holidays, there *will* be two weeks where students who can get an internship offer can leave the dorm during that time. And since school isn't in session, it won't be like the fall semester voluntary internships, they can actually *leave* and pretty much take care of themselves during that time. It's an amazing opportunity to be a little more like fully fledged heroes during that time, to figure out housing, and food, and have even more time to learn from their mentoring heroes.

And Ochako is sure that Monoma will have a great time doing that.

Unlike most of her peers, Ochako can't just ask her parents to help her fund that opportunity. That narrows her choices down to staying in Mustafu, or her hometown, which only has a few local heroes who aren't established enough to offer internship slots. Ryuko is based far enough away that even if she stays in the dorm, she won't be able to participate in full patrols without missing curfew, and even though she *really* wants to intern with Gunhead again, she would have to ask him if he would be willing to provide for room and board like he was required to for the first internship, and she *can't* bring herself to do that.

She should be able to take care of herself. She should be able to stand on her own two feet, like so many of her peers are able to.

Ochako fills two glasses of water to take to her room, and almost bumps into Ojiro as he's putting his own dishes in the sink. It looks like he also got Bakugo's 'room service special,' but he actually got *tea* to go with it.

She can't help but feel jealous, or feel like this is further proof that the breakfast is actually bullying.

"Bakugo," Ojiro says, drawing Bakugo's attention as he snarls. "Thanks for the breakfast, but... *what* did you do to my tea? It tasted a little off."

"St. John's wort," Bakugo answers, oddly quiet for his usual personality, but it's almost as though Ochako jinxed it by thinking of that as he rears up and scowls. "You're been so *fucking* depressed and it's bugging the *shit* out of me, so drink the fuck up and get your serotonin straightened out, dumbass!"

Even though it's *possible*, on some almost impossible level, that Bakugo was making breakfast for everyone because he 'cared' or something. The connection to the tea makes Ochako realize something *worse*. "Bakugo, are you..."

She doesn't want to say it. She doesn't want to say it when he looks at her and he looks so *quiet*, like he already knows. It's *terrifying* to think that she's right.

"And Yaomomo-"

"*Fuck no*," Bakugo screeches, the rag that he was using to clean the counter exploding before he throws down its charred remains. Ochako can't help the relief that washes over her, because even if YaoMomo might be able to mellow him out like that, she doesn't think anyone could really

repay her sacrifice. “Are you stupid?! Are you *that* fucking stupid?! *Fuck no*, I’m not fucking with that tea sipping *fucker* just because I make *tea*, why the fuck are you that fucking stupid-”

“Oh, Uraraka,” Ojiro calls, as Bakugo keeps rambling on, but they’ve long since learned how to tune him out when he gets like this. It’s probably good training for disaster relief operations, honestly. “I was wondering if you could introduce me to Gunhead, since you’ve already had an internship with him. I’m not sure if you were planning on going back to him for winter break, but-”

“Of course!” Ochako agrees, and she can already imagine how much Gunhead will enjoy taking him under his wing. “I can call him and see if he’s taking internship offers, and I’m sure it’ll be a lot of fun! I haven’t really decided if that’s what I want to do, I’m still trying to work things out.”

“Thank you,” Ojiro says, just the smallest smile on his face as he rubs the back of his head, and it seems like he could really use the break from campus. From the dorm, and from everything for a little while. She’s happy to help. “If it works out, I have family in Nara, if you were looking for a cheaper place to stay. It’s pretty quiet, but it might be safer than-”

“*Oi*,” Bakugo interrupts, looming too close with a spatula coming between them. Ochako wouldn’t think anything of it, but *Ashido* is right behind Bakugo’s shoulder, her hands covering her mouth with something close to *horror* in her eyes. Ashido shakes her head, and that’s not- *that’s not*. “Get that *disgusting* shit out of here, don’t *talk* about that kind of bullshit in public. You better take these internships *seriously* instead of planning some *love nest*-”

“*That’s not what I was trying to-*” Ojiro covers his face, his tail thrashing back and forth behind him, and *thank god*. Ochako doesn’t have *any* time to think about those kinds of things, and she doesn’t want to have to let Ojiro down gently, if he *did* have that kind of thing in mind. “My cousins have a bed and breakfast, it’s *not* like that!”

“Oh *thank god*,” Ashido practically wheezes, collapsing onto Bakugo’s shoulder. “Rebounds are just- no. *No*, don’t do it guys, it *never* works. I know you might want to really get under Midoriya’s skin by getting with a guy like Ojiro-”

“*What?!*” Ochako can’t help but feel the blush like a burning *fire* on her face, because it’s *not like that at all*. “I’m not-with Izu-*no!*”

“*Oh?*” Ashido asks, her head popping up with a grin that looks *menacing*. “*Not* with Izu? Not even a little? With *Izu?*”

Ochako *could* go through all twelve rounds with Ashido over this, and still not win, so she decides to cut her losses and *ignore that*. Ojiro might have decided against what he already offered, but, “If your cousins are looking for part time help for the holidays, I can-”

“Oh, no!” Ojiro says, waving his hands even if the blush is still lingering on his cheeks. “They usually have vacancies, even during the holidays, so you wouldn’t have to pay or help out. It’s a family favor, or I guess.... A hero in training discount.”

Or Ojiro already knows she wouldn’t be able to afford it on her own. She would be exhausted, and probably wouldn’t have time to sleep during her internship. But she would be earning her own keep, honestly. “I... still haven’t decided. But I’ll talk to Gunhead and ask.”

Ojiro’s grateful smile still lingers on her mind as she makes her way back to her room. It’s a favor, kind of, to introduce him to her mentor, but is it enough for a two week stay in Nara? She doesn’t even know how much each night should cost, if there’s a *reason* those rooms are vacant even on the holidays.

If there really is a vacancy, or if Ojiro was lying to her. Just because he's that nice.

Tsu groans but wakes up enough to hold out her hand, begging for the glass of water before she can go back to sleep. Ochako hands her that glass with a smile, one that Tsu works up to return when Ochako also hands her the little teddy bear wearing a yellow raincoat and hat that Eri picked for her as her 'plushie friend,' a handmade invitation to Eri's birthday party tied to its leg and personalized with a drawing of 'Froppy.'

The 'Uravity' on Ochako's card has a big fist raised in the air, and blush marks. Maybe, Ochako appreciates that both of those things are part of the hero that Eri sees, even if she didn't see Ochako pin Overhaul down during the raid, Eri can so easily reconcile that 'Uravity' is cute, and powerful. That she can train to mitigate how almost non-offensive her quirk is, to fight the assumption that she's best suited as a support *sidekick*, not even as a hero, to stand on her own, despite what the Management Course interviewer said during her entrance exam.

Maybe, Ochako is distracted enough, or Tsu is more awake than she thought, because she sits up and stares at her. "What's bothering you, kero?"

Ochako shrugs, and smiles, but she knows that's not really enough of an answer to sate Tsu's curiosity. She just can't find the words to admit just enough, but not all of it. "Oh, just internships, I guess. Ojiro asked about Gunhead, and I think that would be good for him. I'm happy for him. I just don't know what to do yet."

"You should take this time to be selfish, kero," Tsu says, and Ochako feels selfish already, when she hasn't asked what Tsu's plans are. If she does have plans to leave the dorm, when the cold weather bothers her this much, and would probably make it hard for her to go to her first internship offer with Seal. "It's our duty as students to become the best heroes we can be, to take every opportunity, kero. Even if that means relying on others for a while, that's a debt we can pay back, kero."

A debt that can be paid back.

If only things could be that simple.

*

"Eri, please," Hitoshi begs quietly, running a hand through his hair to keep himself from seeing what he *knows* he'll see. What he can already hear from her sigh, how it burns under his skin from the frustration.

"Twenny, Yama wanted *you* to pick lunch, and you're big so you're supposed to know what you want," Eri says, and Hitoshi grinds his teeth and glares at the open refrigerator again, and he *knows* that's not supposed to be a punishment. Yamada *shouldn't* know, but he probably does, but he wouldn't *smile* that way if he was trying to hurt him.

It's probably *not* supposed to feel this frustrating, when Hitoshi can see several options from the ingredients, but he can't just *pick*. And he can't just turn around and walk out the door, no matter how much he wants to. He can't drive away that weird image of satisfaction that punching a wall on his way out might bring, *some way* to fight this *stupid fucking task* in a way that makes sense but it *doesn't*.

Hitoshi just closes the refrigerator door, pressing his forehead against it with his full weight, hard enough to hurt. This is just *misery*, and the worst part is there's no reason for it. No cause. He's just being *stupid*.

He's fed up with it, feeling this way. Like there's a monster under his skin, boiling his blood, making him do things that make sense in the moment without thinking things through. He *knew* that Eri would have her usual Quirk Grumps when he left with Mirio, but that offered escape just sounded too tempting to avoid it. As though he *should* avoid it, he should abandon Eri after asking her to try Rewinding him. After he shrank her horn down to half size, then *abandoned* her. Just because he was afraid to deal with it. Of Yamada finding out. As though Yamada *wouldn't* if he left Eri alone.

Hitoshi almost flinches when he feels Eri's small hand on his shoulder, and he turns his head to look at her from the corner of his eye. She still looks mad about it. "You can make the fish soup that's kinda chunky and spicy, like Ugo likes to make."

Fish curry, perfect. Hitoshi kind of knows how to make that. "Thanks. I'm sorry."

Eri pats his shoulder, and it should feel worse to be pitied by her, but it doesn't. Hitoshi leans back on his heels to curl a hand around her head, his fingers wrapping loosely around her horn. Eri doesn't pout, doesn't tell him to stop like she does when she's irritated with him. She's just that full of pity.

And he pities himself, too stupid to deal with picking *lunch* like Yamada doesn't do that every single day for them.

"And hot chocolate, and apple bunnies," Eri adds, and the tilt of her head betrays how she's well aware those aren't the usual sides. But he tries not to focus on how those are two things too simple for an *idiot* like him to fuck up.

"Got it," Hitoshi says, and stands up to get to work. He pulls out the apples, milk, fish, carrots, onions, and potatoes, placing everything but the milk into the sink to rinse it off after pouring some milk into a pot to boil it for hot chocolate. The hot chocolate mix and marshmallows are in the same cupboard as the coconut milk and curry mix, Yamada started the rice before he followed Aizawa to the bedroom to 'talk to him.'

About what, Hitoshi knows and hopes that he doesn't know. He hopes he's wrong.

He knows he's probably right.

For some reason, Eri finds him washing and cutting the vegetables more interesting than watching TV, so he picks her up and sets her on the counter, right against the refrigerator and away from the stove, while he focuses on trying to make the cuts even. It always takes him some time to practice, to remember how to be confident about the placement for the knife, something that never affects Yamada.

Something embarrassing, for how often he's prided himself on his skill with a knife in other ways.

When he pours them in, the onions screech and steam blows up from the pan, and Hitoshi pulls the pan up and away from the stove because he turned the heat up too high to start off. Eri shuffles a little further away, pulling a face, and he *tells* himself she just doesn't like the smell.

But he knows that she doesn't trust that he can cook this, and he doesn't really trust himself either.

"Twenny," Eri asks, kicking her feet loosely a few times. "Are you still hurt on your face?"

Hitoshi pushes the chopped vegetables around a few times before setting the lid on to steam them, feeling the black facemask around his face like an accusation everyone can see through. Especially Eri. "It's not as bad, just scratches. It'll heal soon."

As soon as Hitoshi got back to the dorm, he pulled out the first aid kit to actually take care of the scabs, even if it's probably too late for proper disinfection, but one of those ointments promised fast healing.

He had to use the ointment for a few *new* scabs on his face, something that makes him even less willing to take the mask off. But he didn't have shaving cream in his and Eri's bathroom, even though the razor was left behind, and the Rewind brought those *hairs* back. That stubble, like *Aizawa* has.

He thought it would be easier, since he doesn't have any scars under his chin except for the two wrapping under the edge of his jaw, but he still cut himself a few times. Luckily, the mask hides that. "Did my quirk hurt you?"

Hitoshi looks at Eri, her heels hitting the cabinets under the counter in unison, in a test kick. She's the least to blame for that. "No, it just took me back to when I was hurt the first time. It's not your fault."

Eri still won't look at him, staring at her knees. She still thinks it *is* her fault, because it was her quirk. But her quirk was entirely under her control, she pulled away by herself before it got far enough. Or too far.

Now he knows that he can't take control of her if he's the target, but he still hopes that he could take control of her if he's not. "If Mirio was hurt back then, that's how you can know you went far enough. You can take him past that point, so he has his quirk, and he's not hurt."

Eri at least looks up, even if she's still frowning. She nods, and it's far too quiet. Too quiet for him to tolerate.

"Do you want to make teddy bears with the rice?" Hitoshi asks, his voice strained but he goes cold for a different reason after he asks. *Because* he asks.

"Yeah!" Eri agrees, and he *feels* it. He has to close his eyes, he has to hold the handle of the pan and the edge of the stove, he has to *feel it* but not *take it*. Not until the moment passes, not until he can will it away. "Twenny?"

He nods, opening his eyes slowly. There's still an itch at the back of his skull, but he won't tempt it. At least he has a *chance* to feel it with Eri there. "Let's pick the bowls."

He can't control his quirk. He *hasn't* been able to control his quirk since the mask was taken away from him the first time, since the raid, and now he *knows* why that is, but ever since it was taken off the *second* time, at UA, it's been *worse*.

His questions warp with Nemoto's quirk, becoming what he didn't want to ask and what other people can't help from answering, and he can't stop from taking control of them after that. But now it's *worse*, now he can take control of others *without* asking questions like he did to Mirio yesterday. Which means he needs to be careful about who he talks to, what he can say.

Nothing has changed about that, but it still feels *worse* than it did before. Just knowing that it's because he *has* become a monster, with that piece of Nemoto stuck under his skin in a way he can't shake.

If there was a way to become quirkless, to just get rid of that complication, he would do it. If Mirio thinks his quirk is still so *heroic*, he could have it.

He has no idea what speaking freely would feel like, and he imagines that he never will now.

Hitoshi is so distracted helping Eri mold the rice into spheres to place inside the bowl to resemble teddy bears, that he *almost* burns the vegetables, but he *doesn't*. Yamada would say they're 'seared,' and he knows that the somewhat burnt edges can be uniquely flavorful. He sets them aside to cook the fish, and he knows that Yamada is capable of cooking the meat and vegetables in the same pan without pausing or 'searing' them, but this is the best he can do.

His stomach turns at the thought that this will push Yamada over the edge. He wasted this food, picked something Yamada won't like to start with, *fucked* it up, Brainwashed Mirio, manipulated Eri into using her quirk, made Aizawa upset-

He might have told Quirk Thief that he's an annoying filth-licker obsessed with giving Hitoshi reasons to commit murder and suicide at the same time, and if he shows his ugly face again, Hitoshi will pickle his fingers and eat them and leave the rest for the maggots. But Yamada was only opposed to telling Quirk Thief to 'die in a fire.'

As far as he knows. Vaguer threats should be fine.

Hitoshi hears the door close down the hall and nearly swears under his breath at the relief he finds when the fish has cooked enough for the final steps of the curry. He throws the vegetables that he had set aside in the bowl in, so Yamada doesn't have to know he fucked up that part, and starts pouring in the coconut milk by the time Yamada grabs Eri's attention. "Yama! We're making the spicy fish soup!"

Curry is a correction that catches on his tongue for two reasons. He shouldn't correct what Eri says when she's already upset at him, and he shouldn't just *talk* to Yamada right now. Even if Aizawa is right about his hearing aids, it's for similar reasons as Eri. "Smells like it's coming along great! I was planning to help, but it looks like two of the most fantastic chefs in the world have already got it covered!"

Hitoshi can't look up from the pan, breaking the curry mix bricks apart and stirring. He knows that if he looks at Yamada right now, the fragile tension that's keeping him from falling apart before the curry is even done will be *shattered*. If he sees a clue that Yamada is lying to him with a smile, or if it's worse than that, if Yamada looks as angry as Aizawa did, if this is *the end* for him.

If the last meal he eats at UA will be fish curry, hot chocolate, and apple bunnies. Without Aizawa even there.

As much as Yamada said they 'got it covered,' he still steps beside Hitoshi and only pauses for a moment that feels longer than it is, before he starts adding the hot chocolate mix to the milk and putting it on another burner. Hitoshi could have *thought* to do that himself, if he wasn't *stupid*.

And while the hot chocolate warms up, Yamada fixes the apple bunnies. Eri already set aside some small plates for that, and Hitoshi glances over when he's sure that Yamada is distracted, to see how Yamada arranges each bunny on the edge of the plate, fanning out in a circle. Perfectly symmetrical.

While he's just dumping curry on top of the rice teddy bears that Eri basically made herself. "Shou's missing out on it while it's fresh, and I bet he'll be jealous when he sees how great it is left over!"

The worst part about cooking is that Yamada always showers anything that Hitoshi cooks with compliments before he tastes it, before *reality* sets in. Hitoshi stares at the teddy bear staring back at him when he sits down at the table, hot chocolate in one of his favorite cat mugs. The cat face on the mug is also accusing him.

He has to pull the facemask down to eat, and he has to eat it himself to know how bad it turned out. It doesn't *look* as watery as that time he made the mistake of misreading the instructions on the curry package, but it might be too gritty like it was with the tofu curry. He was sure that he stirred it enough this time.

Hitoshi pulls down the facemask under his chin, to at least hide the cuts from the razor, and takes a bite with a carrot he knows he 'seared' but basically burned.

And it's actually not bad.

He knows it's not as good as it would be if Yamada cooked it, but it's not gritty, not watery. The sear kind of *does* add a flavor that he likes, even if he's not sure if he just learned to like it due to the frequency. He made the curry by himself, and it's not horrible enough to cry over.

He makes the mistake of glancing up at Yamada, regretting it and looking away as soon as he does, as soon as he realizes he can't *tolerate* looking at Yamada when he feels so raw and *weird*. But he feels a hand too big to be Eri's fall over his arm. "Hitoshi, this is *great*. You made this all by yourself too! The fish is cooked perfectly, the veggies are perfectly soft and not mush, and it's just... I'm really proud of you, kiddo!"

Does he always overcook the vegetables until they're mush? Is that why Yamada is so excited, because he *didn't* fuck that up for once? He knows there are at least a few times that he didn't cook them well enough, they were still too crunchy, and at least he didn't do that again with this curry.

Hitoshi glances up again, and he doesn't see what he was sure would break him. Just Yamada's sincere smile, sincere pride. He *didn't* mess it up.

The words almost pass over his tongue before he remembers himself in that moment, he feels so warm with just Yamada's sincerity and the praise he knows that this time he *earned*, but he *does* remember and sets his chopsticks aside. 'Thank you.'

Yamada nods, and pulls his hand away to keep eating. Hitoshi doesn't know if he's imagining the ghost of warmth that departs when he does. How much he misses it. If there's another reason Yamada pulled away. "Twenny, it's really good!"

Hitoshi has to duck his head, because now it's *uncomfortable*. He just managed to *not* fuck up a meal for the first time, and everyone is surprised. Eri was the one who picked it, after all.

He tries the hot chocolate, which works well to water down the mild spiciness even if it feels weird on his tongue when he goes back to the curry. It's not unpleasant, but just a little weird. Maybe this is what Bakugo was talking about when he said Kirishima combines foods that shouldn't go together.

Hitoshi nearly drops his next bite when he hears the door close again, and he knows that there's no other reason to explain why that sound rings out. *Aizawa* was supposed to eat it later, not with them, not *now*. Not when it's fresh, as good as it'll ever be, not when Yamada might *brag* about it to him.

Aizawa's hair is messed up on one side, like he tried to fall asleep, and despite standing up, his eyes are almost closed enough to be convincing that he *is* still asleep. That only fares better for Hitoshi. "Well, I guess you heard us singing the praises of this delicious curry Hitoshi made! Sit down, I'll grab you a bite."

'Before you fall over,' is something that Yamada mutters under his breath, and it still seems like

Aizawa falls in a barely controlled way as he sits down, his eyes still barely open as he rubs them. He looks at Eri with a tired smile, which falls away when he glances at Hitoshi before Hitoshi looks away.

This is worse than he thought.

He hears Yamada set the bowl down, the red and black bowl that Eri picked for him. The teddy bear that Eri made, and Hitoshi is glad that he resisted the urge to mess up the eyebrows when he was cutting the seaweed for them. He hears the quiet clack of Aizawa's chopsticks as he picks them up, and realizes he hasn't eaten a bite or *breathed* since he realized Aizawa was going to eat it. Soon.

He hears a hum. A hum can go either way.

"It's very good," Aizawa says, his voice gravely and almost exhausted. The way it *isn't* exhausted is worse than those words, that *sincerity* and *honesty* and he *actually* thinks that the curry isn't just 'decent' or 'edible,' he thinks it's *good*. *Very good*.

Hitoshi doesn't know if he's going to cry if he looks up, so he pointedly doesn't. He keeps his eyes on his food, too concerned with making sure he has the perfect balance of curry and rice in every bite. He hears Eri and Yamada talking about the plans they made together for her birthday. The hero students were all invited, which was another reason for giving away those plushies with cards attached. But they're invited to a 'pre-game' party at their own dorm, which *ensures* that they all need to give Eri presents. Then, Eri's friends are coming to *this* dorm, to play hide and seek, dress up, musical chairs 'like at Zawa's birthday.'

Neither of them talk about 'pin-the-hair-on-All-Might,' so Ashi probably doesn't know how to celebrate a real '6 year old's birthday,' despite her insistence on throwing him a fake one.

After Hitoshi finishes the apple bunnies, he still feels like he could eat a smaller portion of curry, but he doesn't get up to get it when that would mean looking up. When he can just sip on his hot chocolate instead, intentionally slowly.

And he knows it's coming when Yamada takes his plates from under him, dropping them and the others in the sink. He *knows* it's bad when Yamada claps, he sits back down without washing the dishes. This is *bad*. "So, since we're all together and awake and stuff, we can have a little brainstorming sesh about 'The Rules of The House.'"

Rules. Yamada sets down a notebook and has a pen in hand, to lay out all the rules that Hitoshi needs to keep track of now. Rules that are more defined than 'If you make Aizawa angry, he's going to talk to you about it.' Rules that are more defined than 'If you make Bug, Memory, Chisaki, or Hari mad, they're going to do whatever they want to you to even the score.'

Rules, written down and explained explicitly, is an interesting idea. "So, without naming names or placing any blame, because the ink wasn't dry on this little social contract, we've had a few instances where some unwritten rules were broken - and since they weren't written, that's perfectly understandable. So we're going to write them up and agree to them from now on!"

It was him. Hitoshi doesn't know what Yamada means by 'recently,' he's pretty sure that he's broken every single rule that wasn't written down, and several that were. In law books. He checked himself when he borrowed Ashi's book.

"So, me and Shou have some ideas for some rules, but that doesn't mean that we're the only ones who get to decide them. If you guys have some rules too, some stuff that you want me and Shou to

not do, then you can bring them up to and they can be made into rules for us! Everyone has to agree to the house rules, within reason,” Yamada explains, and Hitoshi watches his hands while he twirls around the pen. *Eri* could make rules too? “So unfortunately, apple bunnies with every meal wouldn’t *quite* be a rule, but it’s definitely a goal that we’ll try to meet. Just gotta throw in some wiggle room in case we run out of apples.”

Eri huffs, half complaint and half thoughtful about the concept, but Yamada *clearly* knows her well.

“And speaking of wiggle room, the first proposed rule is supposed to have a *lot* of wiggle room,” Yamada says, raising a finger with both hands still framing the notepad. “‘No hurting people intentionally, including people who don’t live with us, with mean words or hitting or any other kind of violence, or quirks.’ The ‘intentionally’ part is where there’s a lot of wiggle room, because sometimes we can say something that we don’t mean to be hurtful, and we can sometimes accidentally hurt someone when we’re learning to control our quirks. Like with the little ‘Rewind’ we had. Eri, I know you didn’t do that to hurt Hitoshi, so you’re double-not-in-trouble, because we hadn’t agreed on that rule and you didn’t know it was going to happen. So, it wasn’t ‘intentional.’”

Of course Eri didn’t mean to ‘hurt’ him, as little as having those fresh wounds on his face ‘hurt.’ Hitoshi glances over at Eri, seeing her staring at the table with a sullen look, nodding instead of agreeing verbally.

These rules are making Eri feel bad, so they’re stupid. Yamada shouldn’t make more of them. “So, can we all agree on that one from now on?”

Eri nods again, looking up at Yamada, and Hitoshi glances up when he realizes that the pause is waiting for his agreement too. He knows that three out of four, or 75% is a majority, they don’t *need* his agreement if this is like passing a law. But he nods, because it doesn’t matter. He knows that’s only going to be a rule that will cause issues for him.

“The rule passes, *which means* that it’s a rule for me and Shou too! If you think that anyone is breaking that rule, if me and Shou are saying something hurtful or doing something hurtful, we’re going to call a meeting to talk about it,” Yamada says, as though that’s something that makes sense. Something that would happen. Calling for punishment on *Yamada* or *Aizawa* for breaking that rule, or any rule?

But then again, if this is a rule similar to a law, that means it supposedly affects everyone. A majority vote would convict them, supposedly with an impartial jury. The way that Ms. Joke talked to Aizawa when Hitoshi said that he was responsible for breaking his leg seemed to mean that Ms. Joke would have taken it out on Aizawa. And the way Aizawa responded seemed to mean that he was afraid of that coming to pass.

“And the next one is a smaller one, but definitely an important one to put in place before someone’s big special day,” Yamada says, introducing a rule that will affect Eri’s birthday party. “No saying bad words around younger kids, like Mizuno or Satsuki or Kota, or even kids we haven’t met yet! Even if those kids know them, or say them, we can’t say bad words like ‘Fuck’ around younger kids like that, because sometimes their parents aren’t too happy about it, and it’s not usually polite. And Shou already kind of introduced a rule about ‘not saying bad words when we’re not at UA,’ but we both decided that it’s okay to do that as long as there aren’t innocent ears around.”

“What if Ugo breaks that rule?” Eri asks, a question that Hitoshi has himself, even if he can’t voice it.

“Bakugo would be in a *lot* of trouble if he did that,” Aizawa answers, lifting his mug of hot chocolate. “The students are subject to different rules, but as their teacher, it’s my responsibility to enforce them. Bakugo already knows that rule *very* well.”

And Bakugo still breaks it, where Eri is concerned. But Hitoshi and Eri still nod their agreement to that rule, passing it again. He knows that he *definitely* won’t have trouble avoiding breaking it.

“Which brings us to property damage,” Yamada says, something that Hitoshi is *almost* sure he hasn’t done, unless ingredients and food count as property. “Accidents happen, but intentionally breaking something to hurt someone’s feelings is a no-go. If I got mad at Shou and decided to break his favorite mug, that means I would get in trouble, but if I accidentally dropped it, that’s perfectly fine.”

That rule passes too, even if Hitoshi still wonders if it applies to food, and how intention is discerned. He hasn’t gotten in trouble for messing up meals before, but then again, it was an ‘unwritten rule.’

“Which brings us to the last rule, ‘no leaving the dorm without letting someone know.’ This is the only rule that kind of means different things for me and Shou and you guys, because Shou and I might leave to do something related to our jobs or something important like that, and have to leave in a hurry, but we’ll always tell each other at least, so you guys know where we are by asking who’s here,” Yamada says, because of *course* there are rules that affect them differently.

It’s still weird that Yamada seems to think that they should be held to any rules at all, or enforce them on each other.

“And it gets a little stricter due to safety for you guys, because you have to let us know for one, but me and Shou reserve the right to tell you that you can’t leave sometimes, or tell you that you have to wait, or have to be back at a certain time, yadda yadda. But, even if it’s a ‘no,’ we’re always going to have a goal for ‘soft no’s where we can work out a good time and good circumstances where we’re all in agreement about going out,” Yamada says, and *that’s* a rule that Hitoshi knows he’s broken. And Aizawa has gotten angry about.

The ‘soft no’ is probably just another way of saying that Hitoshi can’t go out unescorted, which is *not* new. He couldn’t go out on his own at the 8 Precepts either, he was always followed but usually at a distance.

Aizawa isn’t *nice* enough to give him that distance though, especially with his weird preoccupation with carrying Hitoshi on his back. “So, all in favor for that rule?”

Hitoshi nods, since it’s not like he really has a choice in the matter. Yamada makes it sound reasonable enough, less like the cage that it is. That *Aizawa* wants.

“Then, let’s open up the floor for some more rules, because Shou and I aren’t the only ones who can propose rules, but we all have to be in agreement on them,” Yamada says, and Hitoshi looks to Eri to see if she has anything to add. Anything he can throw his support behind immediately.

Eri looks at him, tilting her head before she glances back at the table. Yamada shouldn’t have taken the apple bunnies off the table before this started. “It’s a rule that we gotta eat together every day from now on, like this!”

For the most part, they do. Even if Aizawa rarely wakes up in time to eat breakfast on school days, he’s there at least for coffee, and they eat lunch together, and dinner most of the time. Lunch is usually the only time they’re all together on the weekends, when Aizawa’s dorm shifts and

Yamada's patrols and radio show make things seem busier. "I think that's a great rule! At least once every day, and if Shou or I or anyone else has to cancel on that, we just have to make it up with extra meals together. Sound like a plan?"

Hitoshi nods, and he doesn't overlook that the main selling point of that rule is the addition that Yamada made. 'Make it up,' a *debt* that has to be paid. A debt that Aizawa would rack up easily.

And be *forced* to pay back, if these rules really do affect all of them. "Alright, anything else? If there's something that bothers you, or makes you feel uncomfortable, we can get it written down in stone to avoid it."

Hitoshi sees Eri hesitate, before she shakes her head, and Yamada looks at him before Hitoshi takes another sip of hot chocolate he doesn't really need, just to avoid the overbearing weight of Yamada's gaze. But it lingers long enough that Hitoshi has to cast his vote, shake his head. He doesn't have any rules that he wants to enforce with them.

"Alright, we can leave the floor open for additions at any point, but the next part of the rule making is the consequences for breaking rules," Yamada says, and Hitoshi is *far* too interested in what he has to say next, every nerve on edge for whatever surprise it holds, however unbelievable it sounds. Apparently, making him run last night was supposed to be a punishment for several broken rules, from leaving without telling Yamada to saying hurtful things to Mirio, possibly fighting him too. Hitoshi didn't have the 'intention' to harm Mirio, for the most part. "So, when someone breaks a rule, we're going to talk about it to see if it was an accident or not, and why it happened. Then we're going to talk about how to avoid it in the future, and show how breaking that rule was bad."

Last night, Aizawa laid out his own deduction for why Hitoshi left the dorm without permission and why he used Eri's quirk to heal himself. His understanding of the situation was mostly accurate, and then he wanted to 'show' how breaking the unwritten rule about healing himself with Eri's quirk, which still *isn't* a written rule, was wrong by making him run. To show that he doesn't know the limits of his own body.

And despite how confusing all of that was, they didn't 'talk about how to avoid it in the future.' "So, a lot of times we might do things that are bad when we're upset, so the first order of business is to calm down so we can talk about these things, and work together to make them right. For example, if I'm just super upset at Shou and I throw his coffee mug on the ground to break it, because I'm mad and I want to make him feel bad too, then Shou is going to help me calm down, and then we can talk about why I got so mad in the first place."

Mirio was the one to explain for the most part why Hitoshi used Eri's quirk, but not entirely why he left the dorm. Hitoshi was calm for the most part when they were discussing that.

"Then, we can talk about how to avoid getting so mad. Maybe I should have told Shou that I woke up kind of grumpy that morning, and I've been getting irritated because he always moves my conditioner when he takes a shower, and I have to look around to find it. And then he said something to me that made me feel really mad, so I felt like I had to break his coffee mug to make him understand how I felt. But! I should have told him about being grumpy, so I could get a few more minutes in bed, and Shou could bring me coffee in bed to turn that grump around. I could tell Shou to stop moving my stuff, that way I'm not angry about hunting for my conditioner. And when Shou says something to make me mad, I don't have that built-up mad already, and I can take some deep breaths and tell him that he's breaking the rule about hurting my feelings, and we can talk about how he shouldn't say things like that," Yamada says, talking about having to talk *a lot* over such a small issue like breaking a coffee mug. Hitoshi knows for a fact that they have 38 coffee

mugs already. “And after we’ve talked things out, I’ll probably have to apologize and fix Shou’s coffee mug, so I can understand that breaking it means that the coffee mug won’t look the same way ever again, and it won’t work as well. And after I fix it, Shou and I can talk and know that we both still care about each other the same way, and since I made up for breaking the mug out of anger.”

Then, the running was supposed to show he wasn’t supposed to use Eri’s quirk, and being kept at the 1-A dorm was the consequence of leaving without letting Yamada know. Both of those seem stupid, and Hitoshi hasn’t had to apologize or talk about how he ‘still cares about’ Yamada.

“And there are other ways to help everyone understand that breaking the rules is not okay too! Like, if I wasn’t calming down with Shou, then I might have to sit in time out for a while, one minute for every year I’ve been alive. Or maybe if I can’t talk about why I broke the mug, I’d have to write an essay about why I broke it, and if the mug can’t be fixed at all, I’d have to write lines like ‘I won’t break other people’s things because that will hurt them’ over and over. But, if Shou tried to make me do something that *really* made me upset, because maybe I had to do it in the past with the intention to hurt me, then I can tell Shou that it would make me too upset, and we could work out another way of learning the consequence of my actions,” Yamada says, which explains why Aizawa apologized when he thought that *Bug* made Hitoshi run laps as a punishment.

Which is hilarious. The idea of Bug or Chisaki or *anyone* doing something as simple as that to punish him is absolutely hilarious. These ‘punishments’ are convoluted, when they could be simple, but they took the simplicity away when they agreed that Yamada and Aizawa can’t intentionally harm them.

Yamada asks for agreement again, and again the motion passes. That seems to be the end of it, just in time for Hitoshi to run out of the excuse of having hot chocolate to drink when he swallows the glob of marshmallows on top.

With Aizawa awake and here, Hitoshi expected that it would be time to go back to looking for The Miasma’s warehouse again, something he didn’t make much progress on before Aizawa decided it was time to go back to this dorm, but Yamada has other plans. Hitoshi knows that they’re important plans, he knows that he *should* feel like helping.

But when he’s sitting at the kotatsu with Eri and Yamada, when he’s supposed to be ‘helping’ Eri pick decorations and themes for her birthday party as Yamada shows off pictures on his phone and rambles about ideas that Eri is excited about, he feels the silence more heavily around his jaw. He feels like it has a purpose, that he shouldn’t be wasting his *time* with this when this is something between Eri and Yamada. His opinion isn’t important here, Eri’s is, and Yamada is the one who will provide whatever streamers or favors Eri picks.

He’s especially unimportant with this, because Eri will have to get used to his absence for her next birthday. Even if it doesn’t make sense, even if this is the only birthday he’ll see for her, he doesn’t want to be involved in this.

But Hitoshi feigns interest well enough, at least looking at the phone and looking at whoever is talking while they discuss it, how pink and purple streamers would work with hero themed plates or Sailor Moon plates. Things that Eri’s friends would like as party favors, something that Aizawa didn’t provide for his birthday, but apparently these small tokens are supposed to thank Eri’s friends for attending. Eri wants to make sure there are enough for the hero students too.

When Aizawa leaves the bedroom again, after he went back to it when the matter of the House Rules was discussed, he walks towards the door with a jacket on and starts putting on his shoes. Seeking to leave the dorm.

Without saying anything to Yamada.

This is the first test as to whether those ‘rules’ really apply to all of them.

Hitoshi can’t say anything, but he looks at Eri, and when she doesn’t look away from Yamada’s phone with all the options for party favors displayed in a list, he leans closer to the kotatsu, barely holding back the urge to strike the top of it to get her attention. Eri does feel the weight of his gaze, looking up at him just to tilt his head, like she doesn’t know what he wants, and he jerks his head towards Aizawa putting on his last shoe. And luckily, Eri gets it. “Zawa! Did you tell Yama that you’re leaving?”

Hitoshi has to bite his lip to contain his smirk when Aizawa seems to flinch with that, when Yamada’s expression darkens to give a reason for it. “Sure looks like he didn’t, little bean. We’ve got our first infraction of the rules here!”

Aizawa sighs and turns around, his back to the door, and his arms folded as though he doesn’t want to submit himself to this. Hitoshi is too curious about how much of it he will be forced to endure, to care that Aizawa might be late for something, probably the 1-A training exercise.

“Shou, it looks like you were trying to leave without telling anyone where you were going, and that’s against the rules we agreed to. Why did you want to do that?” Yamada asks, folding his hands on top of the kotatsu, acting oddly calm as he asked his husband that question.

“I forgot,” Aizawa answers, before he sighs. “I forgot because I haven’t slept well, and I’m tired. I haven’t left yet, so I haven’t broken the rule, but I’ll try to remember going forward.”

“And I think that taking a nap when you get back, and making sure to sleep better will help us avoid this in the future!” Yamada adds, raising a finger in the air as though those consequences are really punitive. Aizawa *likes* taking naps. “And I forgive you for making a mistake, because we all make mistakes, but we can all work together to avoid them in the future.”

“Right, I apologize for my behavior and accept the consequences of my actions,” Aizawa says, robotically enough to show that he’s a poor actor, and hardly sorry. But Aizawa looks at Hitoshi, probably catching his hard stare. Probably catching an accusation that Hitoshi wanted to throw, but he’s not entirely sure he wanted Aizawa to catch. “I’m going to watch my students train with Toshinori, and I should be back in a few hours. It depends on how much I need to *interact* with my students. Because this is a training exercise for my students’ benefit. So I’ll be working closely with *my students*.”

Hitoshi makes it a point not to blink, even when Aizawa is saying everything except denial to him. Aizawa thinks that his students are ‘dealing with enough’ without him there, but Hitoshi still wants to be there. He needs to be there, with Aizawa, to remind him where his priorities lie. They need to focus on finding The Miasma, now that Aizawa has found the means for it.

Aizawa blinks first. “Would you like to come with me?”

Hitoshi stands up as his answer, going to his room to get his jacket and scarf with his ears straining for the evidence that Aizawa will leave while he’s getting ready. He wants to go, needs to go, and Aizawa was forced to invite him which means that Aizawa is aware that he’s leaving, and Yamada being in the same room means that he’s aware too.

And when Hitoshi re-enters the living room and sees that Eri has moved right next to Yamada’s side, still scrolling through his phone, he also sees that Yamada might not be entirely happy with that. He seems less happy than Eri.

But of course, his words don't reflect the strain in his smile at all. "Well, you two have fun! Watching the herolets train and all, very exciting!"

Hitoshi nods, following close behind Aizawa after he shoves on his shoes. Despite the warmth of the dorm, the slight chill of the hallway is refreshing.

"Saying things intentionally hurtful still applies to my students," Aizawa says, like a threat. Like a warning.

Like something that Hitoshi wants to do, half as much as getting away from the dorm for a while. "I know."

Hitoshi answers with a threat, with a warning, and with an honest voice he decides to trust with Aizawa for now. If he slips, it'll be an 'accident' after all, quirks are hard to control, like Yamada said.

And if his voice is a threat, it's one he wants to aim solely at Aizawa, or any of the students that want to bother him with their idiocy.

Predictably Bad, With Natural Consequences

Chapter Summary

The training exercise with 1-A turns disastrous as Midoriya tries to reach out to Shinsou, leading to questions on Midoriya's part about what friendship should really entail. Shinsou focuses on the investigation, dragging Aizawa into confronting his issues with it, leading to a late night discussion that benefits all parties involved.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: Aizawa reflecting on Shiori's death in both of his POVs, Self-victim-blaming in Midoriya's POV, vague mention of cannibalism, 50 mention in Aizawa's second POV, Bug mentions in Aizawa's second and third POV

Previously on Wards of UA: Last chapter, Yamada, Aizawa, Eri, and Shinsou agreed to a few rules that would affect all of them, such as not intentionally hurting other people physically or emotionally and not leaving without permission. Shinsou pressured Aizawa to invite him to go to 1-A's training exercise, and Aizawa's plan to find The Miasma is to have Shinsou look at warehouse districts on Google Maps. Aizawa and Shinsou stayed with Aizawa's grandfather in the mountains the previous weekend after UA's security was compromised by the UA traitor, Hagakure, who is currently expelled from UA and awaiting transfer to Ms. Joke as a ward, and Aizawa believes that Shiori is dead from the fallout of that reveal. When Shinsou threatened 1-A to not interact with him, he specifically said that he would cut out Asui's tongue the next time she tried to rescue him. Midoriya was the only one who heard 127, AKA the Chameleon quirk villain, threatening all of Shinsou's friends and specifically Eri for trying to escape him. Aizawa refused to take Shinsou to Recovery Girl to heal his sprained ankle injury, which led to Shinsou asking Eri to use Rewind to heal him. When Aizawa tried to discipline Shinsou for sneaking out of the dorm without letting Yamada know and instigating Eri using her quirk on him without supervision, he told Shinsou to run laps. Shinsou was previously unable to use his quirk without asking a question, for anyone other than Eri, but now he is able to do so. Todoroki possibly believes that Shinsou is part cat, and should be treated as such. Aizawa might be 1-A's homeroom teacher for the entirety of their time at UA if Principal Nezu reinstates 'the duckling model' for homeroom teachers. 50 was identified as Furokage Mizuki, and Shinsou stole her autopsy report after Aizawa made that connection. Aizawa has told himself that after he smokes the last cigarette in his and Yamada's 'Stress Stash,' he needs to get over Shiori's death to focus on the investigation, including the contributions she made to it. Shinsou got drunk at Aizawa's grandfather's shack. Aizawa showed Shinsou the security camera picture of Bug from when she attempted to kill Shinsou in the hospital when he was trying to avoid a forced interview.

Aizawa leans against the railing on the balcony overlooking his students' exercises. After the warm up and subsequent free time for quirk-focused training, Toshinori introduced possibly one of

the stupidest rescue exercises he's ever heard of. Hidden throughout the concrete obstacle course that Cementoss engineered on half of Gym Gamma's floor are 20 numbered balloons that will pop if handled too roughly. Supposedly, this is supposed to help his students train to rescue civilians in disaster zones quickly and efficiently. And gently. While removing the greatest obstacle to that, which is the usual panic that civilians have and the vocal and physical abuse they're likely to hurl when suddenly grabbed like his students are being trained to do.

Basically, this is just an egg hunt that Toshinori wants to call training.

This is also an exercise that benefits his favorites like Midoriya and Bakugo *pointedly*. While they have to be careful about using their quirks for mobility, lest they damage an unseen balloon, other students like Jirou or Shoji won't have any benefit to using their quirks to detect where the balloons are placed. Aoyama pops three balloons when he attempts to use his laser quirk to jump from one concrete peak to the next, and completes the exercise with poor results completely quirkless otherwise. The same is so for the majority of his class.

Toshinori keeps glancing at him, practically begging for his opinion on this exercise, even if he'll disguise it by asking how he thinks his students are doing.

Toshinori *doesn't* want to hear Aizawa's opinion, and Aizawa doesn't feel that he can speak frankly without 'intentionally hurting Toshinori's feelings,' a heinous crime now that Hizashi feels they need to *model* these stricter behaviors.

And if Hitoshi would focus on self-study, instead of scrolling through the Google Maps application he practically insisted to be installed on his phone, then Aizawa wouldn't have to worry about being a good model. Or if Hitoshi had decided to stay at the dorm, and just wanted to be invited to prove a point, but ultimately reject the offer. But Hitoshi *wanted* to come here, to apparently sit on the ground with his back against the wall and his eyes focused on his phone, half of his face buried in his knitted scarf.

Aizawa doesn't know if this is a gesture pointedly made to prove that if Hitoshi can't be allowed to go out unescorted, that the teenager will make every effort to ensure that Aizawa isn't allowed that freedom either. But it certainly doesn't *feel* like Hitoshi just wanted to spend time with him, for any reason.

"You seem a bit quiet today, young Aizawa," Toshinori notes quietly, after loudly congratulating Tokoyami's perfect performance in the exercise, which was already tilted in his favor with a quirk allowing him mobility and range to grab all of the balloons. "I suppose that mountain trip wasn't very relaxing for you?"

Aizawa makes the effort to look at Toshinori out of the corner of his eye. He makes a *pointed* effort to remind himself that he can't say something 'intentionally hurtful.' "*Nothing* over the past few days, months, or *year* has been relaxing, Toshinori. *Especially* what happened while I was 'relaxing in the mountains.'"

Toshinori looks scolded enough, like the student missing from this exercise was something he overlooked. Honestly, that would be a fair accusation, given how Hagakure would have fared in this exercise that wouldn't have given her any opportunity for her quirk to make a difference. "Of course, I didn't forget that."

He might have, and Aizawa envies that. Given that Aizawa has forgotten how to drop into a dead sleep when the opportunity presents itself, and forgotten how to stay awake when he wants to, perhaps that will be next. Forgetting that Hagakure is currently in a mental hospital awaiting transfer to Ms. Joke's custody for a wardship placement that will solidly derail her career as a hero,

and forgetting that Shiori, an informant with personal circumstances made more painful to know about after her pointless death, is *dead*.

Aizawa looks away from Toshinori to see Hitoshi standing beside him, offering his phone again for another warehouse location to look through. Aizawa picks another off the top of his head, and can't bring himself to remember if it's one on the coastline, or one he hasn't given Hitoshi before.

But Hitoshi lingers at his side, glancing at Yaoyorozu scaling a concrete precipice to get to a tunnel, before he looks back at Aizawa with a comment or question that hopefully won't be phrased that simply, given how Hitoshi's questions seem to turn.

Instead, it's silent, a tug on his own knitted scarf with a pointed look at Aizawa's. A request that Aizawa sighs and complies with, gathering the capture scarf in his hands and placing it in the purple haired teenager's. "Don't wear it around your neck."

That warning is one that accidentally proves a point, when Hitoshi has to curl his hands around the capture scarf tightly as it tries to flare out and escape him. Even with the face mask and most of the scarf hiding Hitoshi's face, he can see the corner of his jaw move in an answer, but it isn't given. Just a half-hearted glare conveys all the malice that Aizawa has apparently deserved.

He could use a 'relaxing weekend,' honestly. Aizawa is aware that at this point, he's only good for offering half-measures twice as pointless for the attempt, but a weariness stops him short of a decent effort. He doesn't know how long it will last, but no escape seems logical to believe in. At some point, he'll have to get over the changes he came back to, but for now it seems unlikely.

He should just resign, if he can't be the teacher that his students need. Certainly, he's not one that would have been able to stop Hagakure before she committed to the things that she did, however culpable she was to them. "Perhaps, you should take tonight off, young Aizawa. I certainly don't have plans, and you seem like you could use the rest. More than usual."

Aizawa just hums, physically watching Yaoyorozu emerging from a tunnel with a bag slung over her shoulder to carry those 'precious, sensitive' civilians. He doesn't know if that's an efficient rescue model that he should start using when he's allowed to return to his hero work, after the investigation into Miasma is done.

He wants to be done with it, for selfish reasons. To kill off the parts stained with Shiori's hands on it, and he can't quite blame himself for that desire when he can hope that Hitoshi will still be with them after that organization's demise. Miasma and the League of Villains seem so intrinsically linked, but he doesn't believe in the assumption that bringing down Miasma will be the anchor that pulls the League down and into the open.

It will handicap them, at the very least, but as long as the League of Villains is still operating, Hitoshi will still need protective custody in a wardship. And seeing Hitoshi move further in his progress knowing that the greatest threat against his life has been nullified is something that Aizawa wants for himself. Somewhat selfishly.

When Yaoyorozu completes the exercise, taking one of the longest lengths of time to be certain that she had rescued every civilian balloon, Toshinori calls out for the last leg of this exercise. Sparring exercises, one on one, with the goal for offensive type quirks to be paired up against non-offensive quirks. Aoyama against Asui, Ashido against Shoji. While Asui and Shoji do have offensive movesets, they will be forced to try to mitigate the outright destruction in Aoyama and Ashido's quirks, while Aoyama and Ashido will have to exercise restraint.

Aizawa notices that Toshinori skips over Midoriya, *predictably*, and *isn't* surprised at all that he's

paired with Tokoyami. Tokoyami is the very definition of a balanced hero, but Aizawa honestly doesn't doubt that part of the reason that Toshinori picked him to go against his *favorite* is to try to get a breakthrough with Black Whip. Aizawa chose to supervise this exercise knowing full well that Midoriya would want to take that opportunity, given that the Problem Child is expressly forbidden from using that quirk without his supervision.

But it seems like a waste of Tokoyami's time, when while he's a balanced hero, he still hasn't had much opportunity to train in an offensive manner. "Sensei."

Aizawa hardly keeps himself from raising his eyebrows when Tokoyami approaches the railing he and Toshinori have been supervising from, almost wondering if his student is going to call Toshinori out on favoritism for him.

But with an arm curled around his midsection, almost like an afterthought of a poor actor, which Tokoyami admittedly is, that seems to not be the case. "I'm loathe to waste this training opportunity, but I am feeling unwell, and uncertain of my abilities to continue in this state."

Tokoyami probably *is* loathe to ask to be dismissed, given that he never does, but Aizawa doubts the implication of a simple tummyache is the reason for Tokoyami to ask. But he does have concerns that the issue comes from around that region, given the plethora of negative energy that Dark Shadow might have been soaking up the past few days. "Recovery Girl can see you at the staff dorm, if it's necessary. Otherwise, you're free to go back to your dorm."

Tokoyami nods acknowledgement from Aizawa's dismissal, and he's one student that Aizawa doesn't worry about being left alone at the dorm. The Problem Child, however, seems to have some gears turning in his brain that Aizawa would rather he didn't.

Especially with that glance behind Aizawa, at Hitoshi, who is currently hissing at the capture scarf for doing something that Aizawa can't see when he needs to focus on the sparring matches in front of him. Keeping his focus divided between eight matches, *waiting* for Toshinori to make a decision before Midoriya puts forth an idea that Aizawa would *rather* he didn't. "Aizawa-sensei, would it be okay if-"

"No," Aizawa interrupts flatly, because they should *all* be used to the odd-man-out matches given that the attendance sheet only *recently* became an even number. Even if Aizawa knows that his students have gone up against his ward, training or otherwise, with his agreement given by not stopping it or *without* his knowledge. This is absolutely not the time to set a violent ward loose on one of his students.

Toshinori looks at him, and Toshinori is *wrong*. About whatever his favoritism has led him to think is appropriate for this situation. And the Problem Child probably catches that, and thinks that he might have Aizawa outnumbered, but training exercises are *not* a democracy. "I was just thinking, that Black Whip might be similar to how the capture scarf works, and since Shinsou is learning how to use the capture scarf-"

"No," Aizawa interrupts again, and can barely convey how much that *cannot* happen. Hitoshi is *nowhere* close to being capable enough with the capture scarf to use it against a living person. Negligent double homicide, on both his and Toshinori's heads. "He isn't a student, and this isn't a mandatory training exercise. Either find a match to wait out your turn, or go back to the dorm."

Midoriya clearly won't give up the training opportunity, and he starts to turn away to find a pair to attach himself to. Until Aizawa hears footsteps behind him, and a teenager whose attention he *didn't* want drawn to this at his side, the capture scarf slung over his shoulder loosely. '*I want to leave. To fight problem child.*'

The first opportunity to take advantage of *the goal of soft no's*. While on its face, Hitoshi's signed request makes no sense at all, trying to frame this request as a request to 'leave' means that he's trying to cage Aizawa into an agreement with additional conditions, but agreement all the same, all but promised with those *soft no's*. If Hitoshi were asking to leave Gym Gamma, Aizawa would have to tell him to wait until the training exercise is over or until Yamada can walk over to escort him back, which is the *purpose* of a *soft no*. Not at all like *this*.

Aizawa has never seen a more promising lawyer than the one staring blankly at him, half of his face hidden and all the now-common animosity tucked away because Hitoshi *wants* him to agree to this.

"No." That should be the end of it. Hitoshi has *threatened* to maim his students in recent memory if they 'invite his attention,' and until his ward sorts out these issues with interpersonal communication, he *cannot* be given the opportunity to follow through with that, or make a statement out of Midoriya's *clear invitation*.

Hitoshi still has his mouth covered, and Aizawa can still see his frown through it. He can *hear* the gears turning in Toshinori's head, without even looking at him. He'd rather have his co-teacher focused on how Ashido is getting a bit more reckless with her aim, as her attempts to cage in Shoji's maneuvers have been going poorly. "Even though young Shinsou isn't a student, perhaps a friendly sparring match without quirks would be-"

"*Toshinori*," Aizawa says, still looking dead ahead but he can't ignore the weight of Hitoshi's gaze right now, how he moves just *incrementally* closer like that's not an insultingly basic pressure tactic. He *doesn't* need Toshinori's input where his ward is concerned, a man who *continues* to think that quirkless sparring matches are *friendly*.

They might be, with his ward. Recently demonstrated with the scuffle between Hitoshi and Mirio, when Aizawa came out of the Brainwash trance with Hitoshi hiding close behind Mirio, *incredibly* close given his usual boundaries.

Aizawa knows that Hitoshi likely wants to do this as a test, and a statement. He probably wants to have the excuse to injure his student, to *very predictably* test what happens when he breaks a rule right in front of Aizawa's eyes, and to further show the rest of his students that he doesn't want anything to do with them. But there is just a *chance*, however illogical, that Hitoshi also wants to fight Midoriya because that's apparently a friend-making method for *both* of them.

Which only means that Aizawa has more cause to worry about how *exactly* the Problem Child was raised, and how Mrs. Midoriya must not have been involved at all with this pile of reckless teenager who has forged strong bonds with his friends by beating it into them.

"A *friendly*, quirkless sparring match without the capture scarf and *without injuries*," Aizawa adds, searing each word into Hitoshi with his stare, waiting for any indication that he's right about the majority of his assumption for Hitoshi's reason to want to fight Midoriya. He almost says 'intentional injuries,' but he knows if the Problem Child comes out of this fight with any injuries, it will *be* intentional.

There's just a nod in answer, nothing to read into there, and Aizawa illogically feels that's all the more incriminating. But he gets the capture scarf returned to him, as Hitoshi makes quick work of taking off his jacket and scarf, the facemask remaining on. There is clear evidence of excitement in some way, as he stretches to warm up on his way down the stairs to meet with Midoriya on the ground floor.

The Problem Child looks excited too, and that much is enough for Aizawa to know that however

this turns out, it will be good *practice* for him.

He'll either learn that he can't make friends with whoever he sets his mind to, or he'll learn the devastating consequences of a training match that Toshinori hasn't set up in his favor.

*

Hitoshi rolls his eyes once he's out of Aizawa's sight on the staircase, but just the half-hearted and most *basic* stretches make him feel like something is finally falling into place. *This* is what he's needed all day. A fight. Training.

Mirio might have reminded him what it's like, what Hitoshi is *meant for*. Even if he's not Dog, even if he's not a Number under The Miasma's thumb, *this* is where he breathes easier. This is where he feels at peace, staring down an opponent and planning to take them apart.

Midoriya waves at him, all smiles, and it just makes him look *stupid*. But Hitoshi can forgive him for that, because he needs *something* to take this frustration out on.

Everything is frustrating, and it's been a splinter under his skin all day. Particularly Aizawa's *clear interest* in the investigation, given that he's been trying to ignore that and Hitoshi since they descended the mountain after being trapped together for three days. Predictable, but it's still irritating.

Even if Yamada isn't here, *thinking* about him makes Hitoshi want to scream. Everything that he liked about him before is too much, every time that Yamada goes quiet is almost a demand to make him *speak*. And with Eri, she's irritated with him over every small slight, and to a degree he deserves it. Maybe it's better to have her anger delivered in piecemeal, since he ran away from the backlash of her quirk, rather than getting it over with within a few hours, but the birthday planning *especially* frustrates him.

And then there's the idiots gathered here, Midoriya being one of them. All of them being stupid, being distracting, *forcing* him to think about them because they're here. Even if he made sure he was invited to come to this training exercise.

He has more important business, and they're in the way of that, for the most part. Sparring with Midoriya means nothing more than a way to clear his mind from these distractions.

Midoriya takes a loose stance, in a sparring square as far from the other matches as they can get, close to the weird mess of concrete but *blissfully* far away from Aizawa. Hitoshi knows he'll be focused on the more dangerous matches going on. "So, I know you only really want to fight me, and you probably don't want to talk. But since you're not checking your messages on LNE, this is kind of the only way I could talk to you about what you said at the dorm, when I wasn't there."

Hitoshi waits, long enough to realize that Midoriya *wasn't* going to strike. Midoriya has no *intention* of sparring with him, his priority is to talk to him, probably frustrated by how often Hitoshi has made it a *point* not to look at their chat to irritate Midoriya. This is probably a punishment for that, a *natural* repercussion.

Hitoshi glares, because he *hates* doing this. It feels unnatural to strike first, he's always *hated* when Bug forced him to during training, when she spotted that weakness out of the many that he needed to correct, but that hatred moves him.

Midoriya *isn't* allowed to do whatever he wants to him, he's not allowed to *punish* him at his leisure like that. And not expect *consequences* in turn.

Midoriya looks surprised when Hitoshi rushes forward with a wide, predictable fist crossing between them, something Midoriya easily turns to the side to avoid. Hitoshi honestly didn't intend for it to connect, just to start the fight if Midoriya wouldn't start it, and Hitoshi grins when he sees Midoriya's weight shift further back before he tries to kick out Hitoshi's legs.

That should be one way to shut him up, to make him less annoying, but as Hitoshi turns to avoid the blow and ducks lower into his usual routine, dodging and trying to find that opportunity to pin Midoriya down, Midoriya finds enough space to keep *rambling*.

"I don't know *why*-" Midoriya's voice gets a bit higher pitched when Hitoshi tries to rattle how apparently *relaxed* he is to be so *conversational* with an open palm jab to his face, that Midoriya jumps back from. "Why you never check our chat, or maybe you're feeling left out since the group chat was deleted? Not everyone agreed with that, but after you threatened to hurt Tsuyu-"

Hitoshi throws an elbow against Midoriya's stomach, catching the back of his knee with one hand to try to bring him down, but Midoriya catches himself with his palms slapping on the floor before he flips backwards, nearly kneeing Hitoshi's face in the process before he backs away. When Midoriya's back on his feet, his outstretched palms are placating, instead of defensive. Like he *still* doesn't understand this is a fight, not a conversation.

Like he thinks the hero students could be redeemed that easily, with explanation. That's hilarious enough to nearly make him laugh, like they were *threatened* by what he said, and took action accordingly to cut him off.

The moment he stopped acting weak and submissive and *sniveling* towards whatever they wanted from him, when he told them what he wants *plainly* and didn't let them argue, they washed their hands of him. Despite whatever they've convinced themselves of, they wanted to be friends with *Dog*. They wanted to be the clients that rented 27.

Hitoshi has arguments and threats, and a will that won't *submit* to them any longer. That's why they're done with him. "But I know that's not why you said that. You didn't mean it."

Hitoshi almost wishes he had a knife, so that he could show that he *means* it. Not to hurt Midoriya, because he wouldn't need to, but to make him understand that Hitoshi isn't *confused* or *stupid*. He knows what he said, and he doesn't regret it.

Midoriya grabs Hitoshi's arm at the elbow and shoulder when Hitoshi meant to topple him for kicking too high, then he twists to become *too much weight* on top of Hitoshi when he's falling, his shoulders hit the floor. Midoriya still holds onto his elbow, but doesn't pull it over Hitoshi's chest to secure any type of pin, his other hand bracing himself on the floor to keep from crushing Hitoshi.

Midoriya is *short* and *tiny* but entirely too much muscle, and Hitoshi still feels the weight of that from where his leg is still crossed over one of Hitoshi's. It's unfair, that he *has* that much weight to put on Hitoshi, and he's still not taking this fight seriously enough to at least *try* pinning him properly.

"I know that you're just trying to push us away, because you're scared," Midoriya says, *too close* to him. Practically laying on top of him, his face too close to Hitoshi's, his green eyes too *close*. "You don't want us to get hurt for being friends with you, like that Chameleon quirk villain said-"

Hitoshi grunts at the effort, but he manages to pull his leg from under Midoriya's and pull his arm up where Midoriya was still holding his elbow, to twist in the brief hesitation from Midoriya's confusion and roll with his free arm braced over Midoriya's throat. He kneels on Midoriya's thighs

with his legs crossed to distribute his weight evenly, but even with one of Midoriya's hands coming under Hitoshi's arm to make sure he doesn't hurt him, that grip on his elbow doesn't loosen.

"And the wardship being over," Midoriya *keeps talking*, even when he doesn't have the proper leverage to fight this arm crossed over his throat, every ounce of pressure Hitoshi tries to add to silence him only meets his scarred palm. They've all been hiding their strength from him, because they thought he was *weak*. "You don't have to act like that, just because you're scared-"

"I'm scared," Hitoshi says, pulling away to kneel on Midoriya's legs when he sees exactly what he predicted. As soon as he spoke, he *saw it*. Just the briefest glimpse of *fear* crossing Midoriya's eyes, *repulsion*. Midoriya just wants him under his thumb more than the others.

"But, anyone would be scared if they went through-"

Midoriya's pointless grip on his elbow loosens just enough, for Hitoshi grab his wrist, pulling his arm straight into a proper arm bar and twisting the green haired hero with a hand on his shoulder so that he's facing the floor properly. With the painful pressure on his stomach, his legs and hips still pinned down by how Hitoshi is sitting, Midoriya scrambles with his free arm to find the leverage to break the hold.

Hitoshi is focused on other things, like how much it would hurt to twist Midoriya's finger just so, to dig into a pressure point under his arm now that the hand on his shoulder is close enough, and he wouldn't lose much leverage from that. Something that Nemoto *helpfully* pointed out and demonstrated on him. "Okay, that kind of hurts, Shinsou-"

"Oh, *anyone* would be hurt if they went through this," Hitoshi comments, almost laughing about how *little* he's hurting Midoriya right now, and the precious little *egg* can't take it. To think he stood up against *Chisaki* and came away the victor, Hitoshi would *love* to see how he'd do if he were *truly* under Chisaki's thumb. If it was him in those fighting pits, that version of Quirk Training with the 8 Expendables, *being Unmade and Remade*, all at Chisaki's leisure.

With that *mask*.

"And anyone would be *scared* if they were in your shoes," Hitoshi says, in ways he means and he doesn't. As many thoughts run through his head, his hands don't move to take them, as much as he feels that string beginning to thrum in his mind, he doesn't *take it*. But he wants Midoriya to fear it, to fear him, to fear the knife he doesn't have or to fear *pain* that won't come.

Midoriya is lucky. *Too* lucky, that Hitoshi is weak, and won't go further. But he wants him to be *scared*, and convinced that he will.

He sees Midoriya grit his teeth, before the world becomes a weightless blur. Midoriya's legs bent upwards, something that Hitoshi realizes *after* he's being swung over Midoriya's head by the wrist he's still holding, an anchor that does him no favors when his *skull* hits the concrete first with a sound he recognizes before the pain blooms, before he realizes that it's dark just because his eyes are closed.

"Shinsou!" That name is too *loud*, Midoriya doesn't have to *yell* when he's that close. Hitoshi forces his eyes open, ignoring the pain becoming a storm of sharp agony and blurry perception, *Midoriya* looks blurry and Hitoshi doesn't know where his own limbs are placed yet. "Shinsou, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to- just, don't move right now, that sounded really bad."

Hitoshi huffs, blinks enough to remember where his body is, to feel that storm inside his skull become tinged with something else. Midoriya might have *tried his best* to break his skull, but

better opponents have tried harder. And those hands coming to pin down his shoulders when he tries to sit up are just *insulting*. “Fuck off.”

“I ca-” *Blissful silence.*

With a price of course, that Hitoshi remembers when the thrumming of the string seems to stir up all the agony that hadn’t settled yet into something he could ignore, could fight through. He pulls himself up to sit without those troublesome hands, stopping short of pulling himself to stand. When he orders his limbs to respond, he can’t feel his arms and legs enough yet.

But he can order someone else’s limbs around. Those irritating green eyes replaced with white, those arms slack where Midoriya is kneeling beside him. All the heroes are dressed in their costumes, and even if he didn’t see ‘Deku’ during the raid, when he fought Chisaki, probably pummeling Hitoshi without restraint at the time when he was battling the fusion. But right now, he’s certainly looking at *Deku*.

Useless. Weak, to any order that Hitoshi gives. He’s already broken the rule about quirkless fighting anyway. “Stand up, and run into the wall.”

Hitoshi does have to pull himself to kneel before Midoriya gets to his feet, because he told him to *run*, and Midoriya took that order to heart when he starts sprinting. Hitoshi braces himself too much on one knee, trying to convince himself that his weight will be supported if he stands, when everything is pain and dizziness, but he hears a nice *thwack* in short order, before he remembers.

That mess of concrete was only a few meters away from the sparring court, so Midoriya didn’t have to run far to find a wall to run himself into.

Everything is still blurry after he blinks, but it’s fading quickly enough, and he can see Midoriya holding his own wrist. His hand must have made first impact, and made that impact well enough that the pain broke him out of his control.

But it’s not the gritted-teeth *whining* from Midoriya that brings the pain in his skull to a new crescendo, it’s the sound of heavy footsteps falling in quick step. It’s the hand on his shoulder falling too familiarly, pulling him by the shirt to standing.

It’s Aizawa, glaring at him, clearly and predictably angry to the point that his eyes are still glowing red, his hair floating gently, as though he thinks his quirk is necessary when it would hardly be useful against him. “Midoriya.”

“I’m fine!” Midoriya replies, too high pitched and too strained, still holding that wrist too tight. He looks over his shoulder and Hitoshi’s head swims when he decides to look away, before he really decided. Just wanting to avoid whatever look of agony Midoriya was wearing.

Maybe, he didn’t want to hurt him. He just wanted Midoriya to run into a wall. Maybe he thought it was funny at the time.

It doesn’t seem funny, when Aizawa is dragging him to follow across the gym floor, and he doesn’t hear the sounds of the other matches in the background.

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‘Step One, do not react out of anger. Take the time to make sure that you’re calm before confronting the child for their actions.’

Aizawa has failed Step One.

‘Step Two, make sure that the child is not injured, and if upset, take measures to calm them down before discussing the issue.’

Looking at the teenager he just dragged outside of Gym Gamma, who reached behind himself blindly until he found a wall to lean against, his body loose and eyes hardly focused in a way that *reeks* of a concussion, Aizawa has *solidly* failed Step Two.

And honestly, intends to keep failing Step Two, because he’s not going to wait however long it takes for Hitoshi to recover from a concussion when he *predictably* used his quirk on Aizawa’s student to injure him. “How badly are you hurt?”

This is *Aizawa’s* Step One - triage - for the student-related incidents that necessitate it. He finds it easier to be calm when he confronts a reckless charge, if only by a small degree, than with Hitoshi. And when Hitoshi rolls his eyes despite how Aizawa *knows* how difficult that is to do with any manner of head injury, he knows it’s probably safe to proceed in failing Steps One through Two. Because they were written for children who are *not* Hitoshi. “M’ fine. I’ve had worse and I’ll get worse.”

Not from him, but that’s a silent reminder that cools Aizawa’s blood just enough. He sighs, he *reminds* himself that this was his fault, what he allowed to happen despite knowing better, and knowing that Toshinori and Midoriya were *idiots*. “You’re concussed. We can either have this discussion now, or after you see Recovery Girl-”

Hitoshi snorts a laugh, curling away from the wall to cover his mouth before he rights himself. “*Right*, because I can *see Recovery Girl whenever I want. Whenever* I’m injured.”

“That’s another discussion we’ll have, after this one, to sort out any *confusion* on the matter,” Aizawa says, crossing his arms and knowing full well there’s *not* any confusion. Hitoshi has just adapted that well to the usual tactics of a teenager trapped within the consequences of their own mistakes, and trying to lash out and distract him in the same measure. But he won’t avoid the most pressing issue.

Hitoshi shakes his head, barely, holding his arms out before he drops them back to his side. For all appearances, giving up, which Aizawa will have to extrapolate to mean that he’s ready to talk about it.

There was a bullet-pointed example under Step Two where Aizawa is supposed to explicitly ask if Hitoshi is ‘ready to talk about it,’ but given that example came within parentheses to explain that the child would likely be set off by that question, he skips it. “Why did you intentionally hurt Midoriya?”

Hitoshi shakes his head again, staring at the ground, before he crosses one ankle over the other and shrugs. All distracting movements meant as casual apathy, made too tensely and too sharp because Hitoshi is anything *but* apathetic to what he did. “Who knows, who cares. This is *stupid*, and we can just skip to the part where you make me run or something else that’s *stupid*.”

The gratuitous use of the word ‘stupid,’ a clear sign of a teenager on the ropes. “I care, because I know you had a reason for acting that way, and I want to work with you to avoid that situation in the future.”

It almost makes Aizawa’s skin crawl, how his mouth drops open but all of those websites’ advice falls out in a condensed and *unnatural* form. While Aizawa could argue that the ‘natural consequence’ of Hitoshi avoiding the conversation and inviting Aizawa to make him run instead, *would* be making the teenager run, that’s *apparently* poor discipline.

Aizawa, to a point, knows that his disciplinary methods with his class are not always standard, but it *works* to a great degree. But he knows *quite well* Hitoshi needs other methods.

Aizawa would just like evidence to prove this method's efficacy, before he can really commit to it.

"You injured my student, and used your quirk to do so, and both of those things are out of character for you," Aizawa says, because those actions do fall neatly into the label of a 'warning sign,' two things he wished he could have been aware of before Midoriya started running, while Aizawa was running to see why Midoriya was acting like Hitoshi had a debilitating head injury. "You might have been feeling overwhelmed in the moment, out of anger or fear--"

"I'm not *scared*!" Hitoshi yells, his wince becoming a glare, but even with a hand coming to cup the side of his head, the pain doesn't stop him from laughing, rolling his eyes and continuing on. "Oh, but everyone thinks I'm *scared*, I'm just so *scared*, like 127 isn't someone I know better than *any of you*. Like I was really stupid enough to believe that I was safe here, or you would keep me safe, or I should just have *friends*, but they're not *fucking friends* if all they want is for me to play nice and let them do whatever they want. But the *minute* I'm not like that, *all of them* decide they're done with me. And *fuck them*, I'm done with *them*!"

Hitoshi sweeps a hand out to punctuate that statement, and Aizawa *wishes* he could feel something other than confusion and pity. It can truly never be simple with Hitoshi. Ever.

"Midoriya just kept *talking*, just *talking* to me about how I'm *scared*, and I should just-just, *whatever* he wanted to do to me, but *I* talk back to him and then *he's* scared, because he's full of shit, but you don't care about that! Nope, he's *your* student, but I'm the one in trouble, because that's how it fucking is, *I* talk, *I* get in trouble," Hitoshi says, the fight somewhat draining out of him when his arms clap against his sides again, and he glares at Aizawa over the top of his face mask. "So now we're here. I talked, I made him run into a wall, and you get to do whatever you want to even the score."

Aizawa will mark all of that down as 'acting out of anger,' and the management techniques for that probably should have been introduced beforehand. But there are several points to answer to in that long-winded, still not a technical explanation of the events, and Aizawa raises a finger for the first one even if he's not sure if he can remember all of them. "You are allowed to talk. You are not in trouble for talking, or even using your quirk. You are in trouble for intentionally causing harm to another person, which violated the rules that we all agreed to."

Hitoshi looks away, crossing his arms over his chest which reminds Aizawa that he's not presenting the calmest body language to mirror, but he feels like he'll be too unsettled himself if he changes it.

"It seems like you were getting frustrated before you broke that rule, and in the future, I would appreciate you removing yourself from the situation before you act out that way. If you realized that Midoriya talking to you was making you upset, you could either tell him to stop, walk away from the situation, or find me, with no consequences for those actions," Aizawa says, as Hitoshi's head rolls to the side from the force of that eye roll, one that Aizawa honestly feels because the words coming out of his mouth still taste like *pamphlets*. "You also seem to be frustrated with my students as a whole, for 'deciding they're done with you,' which might be due to you telling them explicitly to 'fuck off,' under the threat of bodily harm or invasively using your quirk against them."

"I don't *care*," Hitoshi mumbles, in the exact surly tone of a teenager who *does* care, and doesn't want to. "I didn't mean any of that. I *don't* care about them, and I *want* them to leave me alone, so that's fine. That's exactly what I want."

That's probably what Hitoshi *wants* to want, but he doesn't agree with himself in full. Which is already a frustrating situation. "Outside of the rules that we agreed to, I don't have authority over any way you act around my students. I'm not forcing you to make amends, or be friends with them, anymore than I would force them to be friends with you. If you want them to leave you alone, that's how they'll probably act with you."

Aizawa doesn't have expectations for many of them to cross that line to try to make peace with Hitoshi, especially with how Midoriya's friendly hand was nearly broken against a concrete wall. But he will be keeping an eye on Bakugo, who might be a kettle close to boiling over at this point, and who has social skills nearly on the same level as his ward. Which would *not* be a good mix.

"Because you hurt Midoriya, you're going to have to apologize to him for your actions, and offer to escort him to Recovery Girl then to his dorm, and accommodate any *reasonable* request he makes and can't do himself due to his injury." Hitoshi narrows his eyes, fury burning in violet that *flashes* but Aizawa decides to see if interrupting him will work before his quirk can barb his words with Confession. "And if he declines your help, you'll be writing lines as your punishment."

Hitoshi's head rolls with his eyes again, staring at the ground, defeated apparently, which is really the best outcome that can be expected. Very few students will accept punishment with glee, which Aizawa counts as a measure that his discipline is effective, and being further set off might indicate that Aizawa is being too harsh here.

The *natural consequence* of hurting another person is making an effort to make amends, which *might indeed* be a skill that Hitoshi will need when he realizes that he's not as dead-set on not having friends as he likes to believe.

'*I can't. Right now,*' Hitoshi signs, possibly a sign that this is overwhelming for him, possibly an attempt to withdraw a bit from Aizawa with the very idea of punishment making the situation uncomfortable for him. '*Doesn't know enough sign.*'

"Apologizing and making amends, or writing lines. Those are your only options," Aizawa repeats, and sees that it won't be necessary to venture back into Gym Gamma to make that apology when Midoriya is exiting the same side door they used. With Hitoshi's discarded jacket and scarf over his arm, and the ends of his hair scorched on one side as evidence that Bakugo was upset about *something* after they left.

And with Todoroki as an escort, which complicates the matter. "Shinsou, are you okay?"

Aizawa *truly* wonders what the Problem Child is made of, to make sure to gather Hitoshi's clothes and *ask* if he's okay with a hand that looks like it's shaking. Hitoshi looks up at Aizawa first, as though he really needs the explicit confirmation that he *does* need to address Midoriya, before he sighs. "I'm fine. I'm sorry I made you run into a wall. That was stupid."

Despite how quietly that apology was offered, and how deadpan Hitoshi's tone *almost* is, there is a thread of real regret that makes his words sincere. And the way that Midoriya takes that as completely sincere, grinning and waving him off with the uninjured hand, is honestly *worrying*. "It's okay! I know that--"

Midoriya's arms drop, his eyes glazing over, and his apparently designated bodyguard Todoroki flinches from behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder to try to shake Midoriya out of it. Hitoshi curls forward with his eyes shut tight, apparently in pain after taking control of Midoriya *without asking him a question*.

But more startling is Midoriya breaking out of the control, somewhat alarmed. Not at all to do with

Todoroki still wobbling him back and forth on his feet. “Shinsou, are you okay? You’re probably not-”

“*Not able to control my own damn quirk* right now, you’re *right*,” Hitoshi hisses, glaring at Aizawa when he opens his eyes. “I *told* you-”

“You *did not*,” Aizawa reminds, because *none* of this was mentioned at all. Hitoshi dropping to sign instead of talking was *not* explained, at all, and certainly not his quirk changing *again* like this to not necessitate a question.

This has become something Aizawa *hopes* isn’t a sign of things to come, Hitoshi’s quirk continuing to mutate into something stronger than he could ever hope to control.

This has become something he doesn’t want his students involved with or to know about, but Midoriya looks at Hitoshi with wide and pleading eyes, before he holds up his injured hand to him. “Can you do that again? Just, one more time? I know you probably don’t like it, and it’s probably- well, it *is* really weird when your quirk starts changing like that, and-”

Midoriya’s eyes glaze over again, his arms dropping, and Todoroki’s hand hovers over him, frozen because Midoriya *did* ask for this. Todoroki honestly doesn’t look like he’s blinking as the seconds tick by, but Hitoshi pulls himself up to stand properly, glancing at Midoriya with an odd look, half hidden by the face mask, before he ends the control on his own again. Something he must have mastered quickly.

“Wow,” Midoriya marvels, holding up that injured hand, which isn’t shaking anymore. “That really is relaxing- I mean, on a physical level, I guess all the muscles that aren’t required to stand just relax under your control until you give someone instructions? My hand feels fine now, and I was worried that I twisted or pulled something, but it’s completely fine now. That could be useful for so many situations-”

“That felt *gross*,” Hitoshi says, his tone really the biggest indicator that he was wrinkling his nose in disgust under the facemask. “Don’t do that again. *Ever*.”

“What? What did I do?” Midoriya asks, shockingly more concerned about how he could have offended the sensibilities of a fellow teenager who *made him run into a wall*. “Oh, is it because I wanted to be Brainwashed? Can you feel the difference if someone is willing to be under your control or not? I guess there really aren’t a lot of people who ask to be Brainwashed, so it probably does feel weird, if you can feel it, but I didn’t notice anything weird. Maybe, it was similar to using your quirk on Er-”

There’s probably some side effects to repeatedly using Hitoshi’s quirk on a person in such quick succession, and the way that Hitoshi looks at him when Midoriya goes limp again, seems to imply that wasn’t *quite* a quirk slip. But the way that the corner of Hitoshi’s eyes squint a bit, making that similarly disgusted face, seems to imply that the control is warping in some way that Hitoshi doesn’t *like* to feel.

Hitoshi probably wants to take Midoriya’s interest in his quirk as a sign that the apology has been accepted, and leave it at that. But Aizawa spitefully considers a third option to the punishment, to involve sating Midoriya’s curiosity, and probably sating his own in the process.

“You’re not done,” Aizawa reminds, because an accepted apology and Midoriya’s injury *possibly* being fixed to some degree doesn’t mean that Hitoshi can escape the explicit instructions in his punishment. Even if it’s not necessary, Aizawa can’t afford to go back on his word.

Probably. The websites that Hizashi pulled up weren't explicit about that, but they were about not backing down once discipline is laid out, as long as it isn't psychologically harmful for the child to complete it.

Hitoshi half-rolls his eyes, and Midoriya snaps out of the control again. He blinks a few times, like there is some kind of disorienting side effect at play, before he raises his hands, flexing his fingers a few times. "Uh, sorry, I guess that talking to you after you talk is enough for you to lose control of your quirk, but I don't know enough JSL to carry a conversation. And I guess you probably don't want to talk about your quirk either right now, since it's frustrating to lose control like that."

Hitoshi stares at Midoriya, not reacting on the surface. Probably frustrated if Midoriya is right about Hitoshi's lack of control, which Aizawa thinks is a *bit* overestimated, but would make his attempts to offer to escort Midoriya to Recovery Girl or his dorm room difficult.

"But, even if it's frustrating, or you feel sc- you don't feel like you should be around us, I still think that you should make sure that's what you really want. And if you change your mind, I still have my chat with you, and Ashido does too. And Bakugo, even if he's a little... weird right now," Midoriya says, a solid pitch for making amends with two students who *might* be able to receive Hitoshi's no-doubt fumbling attempts towards that, with a warning about Bakugo that is honestly *underwhelming*.

It might be an overlooked benefit that Bakugo *isn't* influencing Hitoshi at all when his ward is quite successfully destroying his life and relationships all on his own. And more evidence to that is Hitoshi's narrowed eyes, taking some offense to that gesture.

Something that Todoroki seems completely oblivious to, just like the Problem Child still smiling expectantly to be offered a renewed friendship. "I think if you want to make amends though, you should start by not imitating me so much. Injuring Midoriya's hand, stating that you're 'not here to make friends.' I'm not flattered."

There's a slow tilt of Hitoshi's head, in confusion, that Aizawa fights not to mirror. That truly can't be the sum of Todoroki's grievances here.

But it looks like it is. "Aizawa-sensei, I don't mean to cast judgement," Todoroki continues on, and Aizawa is *wholly* too interested in whatever unpredictable wisdom his student wants to impart. "But, aggression often comes from a lack of stimulating activities, and physical exercise, as well as a lack of discipline. I have a few cat wands, if you don't have any on hand."

When Aizawa reflects on all the reasons to fear being this class' homeroom teacher for the next two years, for some reason, Todoroki is never one of them. "Cat wands, for a cat that I'm completely unaware of. I'll keep that in mind."

Todoroki nods, and Midoriya lets out a half-nervous laugh that sounds like the first gasp of air he's taken in since Todoroki started talking. "Um, I'm glad you're okay, Shinsou, and uh-"

Midoriya pats at his arm before he realizes that he dropped Hitoshi's scarf and jacket *a few* Brainwashes ago, scrambling to pick them up, shake the snow off, and hand them over to him.

"I'll see you around? Talk to you, maybe, if that's okay? But, uh, bye!" Midoriya sputters, making the cause of his nervousness known as he turns to shove Todoroki towards the dorms, apparently deciding against a Recovery Girl visit, and wanting to make sure that Todoroki doesn't say anything else that the Problem Child deems embarrassing.

Unfortunately, claiming another victim, who is still staring at the jacket and scarf in his hands

without realizing that he failed. “100 lines, after your concussion is evaluated-”

“He didn’t need-” Hitoshi *tries* to argue, glaring at Aizawa in the futile attempt, before he sighs, his head dropping forward with the effort. “The Problem Child is *weird*. Weird, insane, *I hate him*. I hope his hand falls off.”

“If you said that while Midoriya was in earshot, that would be a violation of ‘saying something intentionally hurtful,’” Aizawa reminds, as an informative example. Not at all to do with spurring Hitoshi’s irritability into a seething growl.

After all, there will be many incidents to be expected as Hitoshi and Eri both learn the fundamental rules of society, enforced by adult caretakers for the first time. It’s important to know the rules, and know how a healthy consequence will be enforced.

But Todoroki might be right about the lack of *stimulating activity*.

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Midoriya sits on the couch, trying to pay attention to the movie that Todoroki wanted to watch. Trying not to feel weird about this, but it *is* a little weird right now, even if he’s sure that he’s making it weird by feeling weird about it.

His hand *did* feel a lot better after Shinsou Brainwashed him, but it kept swelling anyway, and Recovery Girl would probably say that he injured the already fragile tendons in his hands and arms. Which, Shinsou *does* kind of have a habit of doing. But, it’s happened often enough over smaller things that Midoriya knows how to take care of it, to take some pain killers, elevate his hand, switch from heating and cooling it.

Which is the reason that Todoroki is holding his hand, on top of the pillow between them on the couch. And it’s not *weird*, because it’s medical treatment, and Todoroki has enough control over his quirk to slightly elevate or cool his body temperature on the respective sides of his body, and the only reason that his hand feels so sweaty is because Todoroki is using his left hand to hold his.

Or, he was before he switched hands? But Midoriya’s hand is still sweating, because it must have gotten hotter before he alternated.

This is fine.

This *would* be fine if Kacchan had taken Kirishima up on one of the many offers to go sparring or running, to get him out of the kitchen where Kacchan has spent most of his time the past four days. But now, Kacchan is glaring at him with a snack-sized serving of kimchi fried rice that looks blood red. “*Oi*, can’t you take that shit to a room instead of pulling this shit in public, IcyHot bastard?”

Midoriya pulls his lips tight, like trying to swallow them might save himself some pain when Kacchan shoves the kimchi fried rice closer to his face, making it clear that Midoriya is *supposed to eat it*. Midoriya is pretty sure that fried rice isn’t supposed to have so much sauce that it looks like *soup*. “I’m not acting. Aoyama told me that I don’t have a stage presence.”

Midoriya turns to look at Todoroki, once again trying to figure out if Todoroki was making a joke. He knows it’s futile, but he always tries. And Todoroki hardly ever looks at him to confirm if he is.

Kacchan is not the best person to joke around with at the best of times, and there hasn’t been anything *close* to a good time for that in a *while*.

“*Fuck off!* You’re always saying the dumbest *fucking shit* I’ve ever heard in my fucking life, do you *have* braincells in that strawberry swirl ass head? Is it just ice cubes and daddy issues with you? *Eh?*” Kacchan demands, bending to yell into Todoroki’s face, but Todoroki just takes the kimchi fried rice from his hand, setting it down in his lap.

Before he takes the chopsticks, and starts eating it.

“I didn’t make that shit for you, dumb fuck-” Kacchan yells, grabbing the fried rice with one hand but the other is raised, curled open with a palm facing Todoroki’s scar, and Midoriya stands up to shove him away.

“Kacchan, *stop*—” Midoriya sucks in a breath, grimacing at the twinge in his hand when he pulls it away from Kacchan’s shoulder, when he *might* have to go to Recovery Girl after all if it’s not better by tomorrow. He didn’t use One For All against that wall, he wasn’t running *that* fast, but ever since the temperature dropped every little ache and pain has gotten worse in his arms.

“Right you’re *fine*, you’re so damn *fine* after that corpse-faced shithead did that to you, you just need to cuddle with your boyfriend and then you’ll just be perfectly *fucking fine*,” Kacchan says in a low voice, almost bubbling with something that isn’t a laugh, but close to it, before he shoves Midoriya with a hand on his chest. “And you’re not going to tell Shitsei that he fucked you up, like you don’t want to rat out some abusive asshole because you just *care* so much about Shitsou’s *feelings*—”

“Because I didn’t say anything about you,” Midoriya interrupts, reminding Kacchan about what they’ve already talked about. What Kacchan *refuses* to listen to. “I didn’t give up on being friends with you, because I knew you needed a good friend. No matter what you did, I was still there for you, and Shinsou still needs a friend. So I’m not giving up on him.”

Kacchan sneers and turns on his heel to stalk away, his shoulders pulled tight as he stomps up to the staircase. Kacchan *is* giving up on Shinsou, and that’s honestly the worst part about it. He can’t even stand to talk about Shinsou anymore, even when it seemed like Kacchan was his closest friend.

Even when Midoriya told him what Shinsou said to Aizawa that night, it didn’t change his mind. *Bastard can fuck right off then, get fucking lost. Who gives a shit where he goes after that investigation bullshit is done? I don’t give a shit, Deku.*

Even if Kacchan doesn’t give a shit, someone *should*.

“I think you should break up with him,” Todoroki says, and Midoriya almost pulls his hand away from where Todoroki is gently holding it, because that’s *not* how things are between himself and Kacchan. “You shouldn’t forgive someone who doesn’t feel sorry for hurting you. That *is* abusive. And no one has the right to hurt someone else without repercussions, no matter what they’re going through.”

Midoriya wants to argue that he still *doesn’t* let the things Kacchan does slide, he usually tells him off, and he knows that Shinsou *is* sorry for hurting him. But all of those thoughts short out into sensation when Todoroki pulls Midoriya’s hand to his mouth and *blows on it*. Just the softest feeling of Todoroki’s breath ghosting over the back of his hand, it feels *weird*, it feels *tingly*.

It kind of feels like what Midnight-sensei described as a sign of sexual attraction, but Midoriya knows it’s *not that*. Maybe, maybe, *maybe* Todoroki can just make his breath cold too? Maybe he’s learning to do that?

Todoroki looks up at him, still holding Midoriya's hand, and Midoriya realizes he probably looks weirded out right now.

"Does it feel warmer? I still feel like my mouth is burning," Todoroki says, with the same blank expression he always wears, something that either feels completely honest of him and still like a *lie* sometimes, and despite the confusion, there's still a part of Midoriya that hopes that never changes.

"I-it doesn't, I don't think it works like that. But I'll get some water," Midoriya says, pulling away his hand to run into the newly vacated kitchen, dropping the kimchi fried rice onto the counter, and he stares too long at the sink before he figures out he needs a glass.

Kacchan has hardly ever been a friend that deserves Midoriya's friendship, but Midoriya knows that he tries sometimes. He tries more often now, now that things have changed so much at UA, now that Midoriya has a quirk and deserves respect from Kacchan-

Well, that's not really what it is.

It's not just Midoriya's quirk that makes Kacchan respect him, it's Midoriya standing up to Kacchan when he goes too far. There is a line, he's sure, when Kacchan might go too far and Midoriya will reject him, just like Kacchan did so many times over so many years, but Midoriya always tries to see the best in people. It's hard with Kacchan, because he makes it *hard* to see the good sometimes, but he knows for the most part, even the things Kacchan says or does that are hurtful are done with a reason behind it. Kacchan bullied him so much so that he could look better for his friends, or because he was stressed out from school, and maybe he destroyed his hero journals because he was worried about his own chances of getting into UA and what would happen if he didn't. Kacchan told him to jump off the roof and hope that he was reborn with a quirk in the next life because-

Because Kacchan was trying to help him, he's sure. Kacchan never believed he could be a hero without a quirk, and honestly All Might didn't either, so he wanted to make sure that Midoriya wouldn't get hurt continuing to pursue that dream, but not give up on achieving it in the next life. Right?

Midoriya didn't do it, so it doesn't matter. He didn't *really* think about doing it either, so it's *fine*. And things are okay now, so he's past it. It's fine.

He already forgave Shinsou before he apologized.

What Shinsou did was so *small*, really. He just said some things that were taunting, that were trying to make Midoriya feel scared, but he wasn't. Midoriya wouldn't even call it *threatening*. And then Shinsou told him to run into a wall, which is *hardly* the worst thing he can do with his quirk, and Midoriya only hurt his hand because of the way he was running. Shinsou probably meant for him to hit his face instead, and neither would *really* hurt if it was someone else, someone who hadn't injured themselves in a long-term way like Midoriya had.

Shinsou didn't really *have* to apologize, because Midoriya understood that he was upset, and Midoriya didn't do a good job of making him less upset. He just made him *more* upset, and he should expect there would be a chance that Shinsou would lash out, since he's dealing with a lot-

"Are you waiting for the 'good water?'" Todoroki asks, standing behind him, and Midoriya jolts, nearly dropping the glass that he *still* hadn't put under the running faucet. Midoriya starts filling up the glass, but he can't help but ask.

"What do you mean by 'good water?'" Midoriya just *can't* sort that one out on his own, but he

knows that it's very rare that Todoroki is any clearer about his answer than his question.

But Todoroki reaches over him to shut off the faucet, as Midoriya realizes that the water is running over the glass and his hand. He just didn't feel it. "When you turn on the faucet after washing dishes with hot water, sometimes it's warmer, so you have to wait until the water turns cold again. That's the 'good water.'"

Todoroki also takes the glass, and Midoriya watches him drink *a lot* of it at once. He only had a small bite of that kimchi fried rice, but Midoriya feels all the more grateful that he didn't try it first.

"But, you don't have to have a hand under the water to wait for it. You can wait until after the steam goes away, or you can wait until someone else says that it's 'good water.' Or you can get a soda instead of water," Todoroki says, and Midoriya feels like he's either talking about something else, or he's *really* passionate about water. Then, Todoroki's eyes narrow a little bit. "Or you can kill it. Even if it's illegal, a slow murder by destroying its hopes and dreams, and draining all of its money can be even more cruel."

Then it's *definitely* not about water.

And Midoriya isn't sure how hot the water would get if he asked Kacchan to apologize.

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Hitoshi refused Recovery Girl's offer to heal his concussion, which thankfully wasn't severe, and seemed to take the excuse that he needed to rest to recover as a means of avoiding Hizashi and Eri both when they returned to the dorm. Even when Hizashi checked on him for dinner, his husband said that Hitoshi 'wasn't hungry,' but he took long enough that it was a predictable inevitability that Hitoshi probably tried to feign sleep as long as possible to avoid answering him.

And still *not* answering him verbally, which is made even less understandable when Hitoshi's quirk has apparently become less controllable with fewer restrictions in its use.

Eri needed to be reminded that Hitoshi wasn't breaking the rule about 'one meal where everyone is gathered together every day,' given that he was present at lunch, but she still didn't seem pleased that Hitoshi seemed to be willfully ignoring this meal. Aizawa and Hizashi both made the effort to take her mind off the matter, and Aizawa knows for himself that he attempted to follow the plot and characters to *Sailor Moon* with more effort than any viewing before, in a marathon that Eri insisted on and Hizashi encouraged as 'research' for her birthday.

He thinks his favorite is Pluto, as she seems to be the most mature and rational of all the Sailor Scouts.

Eri seems to have a preference for the titular character *Sailor Moon*, and even with all the *Sailor* wands that she's collected from Monoma, she seems disheartened that she doesn't have a wand for that character. Despite the fact that she has a mirror compact and a cat-themed doll for that specific character. But, if Aizawa's recollection is correct, the mirror compact *is* a lesser vessel for *Sailor Moon*'s powers, and the wand is the upgraded version. And he's willing to bet money that Monoma will give her that wand on either her birthday, or Christmas.

Aizawa has heard the common complaint that having a birthday close to Christmas usually results in worse presents for either holiday, and he doubts that Eri will have that problem. In all honesty, it's hard to find a gift that *wouldn't* be given to Eri for either holiday, given that he's aware of Monoma's current ritual, his students' plans, Mirio, Amajiki, and Hadou though he wouldn't count out 3-A in its entirety either, given that the Class President had emailed him to make sure of the

date.

And that doesn't *begin* to take into account the UA staff, given that there's an email chain that's been leaked to him with a long and concerning back-and-forth between Principal Nezu and Powerloader about a 'refreshingly cute' *personal security system for Eri*.

He wants to tell them not to do it. He *also* heavily considered requesting one for Hitoshi. In the end, he said nothing, because he knows there's very little he can say in the face of one of Principal Nezu's machinations.

There's honestly very little that Eri wants for either holiday, because despite this small desire for a wand toy for her favorite television show, Eri neither has the usual greed of a small child or much opportunity to develop it. She'll have plenty of *things*.

But *things* aren't at all what she wants for her birthday. And when Eri falls asleep between them, her arms wrapped loosely around one of his own and her legs curled against Hizashi's, there's a private moment between them that feels surreal, when he looks up and sees that Hizashi was watching her sleep too. Neither of them really wanting to move her, to risk disturbing her peaceful sleep.

After bringing himself to discuss it with Hizashi weeks ago, he hasn't thought of it much. At times, he marvels at how different it feels now, to decide that Eri was their *child*. Their *daughter*. Unofficially still, but it's easy to forget that now. Now, marveling at the wisps of Eri's hair, every twitch of her eyelids in sleep, her warm weight against his chest when they both work gently, *gently* to move her to bed. He can't imagine it any differently, except for the terrifying-yet-not idea that she'll grow out of this eventually. He'll still be with her, to see her grow through the years, and there will be one day that he carries her to bed, and it will be the last, only because she's outgrown the need for it.

That day won't come for a long time, and it's illogical to be upset about the idea of something so distant. Especially when Eri still likes to be carried around instead of walking on campus at times.

Hizashi still trades some *looks* at him as they get ready for bed, as though he can feel that warmth still smoldering in his chest at all of these illogical thoughts. He tries to keep his mind off of it, for argument's sake, because he *does* need to sleep well tonight to truly take advantage of Toshinori's offer to cover the nightly dorm shift that Aizawa had volunteered for throughout winter break. It was the least desirable shift, but he was one of few heroes on staff who worked primarily at night.

But when Hizashi finally falls into bed beside him, offering an open arm that Aizawa takes advantage of to rest on his chest, those thoughts were apparently not the only ones that Hizashi had on his mind. "Has Hitoshi talked to you about me? About what's going on right now?"

Aizawa doesn't bother to open his eyes, because he's sure he has the perfect mental picture of worry written on his husband's face just from the sound of his voice. "He hasn't said anything. It's probably just what it means now. The test that he's worried about."

A test Hitoshi *will pass*, which makes it all the more illogical to avoid Hizashi. His husband clearly isn't fond of giving his ward distance when it's needed, and especially not now. "It seems like *more* than that, Shou. With the threats, running out on us, getting rid of his friends and his stash.... Running after *you* to spend *more time* together...."

Aizawa snorts and has to look up at his husband with his chin on his chest, trying to figure out how on *earth* Hizashi could mean that. "He sat against the wall refusing to talk to me, and only showed an interest after being invited to *fight* one of my students. That's not 'trying to spend time with

me.”

“Shou,” Hizashi sighs, and he looks oddly *defeated* as though Aizawa is wrong about the situation on every level, even when he knows he’s not. “How does Eri spend time with you?”

“Watching TV, napping, helping me grade papers,” Aizawa lists, even if the last one nearly burns him to admit it. “The... missing cat investigations.”

“Our kids just,” Hizashi hesitates, raising a hand almost as though he’ll retract the way that ‘our kids’ sounds, but as Aizawa is too tired to call it an argument, he takes that as a reason to continue. “They only know how to read the room, and put out what *you* put out. You’re pretty ‘low energy,’ so the napping works swell, and that’s probably what Hitoshi was reading. If you’re not going to *invite* him to do anything with you, he’s just going to sit in his sad little corner and call *that* sad little time ‘quality time together.’”

Aizawa is still *completely unconvinced* that was Hitoshi’s reasoning for going to the training exercise. There had to be more spite involved. “And he wanted to fight Midoriya to get attention from me, because I was paying attention to my students, *like* I told him I would before we left.”

Hizashi shrugs, moving Aizawa’s chin with the motion, but that’s still not a gesture completely sold on the hypothesis his husband is trying to sell. “Bad attention is better than no attention, when you don’t know how to get *good* attention. *So*, if you’re going to be spiriting away my ward again, maybe try to have a good time? See how it goes at least, so *maybe* there can be a few less head injuries.”

Arguing at this point would only mean hours lost that could have been slept through, so Aizawa concedes the point with little thought to how to accomplish that. Hizashi seems *jealous* for the most inane reasons possible, solely due to Hitoshi’s frigid avoidance of him. Finding the reasoning behind that, if there is any, seems like a better use of Aizawa’s time than trying to plan ‘quality time’ with him, given that Hitoshi’s sincerest interests tend to be on a more violent side compared to Eri’s.

Hizashi already showed him how to make coffee, and Aizawa doesn’t think that sharing a coffee shop order qualifies as an activity. Hitoshi’s interest in the capture scarf is rare, and offering to train him with its use seems like a poor idea when Hitoshi still seems to struggle with basic ‘start and stop’ motions. There were a few things he noticed when his fight with Midoriya first started, that he could offer to sort out. If he wanted an even more *capably* violent ward.

Stay awake. Don’t blink. It can crush your head but don’t close your eyes, not now, not Asui-

“You really are cool. Eraserhead.”

Aizawa jolts with a hand over his mouth, sweating too much when he pulls away from Hizashi’s embrace, shaking with a terror that isn’t *new* to him.

He sits on the side of the bed to fumble in the dark for his phone, just to check the time. Just to stare at it long enough that the numbers made sense again. Five hours.

Five hours of sleep, with a nightmare to wake him. The same one, the usual USJ nightmare, and he *wishes* he could take solace in the thought that the nightmares are receding again into lesser horrors. He can’t right now, and he can’t think of laying down again as anything less than *submission* to claws ripping through his scalp and his limbs useless until they’re broken.

So Aizawa makes his usual course to the kitchen, to make himself some tea. To take the time to

remember who he is, where he is, and where he's *not*. He's past USJ. He has bigger issues.

He has a *question* as to who brewed a pot of coffee and seems to have gone through half of it, but the answer to that is likely already known to him, and the idea of confronting Hitoshi about that poor decision seems like pointlessly kicking a hornet's nest.

Staying awake all night is a poor decision that can't be prohibited by a rule, given how unenforceable it would be for the majority of the occupants of this dorm. But if Hitoshi is trying to pursue that dream that *almost* became a reality for Aizawa to become nocturnal and avoid most human interaction, that's a dream already dead in the water by the 'one meal eaten together every day' rule.

Aizawa stares at the temptation of the coffee pot for too long, even while he waits for his chamomile tea to brew. Curiosity eventually gets the better of him, when he takes his mug and walks quietly down the hallway, first seeing that Eri was undisturbed in her slumber, safe in the pink net canopy over her bed, then seeing that Hitoshi's door was open.

And that Hitoshi wasn't in his room.

Aizawa checks the bathroom, because he doesn't want to jump to conclusions, but when the door is open and the lights are off there, he brings himself to check the laundry room *just* in case. Because Hitoshi *could not* be that reckless.

He wouldn't drink half a pot of coffee to just wander off, the slimmest possibility that he went to the 1-A dorm, a *slightly* more reasonable suspicion that he invited Mirio to take a walk with him due to some frustrations and issues that he didn't want to share with Hizashi or himself. The possibility that Hitoshi isn't on campus at all is nigh impossible, but Aizawa neither wants to scour the grounds *or* ask that The Commission track him down with that tracker implanted in his ankle, though Aizawa *truly* thinks he should request access to it in the future.

Aizawa nearly drops his mug when he sees a door opening, a door he *didn't* think to check, as it's always locked. Locked to keep Hitoshi out of it.

But Hitoshi has *proven* he can pick locks, and he seems nonplussed about getting caught after the fact when he sees Aizawa as he exits the office, and holds the mug in his own hand a little higher. Almost a greeting, almost pointing out the similarity that they're both awake at 4 AM holding mugs in the hallway.

Completely unapologetic about invading a space that he's not supposed to be in, at an hour he really shouldn't be awake, given that he should be *resting* to recover from his concussion.

It's late, Aizawa *hasn't* indulged in a cup of coffee like Hitoshi has, and the silence of the hallway only holds Aizawa's tongue further. He doesn't say anything, but he follows Hitoshi to the kitchen at a distance, watching the teenager pour another cup for himself. Aizawa can only hope that this is the *only* pot of coffee that Hitoshi has brewed.

"You're supposed to be resting," Aizawa whispers, his elbows on the counter after he submits to the argument that he's *still* exhausted himself, and sits down accordingly. Hitoshi just shrugs his shoulders, his back turned before he takes a sip, then turns around with his back braced on the counter beside the machine. The warming light for the coffee machine is off, and there's no steam for his cup, meaning that the coffee is probably cold at this point.

Hitoshi, despite willfully staying up this late, looks exhausted with the rings under his eyes. He's forgone the facemask too, and Aizawa notes with some concern that the scabs within his scars

have edges bleeding fresher, as though he were picking at them. “You’re supposed to care about the investigation.”

The accusation there drops like a lead weight into Aizawa’s stomach, because it is somewhat *deserved*. He hasn’t chased the lead with his usual vigor, and he knows exactly *why*. He has an assumption as to why Hitoshi is so focused on it now, the recent attempt on his life would force him to either extreme - to shut down out of fear of further attempts to silence him, or fight harder to bring down his former captors. Aizawa should feel that same fire that Hitoshi has chosen.

He doesn’t. And he knows exactly why.

And he knows he needs to push past it. “Let’s see where you are, then,” Aizawa fumbles, raising his mug of tea that he only barely thinks of exchanging for coffee. If this is an early morning for him, five hours of sleep is still a rare gift, and Aizawa imagines that Hitoshi *needs* some guidance as to what he’s working on. He may have gotten frustrated at the lack of warehouse addresses given to him and just started virtually pacing the coastline of Japan on Google Maps’ street view, something that might actually be calming if it wasn’t for Hitoshi’s intentions with it.

Aizawa follows him through the unlocked office door, and still keeps the admonishment to himself, before he sees the absolute *mess* of paper scattered like an explosion over his desk, debris filtering out onto Hizashi’s.

Frustration about the lack of addresses spiraled into *darker* territory, as Aizawa identifies several investigation files he never wanted Hitoshi to see. And the teenager simply takes his place in Aizawa’s chair. Without the facemask, the corner of his lip twitches up almost into a smirk that reads more *proud* than what he should be. “The lines you wanted me to write are over there.”

Aizawa glances at Hizashi’s desk, and buried beneath Hitoshi’s wardship paperwork which seems mostly untouched, if out of order as though he’s been reading through it in full, a cat-shaped notebook is flipped open and a pen with a cat’s head on the cap discarded above it. ‘I won’t intentionally tell Midoriya to run into a wall,’ written repeatedly on the first page, but when Aizawa flips through the next few pages, idly wondering if it added up to 100 lines, he sees the lines change to ‘I won’t intentionally hurt other people with my quirk.’

Aizawa doesn’t count, but it seems to surpass the 100 lines that Aizawa *did* intend to tell him to write, but *after* he had fully recovered from the concussion. “You didn’t tell me what to write, so I guessed. 100 for both guesses.”

Left alone, Hitoshi took it upon himself to submit to the discipline and *double it*. “That wasn’t necessary. Next time, I’ll tell you what to write, and you only have to complete 100.”

This exhaustion threaded through Hitoshi’s loose limbs, this odd and oddly companionable *silence* that answers him, devoid of a criticism or barb, seems to suggest that there won’t really *be* a next time. As terrifying as the prospect of introducing punishments and discipline to two children who had faced horrific abuse *described* as that, Hitoshi’s enthusiasm for exceeding what was required almost seemed like an admission in itself. That apologies and writing lines were so beneath what he expected as a ‘punishment,’ and he was possibly taking to the very idea of defined rules and expectations with enthusiasm.

Hitoshi eventually rolls his eyes, over some hesitation perceived, and takes another drink of coffee, which prompts Aizawa to look through the rest of the storm that’s blown through his investigation files in the past five hours. Without Hitoshi being a guide, he’ll see what Hitoshi has been at work with, similarly without guidance.

Autopsy reports. On the edge of his desk, Hizashi's only containing those lines and that the wardship paperwork, the autopsy reports for 44, 61, 102, Numbers that were recovered dead or in *pieces*, are described as they were in life with bright yellow sticky notes borrowed from Hizashi's desk. '44, Explosion quirk like Bakugo but only activated by punching, Rank filler and fighter, rented to Suma Gang. Good at math too.'

Neither gang's members arrested at the scene would claim the young woman on the cusp of adulthood, neither would say why her body was there. Suma was disbanded after enough arrests were made, if Aizawa's memory is correct, but he's not sure if Naomasa has talked to them in regard to the Miasma ties.

He's not sure how close Hitoshi was to this woman, if he wanted to note something about her life on her autopsy report, how she was 'good at math.' If that was a meaningful relationship that led Hitoshi closer to Bakugo in the first place.

61's is shorter. '61, Witness quirk, can memorize every detail observed in short spurts, Information gathering. Probably got run over on purpose after getting caught.'

The young man with that number tattooed over his ribs was indeed killed by the car tires crushing his abdomen, something thought to be a tragic accident. The driver was charged as they were already evading the police, only manslaughter in the second degree as it looked like the young man was trying to exit the speeding car on his own. No clear ties to organized crime syndicates were made at the time, they got away with the defense that they were panicked when they were speeding and pursued by police.

102, only recovered by a disembodied foot. '102, loyal to Miasma. Never learned his quirk. Might have been chummed.'

Aizawa wanted to get up to speed first, but that word 'chummed' has implications he wants to be sure of. "Chummed?"

"Usual disposal," Hitoshi explains in a clipped tone, staring at the computer when Aizawa looks at him. "A Tiger Shark quirk swims around the compound. Whenever a Number needs to be disposed of...."

Hitoshi trails off, but the implication has been made clear enough. Tiger sharks are maneaters, the animal can attack humans and in certain circumstances, eat them. Whatever the specific changes that quirk comes with, Aizawa can safely *assume* that's an ability that carried over.

But Miasma has found other ways of 'disposal,' recently, and Aizawa wonders how exactly this unnamed Tiger Shark Number found themselves 'unemployed.'

The last autopsy report makes his blood run cold. Furokage Mizuki's.

There's no sticky note on the first page, but Aizawa still flips through it. He knows that Hitoshi has stolen this before, and he doesn't want to find that a page has gone *missing*. Instead, he sees a note added, on one of many photographs documenting the scars on the young woman's body, circling a small scar on her wrist. 'My fault. In training.'

A training accident, a wound made unintentionally that Hitoshi wanted to point out as his doing. Out of the many, the *worse* injuries made record by scars, the *intentional* ones, Hitoshi wants his younger self to be blamed for the smallest of them. "That's not your fault. You shouldn't have been in that situation--"

“It doesn’t matter,” Hitoshi interrupts, seemingly irritated by Aizawa trying to talk about something other than the investigation. “I didn’t know what else to write.”

Hitoshi wanted to make a note on Furokage Mizuki’s record. On her *autopsy report*, after going through the others. As if he didn’t want her to be *left out*.

The Nomus with number tattoos are next. After the bulk of those Nomus were restrained and captured alive during the Kamino incident, they were sickeningly identified by other numbers, issued by the Hero Commission after observation and testing tried to suss out which quirks they were built from. What people they used to be.

Hitoshi has identified them by their original numbers, using the bulleted list of quirks. ‘388 = 88, Strength Enhancement quirk with bleeding eyes when active. A dick.’

Not exactly a *fond* way to refer to a man who was used as a component of an abomination. And the common assumption about the presence of the number ‘3’ is proven on a sticky note on top of the stack of reports. ‘The only three-digit numbers assigned are the 100 series. Memory must have added the 3 to their number before they were sold off.’

Memory, the poisoner, part of the assumed administration, and someone who was present when Hitoshi was sold by his mother, also coordinates outward sales and rentals. And she seems to be the tattooist for all Numbers.

She put that tattoo on Hitoshi’s arm as well. Naming him ‘27.’

Aizawa feels his stomach twist when he thinks of ‘327,’ and moves on to the next scattered pile, this one even more messy. He regrets it immediately.

The reviews. Hitoshi’s reviews, 127’s reviews, all of the Number reviews that Shiori handed over to the police before her demise, a heavy stack perfectly organized with a cover page for the traits that Shiori had pulled from the contents, about that Number’s specialties, their quirks, their appearances. When they became active according to the evidence of the reviews and when they might have gone silent, been *disposed of* or ‘*chummed*,’ an undeniably useful wealth of information already half-sorted at the start. Hitoshi’s insights here are probably the most valuable addition they could ask for.

Aizawa pulls his hand away instead, taking a step backwards because he can’t bring himself to *touch* them. When he feels this itching under his skin, the unsettlement burning behind his eyes and almost making them water.

He pauses to take a drink of bitter tea, almost cold at this point, and tries not to see the similarity in the rings of exhaustion highlighted in the glow of the computer monitor on Hitoshi’s face, when a ghost looks familiar. “Wherever you got that, that’s almost everyone, as far as I know. They might have gotten more Numbers after I was sold. Most of them I know are dead-”

“The warehouses?” Aizawa asks, afterwards realizing that’s the most difficult part for Hitoshi to complete on his own, but he wants to talk about *anything* else. Just for now.

He’s not brave enough to face it yet. “I went through this list,” Hitoshi says, holding up a notepad next to the keyboard, his eyes growing cold and narrowing to show that he’s not pleased with the results of that measure, one he was unaware of and must have been Hizashi’s work. “I didn’t find The Miasma, but I was rented to a few of them. Put down as many names as I could remember. Some of them are in those reviews.”

Aizawa doesn't want to talk about the reviews. Not with this exhaustion doubling, this tension in his chest nearly making his breath stutter. Shiori could have given him this when he first asked, but she didn't. *I'm not going to 404 my servers for you, Eraserhead.*

And then she *did*. "Got a lot more complaints than I thought I would-"

"I need to take a walk," Aizawa interrupts, because he needs to get outside. He needs a break, he has one last cigarette. It seems fitting, now that Hitoshi is making the effort to make *sure* he can't avoid the issue now.

He feels like a coward, when Hitoshi looks at him with all the accusation of not taking his efforts to help as such, as being so devoid of praise for the hours Hitoshi spent, *helpful efforts* that Aizawa knows were painful for him to make. That he did on his own. But Aizawa finds it hard to compliment this dig into his own wounds. He just needs a break to clear his mind.

"It's cold outside," he offers as warning, when Hitoshi says nothing, but his eyes still seem to express the same request that they did before the training exercise.

Why didn't you ask me to go to the 1-A dorm? While Hitoshi's Confession quirk often warps from under his control, Aizawa is starting to suspect that question was honest on the asker's part. A request for *quality time together*, if Hizashi is to be believed.

Aizawa is all the more fearful that once again, his husband is right, when Hitoshi stands up and walks over to the closet where their spare hero costumes are stored, to grab a spiked leather jacket from Present Mic's image.

Hitoshi isn't *much* shorter than either of them, but he still seems too small when the jacket can be wrapped around his torso so loosely, and the sleeves hide his hands for being too long.

Aizawa knows full well that if his husband saw this, their ward would die of mortification while Hizashi would probably be shocked into silence. Before he found a phone to take a picture of it.

Aizawa stops before he reaches the door, to pull a discarded scarf from the back of the couch and offer it to Hitoshi. He can face the freezing cold with the black long sleeved shirt and sweatpants he went to bed in, for a short and uncomfortable amount of time, but Hitoshi should be better prepared.

He only notes after he hands it over that the scarf is Eri's, the soft pink color not incriminating enough, but the cat faces drawn on the ends of the scarf, that Hitoshi picks at after winding it around his neck, are the most identifiable features.

Hitoshi tilts his head at Aizawa's hesitation, before Aizawa remembers which pocket he placed the 'stress stash' in while he was in the office. He has to flip the box open to check that the lighter was still there, the last cigarette still *there*, given that there was a teenager who had broken into that office who had already found a fondness for sake when the opportunity was available. He still knows that smoking in front of an impressionable teenager is a bad habit.

But just once, Aizawa is willing to let it slide.

Hitoshi continues to follow him close, no more than two steps away, angled a bit to his left side while they exit the staff dorm and Aizawa finds the bench distant enough from the building, with only a fine dusting of snow. Hitoshi following him like that, almost like a trained bodyguard, is a habit more often seen with Eri or Hizashi, but Aizawa assumed there would be side effects for Hitoshi digging into his painful past alone like that.

Aizawa should be more ashamed, when he sits down and pulls the cigarette to his mouth, and lights it. When Hitoshi sits beside him, on the very edge of the bench to maintain the distance he seems comfortable with, Aizawa does have to offer the barest warning. “This is a horrible habit. You shouldn’t pick it up.”

Hitoshi just stares, cocking his head at that. Even if his face is blank, even if he’s silent, there’s too many wordless accusations there. ‘If it’s a horrible habit, why are you doing it? Why is it horrible? What gives you the right to tell me what to do? Why is this more important than making headway in the investigation?’

Given how Hitoshi has a new reason to avoid asking questions when Confession can warp them and force an ugly answer, Aizawa appreciates that they’re silent. Looking instead at the sky, how the barest hints of dawn are rising in the gray sky, he can appreciate his surroundings. This used to be the time that he would end his patrols if they were uneventful.

When he was able to work as a hero, before Hitoshi’s wardship necessitated that he stop to focus on his safety. “Why do you care about her now, when you didn’t before?”

“I cared, but I didn’t know how bad it was. I feel guilty because I could have stopped it,” Aizawa is forced to answer, his mind wrapping in *too familiar* static with only an unnatural will to answer that question remaining in his body. But too soon, the static disappears, and Aizawa turns to the sound of Hitoshi coughing.

With a stolen cigarette in his hand, that Aizawa leans across the bench to take back from him.

“Do we *need* to make a rule about smoking and drinking?” Aizawa asks, bitterly brushing his thumb over the filter before he flicks the ash away. At least it wasn’t wet.

“No,” Hitoshi argues between coughs, turning to glare at Aizawa with watering eyes. “That’s *horrible*. It’s just *smoke*.”

Aizawa nods, as that was his own first impression, and he might be able to lie for better results. “It’s not enjoyable until you turn 20, after your brain develops enough to recognize the nicotine.”

It’s not enjoyable the first time, especially with just the first taste, but after the addiction forms well enough, the nicotine buzz can be soothing. Aizawa’s first few attempts to find the appeal were similar failures, and he can blame the compulsion on Hizashi for starting the habit first. After they graduated, *possibly* shy of the legal age. By a few years. “Her.”

Aizawa knows that’s a question Hitoshi is trying to ask, but he doesn’t have answers he wants to give. He looks at the student dorms in the distance instead, at how there isn’t a soul stirring on campus yet. But he’s sure that at least a few of his own students are early risers.

“You feel guilty about someone,” Hitoshi continues to pry, with a gravely voice not entirely recovered from the smoke he probably took too deep into his lungs. “You’ve been weird ever since we got back to UA.”

Aizawa doesn’t have a clue what Hitoshi was originally trying to ask, as he doesn’t know anything about Shiori. Confession spawned the question that Aizawa was forced to answer, giving him this hint that Aizawa *didn’t* want him to find. And he doubts that the honest answer is one that Hitoshi wants to find. “Someone I worked with died. I didn’t find out until we returned. If I had....”

Aizawa stops himself short of saying ‘if I had been there,’ because it likely makes no difference. He would have been there for *Hagakure*, he wouldn’t have wanted to be on the escort taking Shiori

to prison. He would have wanted to wash his hands of it. Everything would have still fallen to the same ruin.

He doesn't want Hitoshi to think that being with him in the mountains was a mistake that Aizawa would take back. "If I had known what she was doing, I would have been able to save her life. She was working with criminals, in ways I didn't know about. She had issues that drew her on that dangerous path."

'Shiori' isn't her real name, and Aizawa has assumed that beforehand. He knew *some* of the crimes she had participated in, to a degree he had *asked* her to commit more, lesser crimes to a degree. He knew that she had committed to the path below the straight and narrow, she didn't want to change her ways and past sins barred her from that to a degree. He thought he was doing his best to help her.

In the beginning, he thought if he pushed, she would just push further away. She needed the offer of escape and help that he thought he made clear, but she didn't take it, when she needed to. When she got involved with the League.

He could have been a better friend, to avoid all of this. "Talking to her might help," Hitoshi says, his tone careless enough with his shrug and averted eyes for Aizawa to know this is hardly something Hitoshi doesn't care about. Something that hits on something vulnerable enough that he makes such a brittle shield. "Apologizing, or... saying what was left unsaid."

Hitoshi trying to comfort him, trying to tell him how to mourn Shiori after receiving that advice for Furokage Mizuki's fate not long ago, still rattles Aizawa enough despite Hitoshi's attempts to play it off casually. As though this isn't a sensitive and painful topic for them both.

Hitoshi has no idea that the reviews for the Numbers he went through came at the expense of Shiori's life, in a small way. It wasn't the reason that she died, she was *killed* by the League to silence her from leaking more of their secrets, if she hadn't already. All the information she had to offer wasn't worth a human life.

Aizawa looks at the cigarette, flicking the ash again even though he hasn't taken another drag. The incense that Ojiro lit, and treated as *funeral incense* for Hagakure still catches in his mind. "She was an idiot."

Aizawa doesn't want to face the sight of the dorms again and pretend that he's *speaking* to Shiori, because right now, he feels like what he would have to say is too harsh for his ward's ears. It would probably lower Hitoshi's opinion of him.

"She was stubborn, she refused to get help time and time again, and her death is on her own hands," Aizawa says, and wants to say more on it. How much Shiori caused Hagakure's suffering, how that in his opinion is the worst of her crimes. A 'mentor,' Aizawa assumed, that Shiori agreed with before her passing, and a *shitty* one at that.

If Aizawa could have known before, he would have seen the disaster those two would have been drawn into, because Shiori shouldn't have been trusted with the admiration of a younger person like that. "You're just mad that she's not here to say these things to. You're still sad that she's gone."

Hitoshi isn't someone that should take that mentoring role to guide Aizawa in mourning, in forgetting Shiori, when he was only days old or not yet born when Aizawa experienced that loss for the first time. With Shirakumo.

But Hitoshi has experienced that loss, all the same. And he seems to think that makes them kindred souls in that way. When Aizawa looks at him, Hitoshi just shrugs, again careless with vulnerable words hidden beneath that. “I don’t know who ‘she’ is, but even if she did something to make you upset, you can still feel like she shouldn’t have died. Chisaki, 127... Almost everyone I knew at The Miasma is dead or they’re... like that.”

Aizawa never wanted Hitoshi to see those files. To know what Nomus are. To experience the *horror* of connecting faces to those twisted things.

Aizawa never thought that Hitoshi talking about Numbers would bring about a similar grief. These *were* the people he grew up with, this *is* his history. Even if they hurt him in the past, even if they deserved their end, it’s an end hurtful in the finality. There is no place for words left unsaid.

Just the attachment remains.

“I didn’t know them. I didn’t talk to them, obviously,” Hitoshi says, his hand raising but falling short of his face, still gesturing to a mask that isn’t there. That was still a painful piece of this history. “I listened to them talk, sometimes. I didn’t really *want* to know anyone, back then, especially some of them. 88, he...”

Hitoshi’s breath catches, and Aizawa doesn’t want him to continue. Continue to feel it, have to reveal it, *whatever* that monster did before he became a monster.

“Busted me up, *a lot* during training. He was one of the worst,” Hitoshi says, and Aizawa can imagine. He doesn’t know when combat training started for Hitoshi, and Hitoshi likely doesn’t either, but 12 is still too young. He knows that was the end, that was when Hitoshi was sold to the 8 Precepts, and there were *years* of ‘training’ before that. “And he liked listening to jazz music. He was good enough that when he was being taken to a job, he could listen to it. He liked protection jobs, and he was friends with 98.”

Aizawa knows that each Number is a person. Almost every Nomu is an amalgamation of people.

He wouldn’t know 388 like that, without knowing him like Hitoshi did. “98 took me to my first Bug session, and he was the one who told me that 50 died. I wouldn’t have known if he didn’t tell me, I would have kept waiting. I wouldn’t be able to ask.”

Monsters, who are people. Far harder to mourn than someone like 50 to Hitoshi.

Hard to forgive, an obstacle to forgetting them. And the pain that follows.

“People hurt people,” Aizawa says, a statement more profound than it seems on its face, something he’s had to remind himself of in his hero work when there are criminals sympathetic enough to lend strictness but not hopelessness. “There are things too horrific to forgive, that doesn’t take away the fact that they were done by a person, who has flaws and reasons for acting the way they do, their own tragedies. But forgiveness doesn’t have to mean redemption, or ‘trying again,’ or thinking fondly of them from now on. Forgiveness can just be... severance. Freedom from thinking about them, and what they’ve done.”

Every time he sees a trace of Shiori left to haunt him, her presence seems to grow like a weight on his shoulders. His class, missing one student. The growth in investigative leads. The scabs on Hitoshi’s face, when he was forced to wear that mask and fear for his life, after 127 gained entrance by Shiori taking down the security system.

He wants to feel hate, instead of pity and guilt, but none of these serve him. Shiori is dead, she’s

just a hindrance to him now, and he wants to be done with her. If he could take the sum of his feelings about it, his anger and sorrow might cancel each other out. He just needs time for each of them to work themselves out.

And his time has run out, judging by the ash clinging only to the filter of his cigarette. The ward who needs his time and attention, and the investigation that only needs a greater push to reach results. Those reviews are the greatest key to knowing Miasma's manpower, who they will face during the raid, and which heroes need to be called to combat them. "I apologized. And wrote the lines. And helped with the investigation."

Aizawa looks at Hitoshi, who is picking at the end of his scarf again. Talking to Aizawa, even when he refuses to look at him.

"We're... fine. After that," Hitoshi asks, the hesitation making it a question, and Aizawa feels his breath catch because it *shouldn't be*. If Hitoshi was forcing himself to make progress in the investigation, putting his mental wellbeing willfully at risk, because he thought he needed to 'make things up' to Aizawa after that little *fight*.

"Of course we are," Aizawa reassures, when he struggles to know exactly how to frame it. He remembers the steps, the words to say, but like he expected Hitoshi doesn't *need* something that simple. "You went beyond what you were supposed to, and I know that you regret your actions. We'll work together on avoiding that, but... You should *not* have broken into the office to do that. The investigation will never be a punishment--"

"That's not--" Hitoshi cuts himself off, dropping the scarf as his hands fall to the bench in frustration, curling around the edges of it. "I want to find them, and I want to stop them. I thought you wanted that too."

Out of all the horrible 'quality time' activities Aizawa had considered, working on the investigation was probably worse than the whole of them. "I do. But I don't want you to get hurt in the process. Your wellbeing is more important to me than the success of the investigation."

Hitoshi folds his arms, his bare hands likely uncomfortably cold from holding the bench for that short time, before he rolls his head lazily to look at Aizawa like he's said something stupid. "My 'wellbeing' is tied to the investigation. They're going to try to kill me again, or kidnap me. And I'd *like* to take them down first, if you don't mind. There's not a lot of friendly faces waiting for me at 'home.'"

Aizawa knows that the end of the investigation is tied into Hitoshi's wellbeing, probably more than Hitoshi does. Adequate care and support for his issues being one of the bigger needs predicated on the end of the wardship.

Aizawa knows well that he's not adequate care *or* support, when he can't manage to make amends with the teenager at the conclusion of the disciplinary process.

"I'll look through your notes," Aizawa says, rising from the bench and feels the back of his thighs frozen and protesting the cold as much as the shivering beginning to set in. He doubts that Hitoshi is much warmer in just a scarf and leather jacket. "But there's something I want to do first."

*

Hitoshi follows Aizawa half-blind with his eyes closed, back to the dorm and into the office, wishing that the exhaustion pulling at his limbs could make up its mind. He's tired, *now*, but he's sure if he tries to fall asleep, he'll feel the same frustration when he *can't*. It's just one of those

nights, and he might as well be productive with the extra time. He might as well make the decision for his body with another cup of coffee.

But when Aizawa reaches into the top of the closet in the office and pulls out that giant speaker contraption that Yamada wears when he's in costume, Hitoshi feels like everything was a mistake.

Everything. Staying awake, working on the investigation, talking to Aizawa.

Giving in to the *stupidest* idea he's ever had, a curiosity about what it feels like to wear Yamada's jacket like this.

Aizawa won't even betray how mocking the gesture is when he holds the speakers out to Hitoshi, his blank face betrays *nothing* and Hitoshi struggles to do the same. "I'm not wearing that."

Hitoshi should have taken the jacket off by this point, but he still feels cold from going outside. It still feels comfortable. Aizawa doesn't give in that easily. "It's the second-best method of testing this that we have, unless you want me to wake up Hizashi."

Because Yamada's hearing aids are like tiny speakers. Because his quirk didn't work over the HAM radio. Because Aizawa is an *asshole*. "*Fine.*"

Hitoshi takes the speakers, and struggles not to show how insanely *heavy* they are. It's a wonder that Yamada can act like he does when he wears them, his shoulders must hurt *all* the time.

But when Hitoshi slides the bulky collar over his head, there's padding around every space that comes into contact with him. Not that thin layer of foam that was worn through shortly after Chisaki gave him another mask, after he was sold, but *thick* padding that makes the speakers feel like they're nearly weightless on his shoulders.

Even the front piece that rests lower on his chest and the part where Yamada must rest his chin for his mouth to reach the microphone is padded, but the chin rest is a little too high for him. Yamada must have a stupidly long neck that he hasn't noticed before.

Hitoshi still finds himself pressing down at the top of the device, testing how effective the padding is, how oddly *soothing* it feels to have a pressure around his shoulders like this. It doesn't hurt. Aizawa pulls his chair in front of Hitoshi's and starts adjusting the dials on the front panel, probably turning it down so Hitoshi won't blow out the windows if he talks.

Aizawa's eyes look a little too wide, there's just a crack in the blankness that's almost confusingly irritating while he works, and as soon as he's apparently done, not that Hitoshi can see what he even *did*, he lowers a hand towards the dials just to see if Aizawa will catch it. "*Don't.*"

Aizawa narrows his eyes in warning, a look similar to the ones he gives to his students when they irritate him, but he's a bit too tired to pull it off. Hitoshi lets that hand drop to his lap, the other still comfortably resting on top of this hunk of metal that he *knows* is heavier than it feels.

Aizawa's expectation with this feels heavy enough.

"Does it work?" Hitoshi asks, purposefully asking a question. There's no flash of blindness, his words are his own words, but he waits for Aizawa to answer him because that's the real test at play.

There's a twitch at the corner of Aizawa's mouth that doesn't fully relax, remaining in that soft almost-smile. "Perfectly. Does it feel different for you?"

It does, in a way that Hitoshi can't even decide if he likes. He can hear how his voice warps just slightly, the soft echo from the speakers at either side of his neck. When he asked the question, it felt like he was talking to Eri instead of Aizawa, and he hardly noticed that there *was a* difference there before he tried it. But after Aizawa answered him, he felt *nothing*. No tug, no string, just words. As though he was quirkless.

But he could still speak.

"Not really. Just that I can't take control," Hitoshi answers, because Aizawa stares long enough for him to know he wants an answer. It still feels *weird*, to talk like this and know there's no way he could slip, but not entirely weird in a bad way. It feels too much like *relief*, after having to watch himself after he took control of Mirio like that. It feels like control, but just over himself.

The mask has never felt *anything* like this. "It will probably feel the same when you talk to Hizashi," Aizawa says, leaning back in his chair and slumping forward, like he always does. That weird half-smile is gone, but there's still too much that Aizawa's eyes betray before he says it. "But you haven't tried that yet. You seem like you're avoiding him."

"I'm not," Hitoshi argues, because that's insulting to think that he would. Even if he *is* avoiding Yamada. He presses a hand to the speaker on his right side, wondering why something so simple, so *small* makes all the difference with his quirk. "It's only for the test... right?"

Hitoshi's teeth find the inside of his lip after those words slip out, too small and too weak and too *weird* with the echo he can feel on his fingertips. Speaking freely like this, his chin and his mouth hidden from Aizawa's sight. If he dips his chin a little lower, his nose would be hidden too.

It's too loose to be the mask, it will never fit properly around his face, but it feels *different* from that. Trying to trust that if he says something that crosses an invisible line, Aizawa will tell him.

"It can be," Aizawa says, as though he can speak for Yamada. Somehow, his tone lightens oddly, his words are almost words that Yamada might say to him anyway. "Hizashi wouldn't force you to talk to him at all, if it was his choice. I think he understands how it might feel like a big change between you two. Something that can seem frightening."

"It's not—" Hitoshi's hands curl around the speakers, trying to find an edge to dig into, but none feel sharp enough. He knows *fear*. "It's not something I *want*. I'm not *trying* to make this difficult, or just..."

Aizawa's head tipping to the side, just the sight of that snaps something in Hitoshi's chest, because it's *stupid*. It's a mess. He can't explain it and he doesn't want to share it.

"Yamada said that when he couldn't talk... he was afraid that something bad would happen if he did. He would lose control of his quirk and hurt someone," Hitoshi says, and he feels more frustrated now remembering that than he did when he heard it, when he felt hopeless because Yamada didn't know it wasn't *like that*. He was more messed up than Yamada assumed he was. "It just felt like I couldn't, before. I wasn't afraid, I just couldn't speak."

Aizawa still just stares at him, still attentive it seems to whatever mess Hitoshi is failing to describe, but he can't bring himself to admit it. That it *is* like that now, but only with Yamada. And that feeling gets worse every time he looks at him, it just feels like he needs to *run* before he's torn apart from the inside. He can't stand to be around Yamada anymore.

He hates it.

“The test is on Friday afternoon. After you see the quirk specialist, the Commission representative will want you to try to use your quirk on Hizashi. To test it,” Aizawa says, and *no one* said that to him. It’s Wednesday- *Thursday* morning right now, *tomorrow* he has to test it, and that’s not enough time. “If you can’t, it will just be rescheduled. No one can make you speak. It’s fine-”

“It’s *not*,” Hitoshi argues, because this is *stupid*. He’s just an *idiot* who still can’t talk, and he’s surrounded by idiots who blindly see through that without seeing how *stupid* it is that he’s like this. It doesn’t make any *sense*. “Yamada isn’t going to be *mad*, or *hurt* me, and I *know* that. It’s just *stupid*-”

“It’s not,” Aizawa says, his hand rubbing the back of his neck as he leans forward, his elbow resting on his thigh. Looking closer, Hitoshi can see he looks tired, he hasn’t slept well. He probably wanted to go to sleep before now, before being pulled into Hitoshi’s stupid mess. “Fear, anger, sadness. They follow their own logic rather than our own. They control us more often than we’d like.”

Hitoshi knows that, and he’s tired of it. He shouldn’t be afraid in a place like this, when he’s tasted *real* terror. Yamada is *nothing* like Chisaki, nothing like Bug. Nothing like anyone he’s ever met before.

And it’s stupid. “Try not to avoid him tomorrow, as much as you’re comfortable with. You can talk to him, messaging him might be an easier option. There’s a difference between knowing logically, and knowing after confirmation. Hizashi won’t be upset with you.”

Messaging Yamada... *what*? That he still wants to be around him even when it feels like his skin is on fire? That he can speak to anyone *but* him, and expect Yamada not to take that as an insult? That he misses him, even worse than when he was stuck in that shack for three days, even when they’re in the same room?

“And he misses spending time with you,” Aizawa says, the perfect words to make Hitoshi feel like *shit*. Like less than shit, because even shit has a meaningful purpose, but Hitoshi *truly* has no purpose other than hurting anyone he cares about. “To the point that he seems to think that you like me better than him, which makes me worry that he’s losing his mind.”

That’s....

Not *true*.

But it’s more true than Hitoshi would like it to be.

He doesn’t *like* Aizawa. Aizawa is still a dick, *a lot* of the time. He has *never* been honest with his intentions or his goals, he’s *never* been easy to read, and every time that Hitoshi *thinks* he’s figured him out, he just changes to spite his efforts. Aizawa was supposed to be *simple* to understand, Hitoshi only had to help him with the investigation to make him happy, he only had to behave better than the students, but then Aizawa *changes* and says that he doesn’t need his help with the investigation, then he *does*, then he doesn’t care. He told his students to stay away from him, then he wanted him to be friends with them, then he didn’t want them to know he was at the dorm, *then* he wants him to make amends with them.

Aizawa is *complicated* and *frustrating* too much of the time.

But sometimes, he’s not horrible. Which is just *worse*.

And the way Aizawa’s eyebrow raises up, like that silence was telling when it’s only a sign of how

exhausted Hitoshi is, it's probably the *worst thing* Aizawa's ever done to him. "Fine. I'll talk to him. But probably not, so don't get your hopes up."

Aizawa holds a hand out, and Hitoshi struggles to figure out what he wants, because Aizawa won't *tell* him that simply, before he feels the weight of the speakers again. Aizawa probably wants to put them up, since they don't belong to Hitoshi. They're probably important.

Hitoshi doesn't want to give them back, but he does, and misses the feeling of that heavy padding, that control beyond his own, as soon as he hands them over. He feels bare without it.

Hitoshi stands up just to pull Aizawa's chair back to his desk and sit down, it's the place he's been in for most of the night, and it's where his coffee cup is. If Aizawa has more addresses to look up, after going through his notes, they might be closer to finishing this.

"That's probably cold," Aizawa says, looking at Hitoshi's coffee. It *is* cold, but he's not going to be wasteful. "I'll start a fresh pot."

Well, if *Aizawa* is going to be wasteful, he might as well help him. And when Aizawa gathers up the rest of the files in his hand, the notepad and those weird compliment and complaint cards, before taking his still-full cup of tea, Hitoshi knows it shouldn't be time wasted at least.

He can get Aizawa up to speed, on everything that Hitoshi can tell him about The Miasma for now. Until he finds the warehouse with a black gate, and gray paint chipped away to red on the left side, on the edge of the coastline.

Until they find the address for the place where '27' grew up, his childhood home. Then, he can know exactly when he has to leave this one.

*

Hitoshi seemed to be dragging himself, the slight pause in caffeine intake taking its toll, and Aizawa noticed that he chose to sit on the couch instead of at the counter while Aizawa took to making a fresh pot of coffee. Without the regular schedule for school, or his patrols, Aizawa's only obligations today will be another training exercise for his class that he isn't required to supervise, but will, and the dorm shift tonight.

That leaves enough time to offer his assistance to Naomasa and Sansa to follow these new leads, and as Aizawa flips through the stack of reviews, he sees more and more reasons to.

In the right corner of each cover page, in Hitoshi's scrawl, the fate of each Number that had reviews is written. 'Dead,' 'Nomu,' 'I don't know.'

The unconfirmed are few and far between, and draw his interest more than in terms of raid strategies. These *are* the people that Hitoshi grew up with. People that might be victims, that might have victimized others, committed crimes before they found themselves marked with that number that replaced their names, that are still trapped in that organization with no escape.

The last pages, before the notepad, are the people responsible for every Number.

The sketch of Boss that Chisaki supplied, now with the full details of his quirk written on the side. 'Recall - Needs a vial of blood to pull a person back to him. Has timers in his office to keep track of when jobs are done. Might like the cold, just a rumor.'

Glitzzy's barest description of Memory, with the details of her quirk added later, now has a large messy scribble that might have been Hitoshi's attempt to sketch the woman himself, before he

marked it out. 'Handles everything, clients and recruitment.' *Sales* as well, but Aizawa nearly forgets the urge to add that crime to these notes.

The frame from the hospital's surveillance footage, the best depiction of the woman who attempted to kill Hitoshi there, has a name at last. 'Bug - Maggot quirk. Trains everyone. Don't underestimate.'

The shortest notes, every character written more shakily, is evidence of one of the bravest acts Aizawa has ever seen. This woman has *tortured* Hitoshi, several times. *Four* times in the gruesome way he recounts, in the worst of his scars.

And he showed this picture to Hitoshi once. He did so blindly, and Hitoshi reacted so horribly, curling his fingers into his wrist hard enough to break skin and *bleed*, and Aizawa had no idea at the time. If he had.

He doesn't want this picture in his possession anymore. He doesn't want *any* of this in the same building that Hitoshi sleeps, that he finds safety. He doesn't want to look at it himself a moment longer.

Because he's already committed her face to memory, and he will *remember* her during the raid.

Aizawa glances at the first page on the notebook as the coffee pot chimes, finishing the brew cycle. A list of 'clients,' some names familiar. There's one that's not, on the first line, and it's not elaborated on like the others. "Hitoshi?"

Aizawa calls softly, still reading the dissimilarities between this line and every other. But there's only silence that answers him. Silence, Aizawa notes, that's not.

Hitoshi has fallen asleep, his head fallen on the armrest where his wild purple hair fans out like an offended fern, his arms curled in front of his chest and almost burrowed inside Hizashi's jacket. His feet are still planted on the floor, if he sleeps like that, his back will hurt from the uncomfortable angle.

Aizawa walks over to slowly gather the teenager's legs, and guide him to at least lay on the couch properly. Hitoshi stirs with a mix of a snort or sigh, his eyes barely opening just to close. To adjust himself and curl deeper inside the jacket, as though the dim light from the kitchen stove is offensive now.

Even if the couch is a poor substitute for a bed, Aizawa gathers the blanket on the back of the couch to fashion it into a slightly better one, laying it over the teenager gently. He might wake up if Aizawa tried to carry him to his own bed, and sleep is a precious enough thing for Hitoshi to seek tonight, after laying bare so many nightmares.

Aizawa goes back to the kitchen to tuck the paperwork under his arm, an empty coffee mug that once held tea in one hand, the entire pot of coffee in the other. Hitoshi has made a vast effort tonight, and Aizawa owes it in kind. To send all of this over to Naomasa and Sansa, compiling every note into the shared record, highlighting the aspects that weren't explored, especially the new names Hitoshi submitted.

Five hours of sleep, and plenty of paperwork to do, seems like an adequate punishment for neglecting his ward so far.

1 Year Wardsversary Special Chapter

Chapter Summary

October 13th marks the one year anniversary since Wards was first published! In celebration of that, we have an outtake chat section, picking up where Chapter 79 left off, where Shinsou logs into a chatroom filled with past versions of himself, to see how far he's come, as well as a glimpse into the future.

This chapter is not canon to Wards, and while I usually put special chapters like these in the Scrap Bin to prevent any confusion, I didn't want to lose the comments on it this time. <3

But the events in this chapter do not actually happen in the Wards timeline!

Hitoshi stared at the ceiling above him, Yamada's leather jacket warm against his skin, his legs still tangled in the blanket but he can't bring himself to move yet. Still holding out hope that he can fall back to sleep.

Nope, not that kind of night.

He turns his head to look at the pet fish again, knowing he should probably go back to his own bed. He should see if Aizawa made another pot of coffee, and if it's still warm. He shouldn't just keep staring, wasting his time, acting as though he's pinned down by the fabric wrapped around him or the exhaustion in his bones that won't let him sleep.

But all of that falls sharply away when he feels his phone vibrating, a message from a chat. Maybe it's Midoriya, telling him that he was putting on an act in front of Aizawa but he's not going to take what he did so lightly. Maybe it's Bakugo or Ashi, or the group chat coming back and his phone has just been messed up the past few days.

Instead, it's a new chat, from someone named 'Shinny.' Only Ashi calls him 'Shinny,' maybe she doesn't want to use the one that she has with him, but wants to talk to him on this one.

Hitoshi: Ashi?

Shinny: ashi!

Shinny: o yuor not ashi

Hitoshi: You're not Ashi either. Kaminari? Are you drunk?

Shinny: no im shinny. im 4 and ashi my bets frend

What the fuck? Ashido had to be playing some kind of *game* with him, just to make him feel bad. Lying to him, and it's just *fucked* up.

Hitoshi: You can be pissed off about what I did, but this is fucking bullshit. You're an asshole.

Shinny: :o BAD WORD. lendladi sed heros dont say bad word like butts or that stuff, yuor bad!

Hitoshi: Sure, I'm bad. I'm not a hero, and you can't be a hero either. Neither can Bakugo. Because you're all assholes.

Shinny: STOP SEYIN BAD WORD its my mommys phone im spose to talk to ASHI GO AWAY :(
:(

Hitoshi: Seriously, fuck off. Fuck you. Rules or no rules, the next time I see you you're fucking dead and Aizawa won't stop me. I hope you're having fun because this is such fucking

27 has entered the chat.

Hitoshi: Nice, we're going there? Bakugo, you are a villain, and you're the reason that the Symbol of Peace is just a withered old man who's fucking stupid, and you're a bigger idiot for having all of his merch that you're embarrassed by. Ashido, you're still dead, and I'm going to feed you your own fingers.

27: I don't know who you are, or what class you're in.

Hitoshi: What?

Shinny: I wanna talk to ashi :(
:(

27: If you're on this phone, you go to UA, but I don't know anyone named 'Hitoshi.' Or 'Shinny.' You know Ashido.

Shinny: YA that ashi!!!! where ashi i wanna sen faces tu her!!!

Hitoshi: Stop hiding behind those fake names and tell me who the fuck you are, you're going to pay for this.

27: This is the name I've used more often than the others. I'll tell you my name if you tell me how you know me.

Shinny: im in miss yoshis class!!! with ashi!!! my whole name shinsuo hitoshi my mommy n lendladi call me hitoshi n ashi call me shinny

Hitoshi: You know what? Fine. I'll play along. @27, why didn't any heroes save you if they're so great?

27: They saved Eri, that's all that matters.

Shinny: y not me?

Dog has entered the chat.

Dog: I don't have much time the 8 precepts of death are hurting a little girl named Eri, she's 3 years old, they're in Shibuya I'm not joking please help me

Hitoshi: what the fuck? What the fuck is happening????

Shinny: :o DOG YUO NEED HEROS CALL 111

Dog: I can't this is the only thing on the screen on Rikiya's phone please call them please please

27: What the fuck

Hitoshi: SERIOUSLY THIS IS FUCKED UP YOU NEED TO STOP DOING THIS SHIT OR I WILL STOP YOU PERMANENTLY. I'm going to show this to Aizawa if you don't fuck RIGHT off.

27: No no no please don't I was doing what Yamada said don't do that

Dog: JUST CALL THE POLICE THEY'RE MAKING BULLETS TO ERASE QUIRKS

Shinny: hitoshi STOP BENG MEAN UR SCARn Dog n 27!!!! Im gong tu tell my mommy!!!!

Hitoshi: Tell me the name of the gray stuffed cat you had to prove that this is real.

27: Tell me who you are first.

Dog: Mocha, NOW CALL THE POLICE

Shinny: :o i have mocha tu!!!!!!

Hitoshi: Okay.

Hitoshi: Okay.

Hitoshi: Fuck.

27: TELL ME WHO YOU ARE ALL OF YOU.

Hitoshi: This is.... A really weird dream. Where you're all me. Just at different times. And it's fucked up.

Hitoshi: But 'Dog,' I never took Rikiya's phone, you don't really exist. But stop worrying, the heroes are going to save you and Eri. You don't have to die. Also, Chisaki dies, so look forward to that.

27: He WHAT.

Hitoshi: '27,' Yamada doesn't actually want you to spy on people on the phone, I think he just wanted you to talk to people. Chisaki does die pretty soon and.... It's okay to cry on Yamada. He's fine with it, and it actually feels pretty nice to cry on someone.

Dog: Chisaki dies, and I don't have to have this name, and... I get a phone? Does Eri have a phone?

Hitoshi: Eri doesn't really need a phone, she can use anyone's phone. She's going to be really happy. I don't think this changes anything, but @Dog run towards the hero with the red cape during the raid when you see him. Don't let Chisaki grab you. It will solve A LOT of our problems.

27: What problems. And Eri can have this phone. And you're me, but you're going by that name.

Hitoshi: @27 You're pretty much only mute because the fusion made you into a Nomu, and you

get Nemoto's quirk, and it's going to make you really sick. You're not broken, Chisaki just fucked us up one more time from beyond the grave, because he's that much of a dick. When you see him, put the knife somewhere that commission lady won't see it, you won't have to kill him but you're going to thank me later.

Shinny: your me but old??? AM I ASHIS WIFE YET???

Dog: I just have to get Eri to the hero with the red cape, right?

Hitoshi: Yes, you need to get Eri AND YOU to the hero with the red cape, his name is Mirio. He has permeability, he can hold off Chisaki while you both run. BOTH of you.

27: Shinny how old are you.

Shinny: 4! :)

Hitoshi: @Shinny, you need to tell Miss Yoshi or Ashi's parents that your mom is having problems taking care of you. Your dad used his quirk on her, it put worms inside her head that make it hard for her to make good decisions, and you need to do that soon.

27: Shinny, stop using your quirk, RIGHT NOW. It's hurting people, it's hurting your mom, even if your head itches just scratch your head and don't use it!

Dog: What are you talking about??? No, Shinny, use your quirk. Some messed up things are going to happen, but it's fine, because Eri needs you. Don't listen to them. And when you're bought by a man named Chisaki, don't stutter in front of him.

Hitoshi: 27, our quirk is.... It's fine to use sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes.

Dog: What do you mean not all the time??? Am I hurting Eri?!

27: YES YOU ARE

Hitoshi: NO WE'RE NOT. 27, Eri is fine, our mom's problems are not our fault and there's nothing we can do about it. Don't try to see her, she's not going to fix you because she can't. Your name is 'Hitoshi,' it means 'person,' and you're a person.

27: No, Eri is a person. I'm a Number.

Dog: Right, Eri is a person. Who's Yamada? What's their quirk? Are they coming to save Eri?

Shinny: is eri our frend?

Dog: Eri is more than a friend. She's.... The best person you're ever going to meet.

27: Yamada.... Seems nice. Not as nice as Eri, but I think he's predictable. @Dog, get on Aizawa's good side sooner and stay there. Don't ruin this.

Hitoshi: 27, Yamada is great, stop being scared of him because he's never going to hurt you. Also, Aizawa is kind of a dick, but he's not your owner, he doesn't even have any power over you really, Yamada is in charge. Cook with him more often, and maybe I'll be better at it.

27: Look, I know you're saying you're me from the future, but Yamada could SCREAM and KILL ME. He's nice so far but I'm not taking any chances.

Dog: HE CAN??? And I get sold again??? Am I still with Eri?

Hitoshi: @27, Yamada COULD but he literally never would. He cares a lot about you. Also, if you haven't figured it out yet, you're going to have to talk to Chisaki for the investigation, but Aizawa LITERALLY doesn't know anything. Tell him that Miasma is in a warehouse by the sea

Hitoshi: Shit no wait, go along with it, stab Chisaki, 127 is going to finish him off. THEN tell Aizawa everything you know.

27: Okay. I'm going to stab Chisaki. I can do that, easy.

Dog: NO WE CAN'T??? Did I go completely insane with the 'Nomu' or whatever?

27: Yamada cuts our hair! It feels great, and the cough goes away too! AND THERE'S SO MUCH FOOD Dog this really is a huge step up for us.

Hitoshi: Dog, don't drink the death coffee. Don't eat Toshinori's cookies (also, don't be afraid of him, he's quirkless and pretty nice. And kind of stupid). Also, don't look at Midoriya, or Izuku. Green haired guy with a lot of scars on his arms, don't. Look. At. Him. Ignore him, he's absolutely insane.

27: Izuku seems fine. What happens to that.

Hitoshi: He seems fine, he seems nice even. It's because he's insane. He's insanely nice. You can throw him into a wall and he still wants to be friends with you.

Dog: Sounds like a great friend, I don't see what the problem is.

27: YOU THREW HIM INTO A WALL???? Aizawa probably killed you, you're trying to get me killed sooner!

Hitoshi: Aizawa can't kill us, stop worrying about it. He literally can't even hurt us, not beating or torturing or anything.

Dog: You're telling me... That the heroes save Eri, and she's happy, and she has a lot of phones. And we live in a place with a lot of food, a nice guy named Yamada who cuts our hair, and our new owner.... Doesn't hurt us? At all? Not even a beating if we hurt some guy named 'Izuku'?

Hitoshi: Basically, but he doesn't own us. After the rescue, we're.... Not free, but we're a person. We're going to bring down The Miasma and make Bug and everyone pay for what they did.

27: No we're not!!! I'm not getting myself killed like that! You KNOW what's going to happen if I talk!

Hitoshi: Yeah, I do. Because I'm you from the future. And guess what? Miasma is going to try to silence us anyway, and we're fine! 127 tried to kill me AGAIN and he's probably dead now because he failed. And that's because I DIDN'T tell Aizawa anything, so if you start on this before that coffee interrogation, they probably won't be able to do that.

Dog: The Miasma tries to kill us after the heroes rescue Eri.... What if I stay with Chisaki? She'll be safer that way, right?

Hitoshi: There's no chance of that happening, but Eri needs us at UA, so don't try it. @Dog, what

you need to do is tell Sir Nighteye at the bookstore where Eri is, stop skipping meals, Brainwash Nemoto and Deidoro and maybe a few others if you can, follow Chisaki until the hero with the red cape shows up, and RUN BEHIND HIM WITH ERI. Mirio can probably tell you where to take her to keep her safe, he'll deal with Chisaki, and maybe this time Eri won't be scared at all because you'll be there from the start.

27: Yes, do that. Also, there's a guy who will come up to you on the first day of school, his name is 'Monoma' I think. Don't. Mess. With. Him. Ignore him completely, don't let Eri talk to him. He's up to no good, he wants to steal our quirk and kill people.

Hitoshi: Good advice, but he's not trying to kill people with our quirk, he's just weird. Everyone at UA is pretty weird, but some of them are nice, and no one is trying to kill you. @27, literally no one is trying to kill us, trust me.

Dog: How many people are weird? I don't think Eri should be around people that are weird.

27: 'Hitoshi,' I don't know how you could possibly know that, or how you could forget everything, but there is a point where they could decide we're not worth it. We're only here for the investigation, but if we play our cards right, it could be more. I have a plan.

Hitoshi: Oh fuck, that plan. It's not going to work, just let that go now and save yourself a lot of trouble. Yamada wants you to stay, Aizawa doesn't, nothing is going to change that. They're not going to kill or hurt you for anything, but don't get your hopes up. Just stick to my plan, go with the Chisaki interview, stab him there but don't kill him, tell Aizawa everything after that. Remember that our mother isn't going to fix us, but stop worrying about it. The pork culet bowl that Mrs. Midoriya made was probably pretty great, don't start crying over it.

Shinny: why don yuo like my mommy nemore?

27: She sold us because of our quirk, because YOU wouldn't stop using it.

Hitoshi: Don't tell him

Hitoshi: Don't tell us that! @Shinny, I know you still like our mother because you don't realize what's going on or what's going to happen, maybe she's still a good person but she's going to make some big mistakes and you don't deserve them. Ashi's parents will probably treat us better. Maybe you can call Yamada's radio show and still meet him. Does Present Mic still have a radio show?

Shinny: :o MICCI YEAH. Im micci my dad love presem mic! I liek KKP and presem mic kinda, i got voice changr fer birthday!!!!

Hitoshi: Cool.... You can also talk through that voice changer, and you won't be able to use your quirk. You should do that when you're having trouble controlling it. And Present Mic is really nice, I hope you can still meet him. And Eri. Tell him about Eri when you're.... 13 years old, I think. That she's at the 8 Precepts of Death, and she needs to be rescued.

Dog: Is that how old I am? 13? I feel older. But yes, RESCUE ERI. That's the only thing you need to remember, Shinny.

27: Just a voice changer stops it, right. Not a muzzle.

Hitoshi: Yeah, Bug is also an asshole for not figuring that out, not that she wanted to. If Shinny

fails, @Dog, remember what I said. Take care of yourself more, so you can be there for Eri. She needs you. You feel older because you're kind of dying constantly, you'll feel WAY better after this.

27: You really want to avoid everything, The Miasma and everything. Even 50.

Hitoshi: Right, @Shinny, there's a bad group of villains that are called 'The Miasma,' they're in a big warehouse by the sea, you can call Present Mic and tell him about that, and how they're going to kidnap a lady named 'Furokage Mizuki,' she has a shadow projection quirk. She's very nice, and she needs to get rescued by a hero before you turn 9.

27: How old am I.

Hitoshi: 16, but Bakugo is going to tell you that anyway. Also, Bakugo is a dick, you can treat him more like a dick. But, he also has some issues that you do, and he can help you deal with your issues. Don't tell him that he's a friend like Rikiya was, because he's a WAY better friend than that, and he's going to get offended. And don't eat the hot peppers or drink the milk, you'll know what I mean when it happens.

Shinny: AM I STILL ASHIS WIFE OR NOT?????

27: Ashido.... Really knows me? That was me before everything happened.

Hitoshi: Yes, the missing child poster, the video, that's you. @Shinny, I still know Ashi but.... We're not married right now. I'm... kind of an idiot, and if you do things right, maybe I won't be one.

Dog: Things are going to get complicated, aren't they?

27: You have no idea. Sometimes, I miss being you.

Hitoshi: That's fucked up, but yeah. Things are going to get complicated, but you definitely won't miss it for long, 27. It's also going to get better than you can even imagine right now, you have no idea how great things can turn out.

Dog has left the chat.

Shinny: by dog!!!

27: Is Dog okay, am I okay, did everything just get ruined what if I die what if you killed me by killing dog

Hitoshi: He just left, or I just left??? This is just a really weird dream, I'm fine so you're fine. Stop worrying all the time, I know you don't trust the heroes or anything, but they're stupider than you think and they're not going to hurt you. They actually want to keep you safe because they're nice people, and you've never really met that many people with good intentions before so it's hard to believe it. But they are nice, I've actually been able to avoid the investigation for about a month and they didn't kill me. I tried to choke out Aizawa and he didn't kill me. So stop worrying, and please fuck with them more. They deserve it.

27: Why do they deserve it if they're nice, if they're like 50.

Hitoshi: Not everyone that's nice is like 50, even if they kind of are. It's confusing, but seriously, you can get away with a lot of stuff so try it out. Have fun with it.

27 has left the chat.

Shinny: by 27!!! i hop yuo hab fun!!!

Hitoshi: Hey, Shinny? Some bad stuff might still happen to us. I'm sorry about that, but try not to blame yourself. You're a pretty decent kid, you don't deserve it. Never stop trying to get out, because you'll be proud of that. You probably won't remember that, but try to. When everything gets dark, tell yourself you don't deserve this.

Shinny: k yuor kinda nice no. N yuor me n old. i bets frend with ashi??? n oder pepl??? N presem mic???? Mandlay??

Hitoshi: Mandalay is nice, we do meet her. And Present Mic. And we are good friends with Ashi and Bakugo, and other people. Until I kind of get stupid. So I hope you don't turn into me.

Shinny: :(don b stubid! ashi the bets!!!! Tell ashi yuor sorry n eat all redhis n hold hand!!!

Hitoshi: I did something too stupid for that already, but remember what I said. It's not your fault, don't believe the things they want you to believe, even if you have to act like you do.

Hitoshi: Hug Ashi for me if you can.

Shinny: ok!!!

Shinny has left the chat.

Shinsou has entered the chat.

Hitoshi: Cool, hey asshole? Our mom isn't going to fix shit, don't bother lying to Toshinori, your name is 'Hitoshi' and that means person and Yamada and Aizawa are fine with calling you that. Eri does it sometimes too, and it's great. And we love her, that's the word for it.

Shinsou: Oh, huh. Wow.

Shinsou: Yeah, I... got that already? It's just easier to go by 'Shinsou' in some cases, less confusing. You're 16 right now, right?

Hitoshi:How old are you?

Shinsou: 27, lol. It's a weird year, you can probably imagine why. So, you met mom for the first time, I imagine you're still a ward? No therapy yet?

Hitoshi:holy fuck.

Hitoshi: Yes, and... I just gave Aizawa everything I know about the Numbers, I still haven't found the warehouse. I haven't had the test with Yamada, Eri's birthday is this Sunday. What should I get her? When do I have to leave?

Shinsou: Oh no, you just threw Midoriya into a wall for the first time, didn't you? Oh that's not a fun time. Ohhhh you're in for some rough times, but you'll get through it.

Hitoshi: ??? Explain??? First time???? What is going to happen to me???

Shinsou: Stop worrying so much about Eri's birthday, she's going to have a great time and she's

going to love your present. You're going to have a great time too. Stop worrying about your quirk so much, it's not going to affect Yamada AT ALL. Actually, you're just a huge ball of worry at this point, try to stop?

Shinsou: Oh no, this is the first 'I hate Aizawa' phase, isn't it? Just remembering it makes me want to send him some more cupcakes. I guess... It's actually pretty good for you, or us, with this whole 'angry' thing, but try to just accept it? You can be pissed off sometimes and still come back from it, you're not a 'monster,' you're just feeling things for the first time and you're finally realizing that you don't want to be treated like literal shit. Nut up and apologize to everyone, they're basically going to be cool with you. You're in for.... Some TIMES, but try not to be so stupid? Please? I'm still suffering from some dumb shit you pulled.

Hitoshi: What DUMB SHIT? Maybe we can avoid it.

Shinsou: Probably not, but.... Actually? I take that back, I'm not telling. Even if I'm embarrassed by some of the stuff you pulled, I'm at peace with it. I wouldn't take it back.

Hitoshi: Fine, but seriously, tell me when this is over. When I have to leave UA. That's the only thing I want to know, so I can stop worrying about it.

Shinsou:Nah, it's better if you don't know. It'll take a few years for you to realize this, but the journey is worth it. Plenty of stories to tell now, and I am so boring, now that I realize it. Oh, you still hate the facial hair right now, don't you? A soul patch looks great, don't let Eri tell you any different. Actually, CHERISH these years, Eri is.... Ohhhh she's going to change. She's going to be a terror when she hits preteen, please don't blame yourself to the point that we have a mental breakdown, this is all hormones and none of our fault.

Hitoshi: We still know Eri when she's that age?

Shinsou: Yep! Yeah, that's actually one thing that will probably help you, stop worrying about never seeing Eri again. Worry that she's going to become too powerful, because now she is. She's going to replace the Hero Ranking Billboard at this point.

Hitoshi: Good.

Shinsou: NOT good. You.... I know you can't wrap your mind around this yet, but Eri can actually be a little mean??? She bullies me so much on Twitter now. OH, but we have so many cats now! You still haven't gone to a cat cafe yet, but try not to cry. Also, it's totally okay to cry every time you feel happy, we're still getting used to feeling those horrible 'emotions' and stuff.

Hitoshi: But we get over it?

Shinsou: Yeah, we're going to pull through! I'm actually a pretty functional member of society at this point, so chin up! Stop worrying.

Shinsou: Actually, feel free to 'chin tuck,' I guess. Just try to be comfortable whenever you can? Yeah, we're... going to face some consequences later on. You still can't feel how bad your neck has been messed up, and I am so jealous right now. But not really, you've still got a lot of shit to go through.

Hitoshi: And you're not going to help me with that shit at all, nice. Very nice.

Shinsou:You do realize you're calling yourself an asshole, even if you don't say it.

Hitoshi: I don't have to say that I'm the stupidest asshole I know when I already know it, you're just the more experienced asshole.

Shinsou: I'm a dumb bitch with terrible taste, I will never change, I will never improve, that is a promise.

Hitoshi: That's a meme, right?

Shinsou:OH BOY.

Shinsou: Oh, the physical pain you've caused me.

Hitoshi: WE HAVE BIGGER CONCERNS RIGHT NOW

Shinsou: You're right, you're right. It's a meme, congrats. You've only been in the real world for a couple months, and I am proud of you. You're going to make me pretty squishy, but yeah, I'm proud of pretty much everything that you've done so far, because it is rough going right now.

Hitoshi: You're proud of me for being a dick to everyone and literally having no friends?

Shinsou: Yep! Gold star for you, for being the tiny little trauma baby falling out of your crib and landing on your head, but trying to assert boundaries and stuff for the first time, and believing you can tell other people what to do and how to treat you. You fucked up so hard, but you tried, so gold star.

Shinsou: *Tap to download 22kB*

Hitoshi: I know that meme too.

Shinsou: I know, you're so smart and talented.

Hitoshi: You're an asshole.

Shinsou: Take a deep breath, breathe this in. Believe it, even if you're physically allergic to this kind of thing right now: I AM proud of you, because you are pretty great, you're doing swell even if you are fucking up, but you're the best at fucking up and if YOU don't fuck up, you won't learn from it, and you'll never get to be me.

Shinsou: Me, the fantastic dumpster fire who recently passed the 10 year mark on therapy, has tried pretty much every psychiatric medication in stock (MAOIs don't work too great, just a heads up!), still hasn't successfully worked full time at any job and I'm still terrified that I'm not in the right career, and I'm also scared that this relationship isn't going to work out because I am still a trash human being with more baggage than an airport can handle.

Shinsou: But, we have 5 cats! And less to deal with! Eventually!

Hitoshi:I still can't really believe I live that long. Or that Eri doesn't hate me. What's the name of our stuffed cat?

Shinsou: Mocha, still sitting pretty in the middle of my bed. You probably can't believe it, but yeah. We're alive, not... for lack of trying to do the opposite sometimes, but we're alive. So you're going to be alive. And you should try to enjoy this life, stop worrying so much, trust Aizawa and Yamada know what they're doing and that they care about you. Eri loves you, even if you worry

that you've messed her up for life. Seriously, have you ever considered what would have happened if you weren't there? Chisaki, raising Eri? Gold star right there, you raised a kid while you were still a kid dealing with so many issues and the constant threat of death, and sometimes dying, so GOLD. FUCKING. STAR. Aizawa, Yamada, and Nezu are to blame for what happened to her afterwards.

Hitoshi: What happened afterwards???

Shinsou: She realized her power. That's what happened. She realized she has all these heroes at her bidding, she realized she had Nezu wrapped around her finger. She got a Twitter account, it's verified and everything. She's too powerful now.

Shinsou: Aaaaand she wants me to bring her chocolate, even though it's 2 AM on a school night. Even though I'm in a different city. Even though I JUST got ready for bed.

Shinsou: So, duty calls. So remember, you're doing fantastic because even though you're a completely embarrassing disaster, you're going through some SHIT that most people would turn tail and run away from, and thanks for doing that. You're not 'stupid,' just delete that word from your vocabulary, because you're actually pretty close to genius levels?? Do you even realize that going from elementary school to high school level education in a matter of months is INSANE? You are a beast, never forget that.

Shinsou: Also, dropkick Bakugo for me. He works too much for me to do it, but he called Frappachino ratty. And if you're still afraid of Midoriya, never forget that fear. He IS insane, powered by a fusion cell of friendship. But, you'll learn to love him for it.

Shinsou: Love you, you dumb bitch baby full of trauma <3

Shinsou has left the chat.

Hitoshi waited, just to see if there was another horrifying version of himself that would enter this chat. But it just disappeared from his phone, showing all the other ones he can't bring himself to open.

Just a weird dream, he knows, a dream that changes nothing.

But the idea that he'll start talking like Kaminari when he's older is horrifying enough to be a *nightmare*.

*

'27'

Delete.

'He didn't know'

Delete.

The writer sighs, staring at a once again blank Google Doc page, with just a working title now, '8 Precepts of Death AU.' She knows this is just going to be a little project for herself, just to get the ideas out of her head and have something to read instead of just imagining all the time. Even if she has big plans, she's also pretty sure this will turn out worse than the Kamisama Kiss Rewrite AU. *Maybe* she can keep herself from spinning off the rails until chapter five this time. She has a plot

outline and everything.

She just has to start writing it, just write that first sentence. But she can't figure out anything that isn't *stupid*.

"You've been sitting here for an hour, you know." An *irritatingly* high pitched voice makes her jump, and apparently she's been sitting here long enough to have a full blown psychotic episode, because she sees herself with longer hair that's mostly blonde. Like she dyed her hair blonde, then let her roots grow *way* too far out before she got a pixie cut, but it kind of looks nice. "What?"

"I'm looking at myself, so I'm either having a completely new form of a mental breakdown, or this is some weirdly self-indulgent method of breaking the fourth wall down to the foundation and then getting a super-powered laser to drill through to the molten center of the earth to make sure that no wall could ever be built in its place again," the struggling writer says, not yet aware that this is an almost horrifying piece of self-indulgence and fourth wall breaking, almost like her one-year-old self is trying to top the April Fool's Day chapter. "Why is your-my. *Hair long*. Why?"

"Well, we're still working that office job, still part time which *sucks*, but I'm kind of okay with it? I can just wear a ponytail, and Grace did a great job on this balayage," the older writer says, finally explaining to a very uncultured younger version of herself why her hair was only partially blonde, and that it was on purpose. "So, I could tell you The Fuckening that is 2020, if we're really going to play this situation for straight instead of giggles, but I kind of feel like we could break way more walls than just four, and I kind of intend to keep this piece pretty short anyway. A little poetic."

"Uh-huh, cool. Cool. I should probably tell my girlfriend that I'm having a psychotic episode right now, but I can't afford to take off work to go inpatient. Kevin would have to take over all of my accounts-"

"*Oh god*," the older writer says, shaking her head with her hands covering her face. "You're still working as a janitor too, oh boy. As crazy as this might sound, you can actually live only working part time, instead of 60 hours a week. And it is still absolutely insane that you want to write this fic while you're working so much, but-"

"One, *you're crazy*, I *have* to work two jobs just to scrape by so I'd appreciate it if you could just-*leave* or something, I can't afford to hallucinate right now," the struggling writer says, looking back to her computer. "*Oh god*, this is a mistake, this is stressing me out already so I should just give up on this-"

"*Whoa, do not!*" the older writer says, waving her hands back and forth. "Dude, I *just* got another message about how your fic impacted and resonated with a reader, you seriously have *no* idea what this is going to turn into."

"*What?*" the struggling writer asks, eyebrows furrowing. "I'm not... I'm not *publishing* this for anyone to read, I *know* how it is with me. I know I'm not even going to finish this, I've *never* finished a multi-chapter *anything*. Not original, not fanfiction, I just... I'm not really a *writer*."

"*Oh jeez*," the older writer sighs. "You kind of *are* a writer, because you write things, even if we.... *Still* haven't finished a single multi-chapter project. But, this one, we're definitely finishing, even if it's taken over a year and pretty much the majority of that year is spent writing."

"A *year?!?*" the struggling writer asks, and probably shouldn't yell when she's trying to hide this apparent break from reality from her girlfriend who's playing Overwatch downstairs. "A *year* and I'm not done with this? How long is this really going to take?"

“Well, probably less than a year and a half? I’ve got a goal for a million words, you’re not *quite* crazy enough to commit to that right now, but you see that outline? *Yeah*, you’re *not* getting all that done for any less than a million,” the older writer says, patting the struggling writer’s shoulder. “And, you actually are going to publish this, Soba is going to be extremely nice and give you permission, you’re going to be a validation *addict*, and it’s... it’s a *whole* ride, I could go on about it, but this story is going to make people cry-”

“I don’t *want* to make people cry,” the struggling writer protests, too much honestly. “I just... I have this idea, I can’t stop thinking about it. And I want to read it for myself, and maybe... maybe it can be kind of meaningful for me. But if I publish it, then people are going to be disappointed when I don’t finish it. Because I *never* finish anything.”

“You never *try* to finish anything, *because* you don’t believe in yourself,” the older writer says, struggling not to make a Naruto reference that would only barely make them cringe more than the really lame emotional spiel she’s already started. “Look, we’ve been through the recovery process, this was kind of just a nice way of showing off how powerful those anniversary ‘check-in’s can be. It’s been a year since I first published Wards- which, is the shorthand for the title you’re going to settle on in a panic, even if it’s not *clever* or *poetic*, but you’re going to thank yourself because that weird ‘Aizawa’s angsty teenage poem, *The Love of Broken Children is a Throttling Weed*’ thing isn’t going to work out. But anyway, you don’t believe in yourself as a writer, but right before you publish the first chapter of this fic, you’re going to make yourself a deal.”

“What deal?” the struggling writer asks, mostly because paragraph breaks are a great way of drawing emphasis to something that’s poignant and needs to stand out.

“You’re going to tell yourself, ‘If I finish this, I’m a writer. I’ll have finished one work, and then nothing can ever stop me after that. I’ll always have this to look back on, and tell myself that I can do it,’” the older writer says, unable to keep a wry smile off her face. “*But*, that’s luckily kinda bullshit. I think I’m a writer now, even if I haven’t finished Wards yet. And I’m actually confident enough to pull this kind of self-indulgent hijink off, even if I have to keep checking the page count to know how long this is going on, because I don’t want to be *too* self indulgent and I have to keep reminding myself that if people get bored, they don’t *have* to read it.”

“People... are really going to read this?” the struggling writer asks, because it’s insanely hard to believe. “I mean... I think it would be good to get a more realistic depiction of trauma recovery out there, and I like the idea of my story. And the idea of people reading it. But I’m *so going to fuck this up*, I can’t finish anything.”

“Funny enough, readers have said they like your unfinished stories too. And *you* like reading your unfinished works, you like *reading other* unfinished works. Unfinished is okay.... *Even if we’re going to finish Wards even if it kills us*,” the older writer says, making an oath and swearing it once again, practically in blood. “Some *amazing* people will read your fic, and... not to be terribly emotional about it, but you’re actually going to make friends? Amazing friends, amazing people, like I said before, this is an amazing ride and you wouldn’t want to give it up for the world. There’s not even really words that can convey how much it means to have people who connect with you through Wards, even if you always drop that ‘Thanks for reading and enjoying’ in every comment, it means so much more than that.”

The struggling writer takes note of that signature, to thank every single comment for being made, for letting her know that there are actually *people* who read her work, and enjoy it. How grateful she is to know that.

The older writer just nods to herself, knowing that she’s a blatant validation addict who’s still awed

that people read her work, who enjoy it, and is still so grateful to receive those comments. “But, what’s that Lord of The Rings quote? ‘The journey of a million miles begins with the first step?’”

“I’m not going to look it up, but it sounds right,” says the struggling writer, who should know it after reading the books twice and watching the extended cut movies hundreds of times. “One small step, just the first sentence. Just something that.... *Isn’t* ‘It was a dark and stormy night.’”

“Nah, just put that down,” the older writer says, leaning over to look at the screen. “Type it out, ‘It was a dark and stormy night,’ and keep going. You’re in Google Doc, you’re not *publishing* yet.”

“Okay,” the struggling writer says, rolling her eyes.

‘It was a dark and stormy night.’

Should she begin at The Miasma? She should probably explain what The Miasma is, but she doesn’t want to cover too much of what Soba already wrote, so it needs to start at the 8 Precepts. But still explain why Shinsou is there, how he meets Eri. How to write that scene.

It’s probably not the best idea to go right into dialogue without setting the scene, but she kind of *did* set the scene with the dark and stormy night.

It’s not like anyone is going to read this anyway, it’s just the rough draft. No one’s *really* going to read this, she’s just hallucinating a severe fourth wall break.

“Well, little brother, I hope you make a good first impression,” 127 says, his scaly arms draped over the passenger seat. “Very few get sold, and very few get sold so quick.”

“That kind of sounds like 127 is already staring at Shinsou, like he’s turned around and staring at him the whole time. And maybe I should keep some of 127’s physical attributes hidden?” the struggling writer asks, but the older writer shrugs.

“This is just the rough draft, you’re going to edit this part a lot. *Too much*, honestly, even if it turns out basically the same. Baby words, you.... Don’t know yet, but you will,” the older writer says, tapping the chair before she goes back to writing Chapter 84, dedicated to not spending too much time on this little anniversary oneshot.

Besides, it’s not like anyone is going to read this anyway.

How to Vent: Badly

Chapter Summary

Monoma tries once again to befriend Shinsou, to devastating consequences coming with a startling revelation for Shinsou. Shinsou has new concerns about Eri, and Yamada has a plan to steal his ward away from the dorm to talk on a 'secret mission.'

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Dissociation, 50 mention

Previously on Wards of UA: Monoma has been giving Eri and Shinsou small gifts for every day in December as part of an advent calendar, though Shinsou threatened to pickle his fingers and eat them if Monoma bothered him again. Shinsou told Eri that his pet fish's name is 'Fishio,' but he calls it 'Ten' privately, after a Number that he was close to at The Miasma. Monoma tried to rescue Shinsou from 127's attack on campus, though Shinsou ran away from those rescue efforts. Uraraka told Monoma that if he should stop trying to befriend Shinsou if he's just trying to buy his friendship with gifts rather than respecting his feelings. In the last chapter, Aizawa went to the office in the dorm to work on the information Shinsou provided about The Miasma. Yamada knows that Shinsou seems to be no longer selectively mute as he's talked to Aizawa and the 1-A students, but Shinsou is refusing or unable to talk to him, still using JSL. Eri used Rewind on Shinsou once before, to heal his ankle injury, but Rewound him 4 days back to the point where Shinsou had just been attacked by 127 and was bleeding from his old mask. Yamada recently learned about the Bug torture. Shinsou's previous username in Midoriya's chat was 'Brainwashio,' after a villain character in the Kawaii Kawaii Pussycat show that had a similar quirk to his. When 50 was alive, she was able to sneak Shinsou a red bean taiyaki while he was still captive at The Miasma. Shinsou reacted badly to Midoriya pointing out that he might have lashed out at 1-A because he was scared of them getting hurt by being associated with him. Nezu can control the vent robots to talk through them, which has convinced Shinsou that the vent robot above his room is sentient. Eri was able to stop her quirk on her own while she was at the Ketsubutsu training camp, which helped her confidence with her quirk. Aoyama is nicknamed 'Other Yama,' since Yamada has already been given the 'Yama' nickname, and Jirou ('Kyou') makes Aoyama sing. Shinsou also worries that if he talks to other people, Eri might be upset because he was only able to talk to her, and she might feel less special to him. Eri calls apple turnovers 'apple overs.' Shinsou's sign name for Aizawa is 'Zawa coffee.'

Hitoshi woke up on the couch, with a twinge in his neck and a blanket only barely covering his legs, the inside of Yamada's leather jacket sticking to his arms, and an annoying knock on the door. He thinks about waiting until someone else answers it, before he realizes that whoever it is will see that he's wearing Yamada's jacket and probably wonder why, an answer that Hitoshi doesn't have for himself, and springs up to answer the door, still feeling half-asleep.

It's Quirk Thief.

It's actually amazing that he could be stupid enough to overlook the clear warning Hitoshi gave him before, and look stupider with his fingers tangled in his hair like he was trying to comb his bangs into place. Hitoshi almost closes the door on him, out of mercy, before he sees what Quirk Thief has in his hands.

Another one of those Sailor Moon wands that Eri wanted, possibly the last one to complete her collection, and a pair of coffee cups held in a cardboard tray. The last coffee that Quirk Thief got him from that shop was underwhelming in taste, but it was purple, so he didn't hate it. And he wouldn't hate getting another one.

He just hates Quirk Thief, a feeling that worsens when he finally sputters out a nervous greeting after jerking his fingers free. "Good morning, Shinsou! It's surprising that you're awake this early, as the winter break has given many a reason to be lax with routine. Not myself, of course."

Hitoshi blinks, and realizes that what he really wants is to take what Quirk Thief has, and leave him out here. Just get the coffee, retrieve Eri's gift, and not put up with anything else from him.

But if he does that, Quirk Thief will learn that he can bother him for that amount of time without consequences. And Quirk Thief deserves to learn that his actions have consequences when he violates clear warnings.

So he opens the door and steps aside for Quirk Thief to predictably invite himself in. Quirk Thief seems to know he's already treading on thin ice with that, that weird smile getting smaller and pinched and more nervous, *almost* flinching when the door shuts. But he hasn't learned the reason he should be nervous yet.

"Ah, Fishie and Fishio are doing well," Quirk Thief comments pointlessly, as though the observation needs to be acknowledged as an invitation to sit at the kotatsu that 10 and Fishie's aquarium sits on top of. Hitoshi doesn't acknowledge it, or anything else that Quirk Thief mutters about as he makes his way to the kitchen, to gather what he needs.

His knife is probably still in the office, but he finds a santoku knife that will do just fine. Yamada is the only person Hitoshi has seen eating the pickles in the refrigerator, and he doesn't want to misuse them, so he grabs a jar of pickled radishes and a spoon, fishing most of the radish slices out into a bowl so that just the pickling juice remains.

He won't need to use it to enforce a threat. Probably.

The look on Quirk Thief's face when he sits down on the opposite side of the kotatsu with the knife and pickling jar seems to *promise* it won't be necessary.

But the white-faced shock fades too easily when he looks at the coffees he carelessly placed on top of the fish aquarium. "W-well, you might notice that this is a little different from the advent calender gifts I usually bring. Since you seemed to take a bit of offense to that, apparently with some good reason."

Quirk Thief takes a drink for himself, and holds one out for Hitoshi with an arm held over the top of the aquarium. Hitoshi pointedly stares at his fingers wrapped around the cup, picking up the knife and twirling it a few times, pointlessly. Testing Quirk Thief's resolve.

Quirk Thief remembers. He's not forgetful, but he is stupid. And he's still holding out the coffee.

Hitoshi is impressed enough to take it, and takes a sip to hide his smirk when Quirk Thief audibly

sighs. He's not as unaffected as he pretended to be, and that makes him entertaining, at least.

"I want to make a few things clear, as apparently, my actions have left things up to the wrong interpretation," Quirk Thief says, rambling pointlessly while Hitoshi recognizes the taste of taro and can see hints of that purple hue through the hole in the lid, but he tastes something different along with that. Salt, maybe, but it's not unpleasant. "I would like to get to know you better, to be your friend, so to speak. I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable with the advent calendar gifts, or trying to 'buy your friendship' in any way, that was just my first method of extending a friendly hand. Offering companionship and all, and demonstrating what a caring and generous individual I am."

"You want to be friends with a criminal with a half-feral appearance who needs a demonstration to introduce themselves," Hitoshi asks without asking, *reminding* Quirk Thief of his first impression of him. He doesn't know if the reminder or speaking it is what makes Quirk Thief's eyes go wide like that before he remembers himself, or if it's both. "Or, you just want to steal my quirk. One sounds more reasonable than the other, even though you're putting too much effort into this."

Quirk Thief's mouth drops open, a finger raised accusingly before his brain fashions whatever argument he wants to use just for the sake of argument, or saving face. "I was *mistaken* and *ill-informed* about the situation that day, and I've since apologized. I don't have any ulterior motives towards being friends with you, this is friendship for friendship's sake. And you can't deny you *need* friends, especially one like myself. Someone who has always tried to look out for you and *quite recently* put themselves in harm's way to rescue you when you were attacked."

Quirk Thief takes another sip of coffee, eyes narrowed in accusation. Accusing Hitoshi of losing the argument that easily, and expecting that 'friendship' to be offered as a result. He didn't *ask* to be rescued, and Quirk Thief just got in the way, putting himself in danger recklessly. "You just want my quirk."

Quirk Thief wrinkles his nose, before he looks up at the ceiling like he's frustrated that Hitoshi isn't buying his lies so *easily*. "No, in fact I *don't* want your quirk. Whatever *mysterious* quirk you have, whatever it does, I'm *quite* fine with my own."

"Because you can use it to copy mine," Hitoshi reminds, as if Quirk Thief thinks he's *stupid* enough to forget that. Since Quirk Thief laid eyes on him on the first day of school, he's been scheming to find *some way* to Copy his quirk. The first time he caught him off guard, it seemed painful for him to have it, and he couldn't use it. The next time, he was *invited* to take his quirk but couldn't, because he was sick. Then Quirk Thief tried to take it forcefully, *then* stooped to these gifts. He tried to *win* Hitoshi at the Joint Training Exam like he could be bought that *cheaply*.

It's *irritating*, Quirk Thief is *irritating*, and short of murder, there's very few ways of getting rid of him. But Hitoshi would *love* to find some way of getting away with that, especially when Quirk Thief manages to fold his hands together in a way that's *condescending*. "Fine. *Fine*, I *like* copying the quirks of people that I take an interest in, you don't like that, I *get* that now. I swear upon my sweet Grandmama's grave that I will never attempt to Copy your quirk for as long as I live, if you would like to let that *go*."

Hitoshi looks at the hand wafted outward towards the fish tank, the hand folded dramatically over Quirk Thief's heart. The sweater he's wearing looks soft, and that's too distracting when he's beginning to doubt if the coffee was decaf or not. He doesn't doubt Quirk Thief's ability to trick him. "Is your 'Grandmama' even dead?"

"No, but she moved to Belgium and stopped inviting me to vacation with her during the summer, so she's *metaphorically* dead to me, and it's a dramatic turn of phrase I thought would convince

you,” Monoma answers, before his eyes glaze over and his hand drops on the fish tank loudly, apparently hard enough to break him out of the control.

Funny, as much as Monoma tried to use his quirk without warning, he seems angry about Hitoshi doing the same. Hitoshi takes another drink in search of something that will make him feel awake enough, while the annoying blonde flusters.

“*That* is your quirk?!” Monoma asks, too loud which Hitoshi tries to remind with a glare, but too quickly he seems to calm down, his hand resting under his chin as he sniffs, trying to regain the semblance of control over this situation. He doesn’t have it. “Well, that *is* a vocal type emitter, falling quite in line with Quirk Rejection Syndrome, which I’m glad seems to be sorted out. That odd ‘fuzzy’ sensation at the end, and my hand falling-”

“Do you really think you can be a hero?” Nemoto asks this time, the question slips out of Hitoshi’s control, and he flinches at the flash of blindness that comes. The words are too familiar.

“Not really. With a quirk like mine that needs to be supported, I’m doomed to be a sidekick unless I rely entirely on publicity ratings, which is why I’ve been honing my public persona for years,” Monoma answers, his pale blue eyes not yet white, but locked on Hitoshi, and he can’t look away. He can’t help but fear this sinking feeling that he’s made a mistake. “There’s not a single person who believes in me, especially my father. I’m meant to inherit his practice. I’m probably just rebelling as much as I can before the inevitable crushes me into compliance.”

Monoma’s eyes fade white again. His hand falls softer on top of his folded arm, it doesn’t break him out of it. Hitoshi feels the string connected to the control, and though he wavers, he doesn’t sever it. “Stand up.”

Monoma does, a willing puppet with limp arms and no will, he might not even remember this if Hitoshi drops the control on his own, instead of hurting him.

“Walk around the kotatsu, and drink this,” Hitoshi orders, and when Monoma stops beside him, he holds up the jar of pickled radish juice. He’s being vaguer than he should be with his instructions, but Monoma takes the jar and starts drinking. After three gulps, Hitoshi stops him. “Stop. Turn around.”

Monoma’s back looks better than his face, and Hitoshi knows he could probably just order him to walk outside. Lock the door afterwards. Not open it again. Quirk Thief probably wouldn’t bother him anymore.

“Touch your nose with your left index finger,” Hitoshi orders instead, before he drops the control, and Monoma springs out of it to spin around, hand around his mouth and eyebrows drawn close with a hint of disgust. He must not be a fan of pickle juice.

“*Radish- why? Why?*” Monoma asks, looking between Hitoshi and the jar still in his hand, even if one has the clearer answer. “You made me- *you made me-*”

“Calm down,” Hitoshi orders, even if he knows that’s harder to do now. If he needs to, he might take control again, if Monoma can’t *control himself* from shouting. “Brainwashing. After you answer me, I can take control of you and make you do almost anything. So, *yes*, I made you drink the pickled radish juice. You’re not a fan.”

“*Not of the juice,*” Monoma hisses, setting the jar down roughly as he stomped back to his side of the kotatsu, folding his arms. He looks upset, but he shouldn’t be.

“You wanted to know more about me,” Hitoshi reminds, unsure if it’s a threat. It doesn’t feel like one, and it feels like he’s just hiding his face when he drinks the coffee again. He likes this flavor, salted taro. Monoma does have good taste.

Monoma still looks upset, since he won’t look at him. Just frowning at the fish, and they don’t deserve that.

“Here,” Hitoshi offers, holding out his hand. He knows how Quirk Thief’s quirk works, if he touches his skin, it *should* work. It never does when Quirk Thief tries, but his own quirk has been messed up until now. It’s still messed up, but it might work.

It might make it up to him. “I said it’s fine, you can keep having your fun. I’m *certainly* not one to lecture someone about appropriate quirk use.”

Hitoshi waits for the slip, the glance at what’s on offer, but instead Quirk Thief’s mouth just twitches, his arms adjusting tighter around himself.

“Why don’t you ask a few more questions, get to know little old me a bit better? Hm?” Monoma asks, his eyebrows raising, but that bitter tone seems to be directed at the fish. Along with that creepy, exaggerated face. “Wouldn’t you just *love* to know how it feels to walk around the same halls with *celebrity* Class A, the students who get *twice* as many internship offers even if they don’t make it past the second round of the Sports Festival? How it’s *always* like that, no matter how well we do or how hard I try, Class B is the *sidekick* class to the hero industry even when there’s not a single damn difference between us, it’s just one *letter* difference, and my father-”

“Monoma,” Hitoshi interrupts, feeling the string drop as soon as he misses it, as soon as he regrets his choice. He could have just made him leave. “You wanted to get to know me.”

Quirk Thief really *is* that cunning. He looks at Hitoshi’s hand, and he *looks* like he doesn’t want to take it. He’s just pouting, too much like Eri, and the annoying part is that he’s pouting at exactly what he wants. He wants Hitoshi’s quirk.

And maybe revenge.

“Are you sure?” Monoma asks, still *staring* at Hitoshi’s offered hand like it’s the most fascinating thing in the world, like it’s changing colors or something. His fingers on the kotatsu are twitching. “I meant what I said, I know it bothers you-”

“*Monoma-*”

“*Alright,*” Monoma sighs, because he wants to *act* put upon, but Hitoshi catches that flicker of *glee* crossing over his face when he reaches out and lays his palm over the back of Hitoshi’s hand. It feels warm.

Smotheringly warm. And he’s *very* sure that Quirk Thief doesn’t have to maintain skin contact like this to steal a quirk. Hitoshi risks looking at Quirk Thief’s eyes, expecting to find them more similar to his own, but instead he sees Monoma’s eyes half-closed, his expression too relaxed. Too *satisfied*. “Are you going to-”

“It’s-” Monoma flusters like he’s been caught, his free hand rising up before he starts wiggling his fingers around, like that’s some way of using Hitoshi’s quirk. He *knows* it’s not. “Odd. Sticky. It’s almost heavy, it’s not really like any quirk I’ve copied before.”

Monoma *still* has his hand resting on Hitoshi’s, but any intention of pulling away stops short at Hitoshi’s wrist. This isn’t *horrible*. But it just feels like he’s waiting for something to go wrong.

Monoma looks at him. And his eyes flash, the blue becoming too vivid. *Exactly* like Nemoto's. "Can you ever be forgiven for what you did to Eri?"

"No," Hitoshi answers, the words drawing out of his chest in a way that's familiar, but it's *not*. In the back of his mind, he feels like it's *sticky*. "There are horrible things that can't be forgiven, and I've done a lot of them. I never saved her, I lied to her then. I want to leave before she realizes that."

Hitoshi is looking at someone's chest. He's standing. He's standing close to someone.

Yamada's hands are on his shoulders, and he looks worried. "Hitoshi, you alright?"

No.

No no no, he hasn't- he hasn't *done* that, that hasn't happened, it *shouldn't* happen, losing time, Away, dissociating, Yamada shouldn't-

His quirk. Quirk Thief used it. On him.

That's what it feels like.

That's what he did to Eri.

*

Things *had* been going well.

Well, that's an absolute lie and Monoma can place absolutely *all* of the blame on the 1-A girl with the Anti-Gravity quirk for placing a seed of self-doubt in fertile pastures where it could bloom to *this* horrific abomination.

Monoma is currently biting his lips, while Eraserhead continues to glare at him, the red glow that cancelled Monoma's quirk is gone but that red impression on the corner of his forehead where it looks like he took an improperly placed nap is still there. Monoma tries not to look at it, but he's looking.

And pointedly not looking at Present Mic, who shifts from that almost sickening paternal concern to *murderous* when Shinsou brushes past him down the hall, presumably to his room if the slamming door is any indication. And with two sets of murderous eyes on Monoma, belonging to a teacher with a *notorious* record of expelling students and his own English teacher who has that right as such, Monoma can *hear* that he has some explaining to do.

He'd like to get some time to form those better explanations than the ones he has, so he'll wait for the interrogation to begin. And he's not disappointed.

"You copied his quirk." Eraserhead states, with a voice that brings to mind the image of bloodsoaked gravel, and Monoma currently doesn't like his chances of not looking like that himself, with his present circumstances. He is, in fact, guilty as charged, but he would like the jury to consider that he had *no fucking idea what he was doing* at the time.

"He offered it. Insisted," Monoma answers, swallowing two 'sirs' that will *thoroughly* rip through what little pride he has and would like to depart this world with. "I came here to smooth things over with a gift of coffee, trying to make amends for whatever I did, and he *happened* to use his quirk on me. Perhaps he meant it as tit-for-tat, but I shot that down, then he seemed offended and I..."

Monoma *doesn't* lose control of a quirk that he copies. *Ever*.

It's a matter of pride, an aspect of what he prides himself the most over. Ever since his quirk developed and he proved to be the better version of his father, he could copy and feel and *use*, his father's admonishments nearly became a soundtrack of his *life*. *Don't play with that, Neito, you have no idea how to use that quirk*.

But, *he does*. When he copies a quirk, he can hear the faint whisper of how it wants to be used when it settles in. How to twitch a tail he didn't have before, how *vines* feel when they're growing out of his scalp and the difference between that and tentacles. Monoma *knows* how to use every quirk in existence, *thank you*, and it's a grossly overlooked benefit to his quirk.

Except for that quirk. Brainwashing. Shinsou's quirk.

It said *nothing* to him, it was just heavy and something about it felt *dark*, it felt *wrong* in a way Monoma had never felt in *any* failing quirk. It felt like his brain was being smothered under a hot towel until he opened his mouth, intending to ask Shinsou if it *always* feels like this, but then something flashed in front of his eyes and *that* fell out of his mouth.

Can you ever be forgiven for what you did to Eri?

Monoma isn't *proud* of the first suspicion that came to him with those words, or the first part of Shinsou's answer. But, *I never saved her, I want to leave before she realizes that*.

Monoma isn't exactly one to cast stones towards a house that looks pretty on the outside but is a rotted wreck inside held together with twine, ingenuity, and a force of will to hold up until there's a *good* reason to collapse, but that statement seemed to indicate that Shinsou has some *issues*. And of course, after that, Monoma had some issues, staring him in the face with glazed over eyes.

He didn't mean to Brainwash Shinsou. *And he had no idea how to stop it*.

He tried to release his quirk, and it didn't *work*, Shinsou's quirk was stuck on his quirk like *tar*. In a panic, he ordered Shinsou to stand up, walk around. Touch his own nose with various fingers. Shinsou said he could make someone do *almost* anything, and there had to be a limit. Monoma can't use the full extent of a quirk he copies, so that limit has to be smaller. There had to be something too vague, too complex to short the connection out, maybe just an order limit, or a constraint on time.

Monoma has his own time limit, and he started watching the clock on his phone with *undeniable* relief when he found the space to *remember* that, but his ten minutes were nowhere *near* up when he heard a door open and close, and *Present Mic* walked in.

The horror on his face when he saw the blank look on Shinsou's, who was so *conveniently* looking down the hall, caused Monoma to try to explain that this wasn't what it looked like, which drew *Eraserhead* out of another door. And to erase his quirk, pulling that heaviness right out of his skull, which must have been distressing for Shinsou as he fled.

And now Monoma was here. And it was probably a huge mistake to be here in the first place.

"*How* are you here?" Eraserhead asks, and this is yet another one of those occasions where the full and honest truth will *not* serve him very well. There are a *few* students who have access to the full staff dorm beyond the common room on the first floor, and Monoma *isn't* one of them. He's not so shameless as to shuffle the blame onto Vlad-sensei, or that stupid.

"Kendo loaned me her student ID to visit Vlad-sensei, and I wanted to offer Shinsou a coffee on

the way, since I was here,” Monoma says, *mostly* truths. Kendo didn’t *willingly* loan so much as she always places her ID in the right hand drawer of her desk. The ID that has access to this floor, the same floor that their teacher lives on which she does require as their Class President, which he *might* have mistakenly picked up while they were having their usual Netflix binge last night.

And he was going to visit Vlad-sensei afterwards. His door, specifically. Monoma was planning on standing in front of his teacher’s door and miming the act of knocking, just in case there were surveillance cameras that might think he had no other reason to borrow Kendo’s ID than a great emergency of utter emotional turmoil that went unanswered much like his teacher’s door.

He hasn’t slept well after all, the last few days. Wondering if Shinsou was okay after that attack, that attack on *campus*. That Chameleon quirk that thought he had the *right* to attack Shinsou, driving him to such a frenzy that he’d flee from rescue, absolutely *terrified* out of his mind.

And Monoma was completely useless. Unable to save him.

“Monoma,” Present Mic calls, taking half a step with his folded in front of his chest, pointing outward, and even with his hair a tangled *mess* and his pajamas *disturbingly* banana patterned, he can look every inch an intimidating teacher. “I *get* that you have really good intentions, you didn’t really do anything *wrong*—”

“We should have been *aware* that you were going to be in our living room,” Eraserhead adds, and the two trade a look that’s impossible to read and, quite frankly, a little disturbing to watch when it adds up to the assumption that they can communicate like that. Just trading looks at each other, like they’ve known each other that long. Years. It’s intimate.

Their living room.

Oh god they’re married.

“*That’s* a little misunderstanding with Hitoshi though,” Present Mic concludes, and *Hitoshi*. Shinsou *Hitoshi*. Given name basis. *Monoma is fucked*. “But, we appreciate the friendly thing, the little gifts and everything for the kiddos, Eri is absolutely *thrilled* with her new merch and the little bean likes hanging around her ‘Mono.’”

A nickname that he’s *decently* sure little Eri is unaware is similar to the name of a viral disease, but still *definitely* more flattering than ‘the dark face of UA.’ A nickname he’s sure she’s *close* to retiring.

“But, Hitoshi is figuring some things out, he’s a little stressed, and it might be better to be hands-off for right now until the coast is clear, alright?” Present Mic asks, *like* it’s a question, but the cold sweat running down the back of Monoma’s neck reminds him it’s *not*.

“Of course, I... see that was a rather poor decision on my part,” Monoma says, standing up to gather his things. His coffee, the cardboard carrier since it would be rude to leave that for his teachers.

He sees the pickle jar and the knife still displayed openly on the kotatsu, and he realizes that these heroes have asked *startlingly* few questions with that in mind.

“I’ll be ‘hands-off’ and all, until the coast is... Yeah. And Eri is fine,” Monoma takes a drink to settle his nerves, the chocolate syrup woven into this mocha *almost* sweeping the memory of that *picked radish juice* off of his tongue. “Goodbye.”

Monoma turns on his heel, exits stage right, and nearly collapses into the nearest wall with a mind

struggling to wrap itself around all of that. *All of that.*

At least he walks away knowing a bit more about Shinsou. Not that it's pretty.

Not that Monoma ever expected it to be.

*

Yamada watched the door close behind Monoma, and still had *questions*. About the pickle jar, the *very concerning* knife, why Hitoshi looked like he had seen a ghost, why he was wearing his *jacket*, why *Shouta* hadn't come back to bed last night.

And as soon as he looked at his husband, he heard a loud and *incredibly* concerning thud coming from Hitoshi's room. He saw Eri's door start opening up, presumably with a very curious almost-six-year-old wondering what all the fuss was about, and decides that the 'cool down post-incident' for Hitoshi is going to have to be *over, now*.

Yamada still finds himself hesitating at Hitoshi's door, because of everything. Every *little* thing that's been piling up the last few days into what seems like an insurmountable wall. Hitoshi hasn't talked to him about what *really* happened at that mountain cabin, about threatening all his friends. Hitoshi hasn't *talked* to him either, but he can't let that show on his face. He still has to talk to the kid. "Hitoshi?"

Yamada knocks, and waits. He waits for a clap, even when he knows that a 'come in' is now in the realm of *possibility*, even if he *shouldn't* know that. If Nezu didn't give him video evidence, he probably wouldn't have believed it.

But there's not a clap, or a verbal invitation. Yamada hears a weird groan like *metal* is bending beyond its constraints, before the pitter patter of *debris*, and that's *not* something he should be hearing behind Hitoshi's door. As soon as Yamada's hand finds the doorknob, he hears the springs of Hitoshi's bed creak twice, and he only opens the door in time to see Hitoshi's legs disappearing.

Into the vents. Again.

Yamada doesn't have much time to tell himself that he told himself so, the vents are a 'clubhouse' for kids who don't have trust in the privacy that a door should offer, which Yamada violated *pretty thoroughly* by opening the door, even if he'd have the right to do that if he was a hero on patrol hearing those concerning sounds of violence. And there was *quite* some violence to be had in this room.

For one, the vent cover has been torn out of the ceiling, probably because Hitoshi knew that Yamada was coming to talk to him and he didn't have time to unscrew it *delicately* and all. There's bits of drywall and dust scattered over the corner of Hitoshi's bed, on the floor, over his computer chair that he used as a means to get into the vents. The vent cover has been placed on the bed, and both Mocha and that big purple mochi plushie that Mirio got Hitoshi have gone missing, but not really since they're probably invited to the vent party.

Then there's a few notebooks thrown on the floor, all blank as far as Yamada can see. His jacket was tossed towards the closet, currently clinging by a spiked shoulder pad to some sweaters still hanging up. Then there's the *laptop*.

Thoroughly busted. Busted in *half*, keys missing from the keyboard laying on the floor around it, the screen has a solid crack from one corner to the other. Both halves are almost under the desk that has a new dent in the low-quality wood, the paint surrounding the crater cracking to reveal the

tan color beneath it, and Yamada is *really* more concerned with the desk than the laptop.

That laptop was *bugged* and all, courtesy of Detective Tsukauchi who was *right* about some leads popping out of Google searches given that it identified 50, but it's hard to fault Hitoshi for unknowingly destroying a huge invasion of his privacy.

But, that draws a bigger question of whether Yamada *can* invade his privacy a bit more right now. His first instinct is to chase the kid through the vents until they can have a talk, because this level of destructive anger deserves a *big* talk, but the vents are a clear way of saying that he needs space. Yamada knows he needs space to calm down.

But there's a bit of blood on the edge of the vent cover laying on the bed, so Yamada votes to *veto* the privacy concerns because as hard as these vent trips are when he worries about heat exhaustion, *blood loss* makes it impossible to allow it.

"Hey, Hitoshi?" Yamada calls, pulling himself to stand on the same chair his ward used to get into the vents, popping into the incredibly dark ventilation shaft to see no ward in sight. And he can hear the echo pretty well, as though the sight of Hitoshi's disappearing legs was just a trick to make him *think* he was in here. "I know you're probably upset, and not in a mood to talk, but it looks like you're hurt and we need to get that patched up before you can take some time to unwind and all, alright?"

There's no answer.

Of course there's not. For whatever reason, Hitoshi has decided that Yamada's just not cool to talk to anymore. Maybe, he just felt overwhelmed that first night back at UA, maybe he's overwhelmed *because* he was so affectionate, maybe he's embarrassed, maybe the kid is tied into so many knots over *everything* that it's impossible for him to sort out by himself, but the kid is too stubborn to ask for help. But Yamada just can't *ignore* that anymore, especially when it's gotten this bad.

For better or worse, he's going to have to get a few knots untied, to get his kid sorted out. And right now, that means stuffing himself into a ventilation shaft.

Yamada pulls his arms in first, trying to shuffle himself inside with plenty of kicks and a *lot* of scrapes on his stomach from the rough edge of the entrance, and maybe he needs to ask for pointers on a more gracious entrance next time. Yamada basically has to crawl around like a beached seal to get himself situated, quickly realizing that there's not enough room to even *properly* crawl without hitting his head from the attempt. The attempt is definitely a sign to Hitoshi that he's in here as the thud ricochets and echoes, and he's really wondering how Hitoshi manages to get in and disappear so *silently* in these things.

There's only stagnant hot air inside this vent, luckily no robots so far. Yamada army-crawls to the first intersection, trying to hold his breath so he doesn't worry his kid with all the heavy breathing. He sees a few smears of blood.

Going left, and with a glance, he can see the vent for Eri's room on the right with a dead end, but it was worth checking. After the left turn, *incredibly* tight with a corner of the vent digging sharply into his hip, he can see another dead end straight ahead, and two right turns between them. He imagines the farthest turn goes to the bathroom, kitchen and everything else, but the nearest one *might* go to the office. Yamada doesn't know what he's going to do if he reaches a dead end with no kid, given that he doesn't have room to turn around, but he'll have to take his chances.

Probably cry for help *from* said kid he's trying to help, which will be *great* for his ego, but maybe *actually* great for getting enough pity from Hitoshi to get a conversation, sign or otherwise.

Yamada shuffles down the first right, and looks right again to see a barricade of sorts. Definitely a sign that he's found a kid, because he's *decently* sure that the purple mochi plushie, while big enough to seal up a vent shaft, doesn't *naturally* bloom in the ventilation system.

"Hey, little listener," Yamada says, breaking the silence between pants for breath, when there really *isn't* any air to breathe up here, and he's more worried with Hitoshi cutting off the circulation by way of plushie. "I don't want to crowd your space and all, I know you're upset, but for what it's worth, I'm not upset about your room or anything. I'm just worried because I saw some blood on that vent cover, and I want to make sure you're alright."

Yamada waits long enough that he starts to worry if this is a *decoy*, if he's just talking to a plushie with the *assumption* that Hitoshi is hiding behind it, but the kid might have crawled off to who knows where by now. Maybe Shouta should have handled this, Yamada is pretty sure he knows his way around these tight and uncomfortable spaces more than him.

But Yamada nearly drops his head to the bottom of the shaft when he sees the edges of the plushie moving, before two fists come out. Hitoshi's fists, which don't really look too threatening. Especially when they open up, and Yamada sees the blood smears on his fingers and palms, from some nasty cuts between the first and second joint on his first two fingers. Still fresh enough to be sluggishly bleeding, and Yamada didn't think to grab anything to treat them with.

But it lines up with that weird sound of metal being bent. Hitoshi probably grabbed the vent cover and just dangled himself from it until the cover ripped off, slicing his fingers up in the process. That desperate to get to a place where he wouldn't be bothered, where he'd be safe to unwind after whatever worked him up to reign some indiscriminate destruction on his room.

And where he's being bothered right now, currently, and Yamada selfishly doesn't have plans to change that anytime soon. "Okay, those don't look too deep. We can get them cleaned up, bandaged and all. If you're close to the office, Shou can probably hand you some bandaids and wipes."

Hitoshi's left hand curls into a fist again, moving up and down to sign 'Yes.' He's close to the office vent, he's okay with that plan. He's still not planning on talking to Yamada.

And he's honestly pretty limited on the sign capabilities, even if the Great Wall of Purple Plushie was out of the way, there's just not enough space for gestures. "Okay, I'll text Shou and let him know that."

Hitoshi's hands curl up and disappear again, and Yamada has to wriggle onto his side to get to the pocket of his pajamas, where he *luckily* brought his phone. He's going to hope that Shouta also has his phone on him, but if not, he can *possibly* crawl back to the vent that leads into Eri's room, where he's decently sure Shouta will be to reassure the little bean who woke up to some loud noises.

But as soon as he sends the request for medical supplies, he sees a notification from LNE. From his chat with Hitoshi, barely used. Apparently, he's not the only one who brought a phone in here.

Hitoshi: You need to uninvite me from Eri's birthday

Alright, that's a weird first concern, but not *entirely* unrelated. Even if he was the person who trashed his room, Hitoshi is probably the most scared person to know about it after the fact. As much as Eri hates to see any sign of destruction in her foul moods, he imagines that the same is so or worse with Hitoshi. Yamada imagines he hasn't really had an opportunity to take out any type of frustration on his surroundings, and might be worried he'll devolve into a rage like that at *any*

provocation, when Yamada *certainly* doesn't share those concerns.

Hitoshi: I can't be around her anymore. I'm sorry. I don't want to

Shouta responds to say he'll make the drop off, a notification Yamada doesn't reply to when he's trying to figure out how to answer this one. Hitoshi doesn't want to talk to him, he can't sign, he might not like the reminder that Yamada can talk to him when Yamada has no *idea* why Hitoshi *hasn't* tried talking to him. And that's probably not an issue he should be thinking about right now.

Yamada looks at the purple plushie hiding his ward, and rolls over on his back so at least he's comfortable while he gets to talking, trying to be quiet enough that the little bean doesn't hear any weird voices from the vents. "Hitoshi, I know that Monoma probably said or did something to upset you, because you don't really make a habit of breaking things like that. I know that probably makes it scarier for you, to get that upset, but that doesn't mean you can't be around Eri anymore, or that you can't be at her birthday party. I'm pretty sure you're not planning on wrecking her cake or anything."

Yamada watches his phone for any reply, still waiting for a smart remark about how he needs to piss off, which is the only thing that will drive him out of the vents at this point. If Hitoshi is truly not ready for any kind of talking to him right now.

Hitoshi: I made her dissociate. With my quirk. Every time I used it.

Shit. That's a horrible connection that few people other than Hitoshi could make, and he made it courtesy of one Monoma Neito.

Shouta hasn't said what it feels like to be under Hitoshi's quirk, but the little bean *clearly* hasn't been offended by it, given that she calls it 'The Safe Place.' Which is a pretty solid connection, even if it does feel like that. "You remember when we talked about that? Even when it feels scary when you lose time like that, when you dissociate, it happens because your brain is trying to protect you-"

"Twenny!" Yamada hears Eri calling, and it's hard to place exactly where she is, but he imagines that a little bean decided to follow Shouta into the office to make the medical supply drop off. "Dad said you got hurt, but I can fix it with my quirk if you come out."

"Eri, that's not-" Shouta's voice is closer, and Yamada can practically *hear* him rubbing his eyes. "I know you want to help Hitoshi, but you need more practice before you can use your quirk on people."

"Training," Eri says, showing off that she gets *quite* the education alongside the little herolets she hangs out with. "Twenny, Dad said I can't use my quirk, but I want you to feel better when you're not in the ceiling. I love you!"

"Love you too," Hitoshi replies in a watery voice, the kid is *crying* behind that plushie wall, and Yamada doesn't know how he'd bundle the kid up in a hug in these vents if he ripped away that purple wall, but he'd probably break his elbows trying. He hears Shouta calling Eri's name softly, probably grabbing the little bean in his arms to carry her away for some cereal and distraction from current events. Probably getting littered with 'Dad's all along the way.

If there's any evidence to indicate that Eri's better off with Hitoshi, dissociative quirk and ventilation adventures and all, it's that sign of how much the little bean misses him after he's been so distant from her too, the past few days.

“Hitoshi, I know you never wanted to do that,” Yamada says, cutting to the rotten heart of it. Even *if* Hitoshi’s quirk made a mess out of Eri’s mind, which they know it *didn’t*, Hitoshi never *wanted* to use it on Eri in the first place.

They were both forced into a horrifying situation beyond their control at the 8 Precepts, and Hitoshi tried his best to protect Eri in every way. Even when it meant that he had to make some hard decisions to make sure he would still be around for her.

“You’ve always wanted to protect her, you’ve never wanted to hurt her, and I’m pretty sure you never have. We know for a *fact* that your quirk has never hurt her, and I know she doesn’t think you’ve ever hurt her with your quirk. And you’ve never done anything to intentionally hurt her either, right?”

Yamada hears a sniff, which draws his attention to the soft purple wall, but the answer comes across in a chat message.

Hitoshi: No. But I made her feel like that.

Hitoshi: It’s unforgivable.

‘Unforgivable’ is a pretty ugly word, and one that only Hitoshi could feel about this situation right now. Which only makes it hurt worse for the poor kid, twisting his own knife in the wound. “I’m sorry kiddo, but you can’t decide whether using your quirk on Eri is unforgivable or not.”

Yamada *really* hates the plushie wall right now, especially when the words drop out of his mouth sounding like *that*. Maybe it’s a little too harsh, taking power away from a kid who’s already spiraling, but he *really* can’t let the kid take the burden of ultimate sin for hurting a little girl who *adores* him.

“Eri is the one who gets to decide whether she forgives you or not, or if she can, if using your quirk on her *is* unforgivable or not. I know this is a pretty rough situation when your quirk feels like that to you, but Eri has *never* made it seem like she was uncomfortable or hurt by your quirk, you know?” Yamada wishes he could know what Hitoshi looks like right now, when Yamada is trying his best to pour his heart out to a wall of purple with absolutely no clue how many lines he’s stepping across, with a kid he *knows* is suffering in there. “She calls it ‘The Safe Place,’ because she’s only ever felt safe with you, and it kind of seems like your quirk is different with her in the first place. With everything we don’t know about your quirk, I wouldn’t be surprised if she felt like that because she *could* feel how much you were trying to protect her, even when you had to do that.”

Yamada honestly hasn’t put a lot of thought into it, but Hitoshi’s quirk could be *terrifying*, even if he just used it to make someone walk around for a little bit. Waking up to look at a different scenery, in a different time, is *jarring*, especially knowing that someone else was piloting behind the wheel with free reign.

As much as Yamada would still trust Hitoshi, knowing him as well as he does within all of two months of knowing him, he wouldn’t be afraid. And knowing that Eri doesn’t even remember her life before Hitoshi, she’s hardly known any safety or trust beyond him, he knows that Eri wouldn’t have felt afraid at all. “You can talk to her about it, just to make sure for yourself. And even if you think Eri might be too young to understand the whole situation, you should know that Shouta and I don’t blame you for what you had to do to survive back then. We’re just so grateful... that you guys made it through.”

If someone had told Yamada last year that he and Shouta would have opened their home and hearts

to two kids, making both of them cut their work hours more than half while they'd get less sleep and sex in the trade off, Yamada would have *laughed*. They had a plan, which at that point was basically planned procrastination, waiting until there was a better time to even *think* about bringing kids into their crazy busy lives. And now they had those kids, and if Yamada had anything to say about it, they were going to keep it that way, and keep figuring things out once there was an opportunity for their work schedules to resume.

Yamada never thought he'd be happier sweating in a vent shaft with his hair a tangled mess than he would be playing his favorite new discovery on his radio show, or taking down the latest baddie that needed taking down. But when he sees the Great Wall of Purple Plushie coming down, pulling to the side at first as Hitoshi struggles to shove it between himself and the wall, Yamada can't help the relief pulling him to grin, even if the kid looks like a *mess*.

Red, watery eyes, darker circles under his eyes, and even if the blood's cleaned off his hands, Yamada can spot the unused bandaids. He can spot faithful old Mocha tucked against Hitoshi's chest too.

"Kind of missed you, you know?" Yamada can't help but say, even when he sees that wasn't the *right* thing to say as Hitoshi winces, dropping his chin on an arm as a hand pulls up to wipe at the corner of his eye.

Yamada sees the scabs on his scars, the fresh wounds that Hitoshi had that night he was attacked, when they forced that *mask* back on his face. He sees the other scars, since Hitoshi's wearing a T-shirt, those long and winding grooves from *horrific* torture, something that Yamada knows would break him before it even began. He knows where they came from.

But that doesn't change how he sees Hitoshi, despite his worries. If anything, it just makes him want to squeeze the kid a little harder once he gets the opportunity and invitation for a good hug.

'*Sorry*,' Hitoshi signs, out of the limited vocabulary he has with the limited space and all.

"Nothing to be sorry for, kiddo. I know it's hard managing all those social obligations, everyone who wants to spend time with the most amazing teenager in the whole world, but I'm glad I could *squeeze* my way into your social calendar," Yamada says, because it is a *squeeze* and it is *stifling*. He barely gets a pity-huff, a clear sign that the kid is still hurting and not ready to really laugh yet, and Yamada knows the worst is probably waiting in his room. "And you know you're not in trouble, right? You can do whatever you want to your own stuff, destruction is *not* off the table, especially in this case because I know you had pretty good cause to get worked up like that. And my jacket looked like it was safe and sound."

Hitoshi looks at him with a complete deer-in-the-headlights look, purple eyes *too* wide, and Yamada is still hoping it could be funny. That Hitoshi's just that *horrified* out of embarrassment, not because he might have forgotten about the slight room damages. Or that he might have been *away* while the damages were going on by his hands. '*No. Didn't.*'

Yamada finds himself a little *impressed* how Hitoshi flips around on his back and pulls that plush wall back up in one fluid movement, a little bit of his hair caught at the bottom, little purple tangles that Yamada can't stop staring at. Until his phone vibrates on his chest.

Hitoshi: I wasn't wearing it.

Yamada has to read that a couple times, covering his mouth and staring at the metal ceiling above him while he tries to work through that impossible math problem. The real problem with that statement, that Hitoshi seems to *really* want him to believe, is Yamada *saw* him wearing his jacket.

He's not mad, he's the *farthest* thing from mad and the only slightly irritated feelings he has about the situation is that he didn't take a picture.

But he's sure that Hitoshi is embarrassed *beyond belief* and solidly into the realm of denial, the poor kid has decided to buy up prime real estate near the biggest river in Egypt just to stay in that state of denial for further notice, which means that picture might have to be taken far into the future.

But Yamada can be patient, the best things in life come to those who wait and all. Maybe he could get a full cosplay out of the kid if he bribes him with a cat and his own oath of silence. "You're right, I saw my jacket in your closet but it could have gotten there in plenty of ways, definitely wasn't accusing you of wearing it. Which you *could* do, anytime you want. I have plenty of spares. And I can always autograph one of them for my favorite listener, maybe even as a Christmas present!"

It's hard to remember that he's trying to bring the plush wall *down* and not seal the kid up in a tomb with his own embarrassment, but luckily Hitoshi has picked up a fondness for glaring. And he can't do that too well through a wall of purple plush, so the wall is pulled away, and even upside down, that glare is *exasperated*.

He's definitely been picking things up by spending so much time with Shouta. "Want me to help you out with the bandaid sitch? I'm first aid certified as a hero, and *maybe* there's some teasing I should make up for. And inviting myself to your swanky little clubhouse and all."

'*It's fine*,' Hitoshi signs, his sign vocabulary a *bit* more enhanced when he has more than just a head and hands to work with since he's laying on his back. '*Not lying. Your house. Your ceiling.*'

Hitoshi taps on the ceiling above them for good measure, but it's not really *their* house anyway. Or their ceiling, since it's UA property and all. But Yamada will eat his hat if Principal Nezu tries to fault Hitoshi for the drywall damages, given how much he cares about the kid. "Yeah, but you need a place of your own, a place where you know you won't be bothered. I get that the vents *should* be that place for you, even if I kind of think it's hot and stifling, and I *do* prefer your room being that place. But I still feel bad, invading your privacy and all. As long as there's no signs of injuries I don't know about, it won't happen again, scout's honor."

Hitoshi shrugs, glancing at the vent to his left which might have provided a little bit of fresh air, not that it's as much as Yamada would *like* Hitoshi to have. '*It's okay. If it's you.*'

The 'clubhouse invite.' His mom told him about it when he made that call, the first nerve wracking time that Hitoshi decided that the vents were a good place to unwind for *five agonizing hours*. A kid who retreats to a secret little place no one will bother them in *might* eventually invite one trusted individual or two, to that place where they can sit with their worst fears and wounds, and trust that person to help them sort it out.

Yamada is stretched out and sweating in Hitoshi's *heart* right now, the place he retreats to with his worst fears. And he's sharing it with Yamada.

And he can't say he regrets this wreck of a wake-up call this morning, with that in mind. And with a kid offering up some bandaids with some nasty scrapes that need them. "You know, I've got a secret little mission that I can't let Eri know about, if you want to help me out with it after breakfast. If you've got the time and all."

Hitoshi looks at him, both hands raised over his head so Yamada can wrap up two fingers on each hand, his purple hair a messy halo against the bottom of the vent shaft. Maybe that look is an

accusation that Yamada had any plans to take the words out of his hands, given that Hitoshi can't sign anything right now, when in fact that was just Yamada talking without considering that, talking without thinking and talking without *coffee* first and foremost. But then, Hitoshi nods, and maybe the suspicion was all in Yamada's head.

Yamada honestly needs the opportunity to get some things out of his head and out into the open with his ward, even if spending some time with his favorite listener is still a big priority. And spending it the way that he plans to will give him *plenty* of time to air out a lot of concerns, worries, and big questions.

Especially the big one, about what his little listener wants to get for the little bean's big birthday.

*

Yamada leaves first, and Hitoshi hears every thud and grunt to his progress back to his room. Yamada didn't tell him to leave, he said that Hitoshi could come out 'whenever he feels like it.' He doesn't feel like it yet.

Hitoshi curls on his side to look at the office through the vent, feeling the emptiness of the vent shaft where he hasn't placed the mochi plushie above his head, struggling to hold both the mochi and Mocha against his chest. His phone is still in his hand.

Yamada doesn't blame him, even if he knows what he did to Eri. Yamada doesn't think that anyone but Eri can decide whether it was wrong, but Yamada doesn't know what it's like. He made Eri *feel* like that, he had to have traumatized her. Thousands of times, he tried to take away her pain and fear but he was just another torment on the way to Chisaki's worst machinations. He always took her to The Chair.

Hitoshi knows that Eri is too young to know what he did, but those days are numbered. She will look back and realize what it was, how much he is to blame, and she will hate him. She will have the right to.

The group chat with 1-A is still missing, because what he said to them, what he did was unforgivable. They've chosen to sever that connection, even if Aizawa talks about making amends at some point, even if Midoriya still smiled at him and asked about his quirk, told him that his chat and Ashi's was still open to him. Bakugo's too.

He used his quirk on Midoriya several times, definitely the most out of the hero students. Probably more often than Aizawa. Other than Eri, probably the most that he's ever used it on a person.

Shinsou: Why aren't you scared of my quirk? **Shinsou:** and why did you change my name.

Midoriya: Oh! I thought that since you were having trouble with your quirk, you might not want to see that name anymore? And even if you liked KKP, the villain character doesn't really seem like it fits you.

Midoriya: And I guess I'm just not? Does that affect how it feels for you, because it seemed like you didn't like the last few times you used it, and you didn't like it, and maybe most people don't want you to use your quirk when you use it, but I was asking you to because of my hand, which is better now!

Midoriya: Just in case you were wondering!

Shinsou: You type really fast.

Midoriya: I guess? I'm used to the new keyboard now. :D

Shinsou: It did feel weird. Open. I don't know how to explain it.

After Hitoshi took control when Midoriya asked him to, when he pulled the string to pull him under, it was like his mind was suddenly clear of anything else beyond it. It almost felt like there would be no resistance to whatever he ordered, whatever he commanded. Like he could command Midoriya with just a *thought*, terrifying enough without Aizawa there for him not to consider testing it.

Midoriya: Mental quirks can be really complex, especially because there's not really a way to visualize how they work sometimes. Even Black Whip is hard for me to really understand, because I have to create it then move it around, and it's harder than just imagining the taiyaki and kicking.

Shinsou: Taiyaki?

Midoriya: !!! It's a long story, kind of weird, but that's how I picture my quirk??? I guess???

Shinsou: It makes sense.

Midoriya: I'm... glad you think that Shinsou. Even if it doesn't. TT.TT

It makes too much sense, why Midoriya would trust Hitoshi so much without any reason to and with so much reason *not* to. Why Hitoshi feels so confused around him too, why his green eyes are intolerable sometimes.

It doesn't make sense, Midoriya just likes the same food that 50 did, they both like taiyaki but they never knew each other. They're not related. They're not similar to each other.

But they *are*.

Shinsou: You spent a lot of time with Eri when she was first rescued. Does she hate me?

Shinsou: Yamada might have told her to act differently when the wardship started. She probably seemed more traumatized at first, because of me. My quirk makes people dissociate.

Shinsou: Eri would have told you if she hated me, and she wouldn't tell anyone else. I need you to tell me the truth. No one else will.

Midoriya: No??? She doesn't

Midoriya: Shinsou, you know Eri better than anyone. You would know if she secretly hated you, and she doesn't. She really cares a lot about you.

Midoriya: And when she was first rescued, she was scared. She only really stopped being scared when you came to UA, and Present Mic couldn't have told her to stop acting scared so you wouldn't know she was. Eri is really smart, but she's still 5, she wouldn't have been able to act dishonestly this entire time.

Shinsou: She's almost six.

Midoriya: Still... I don't think that Eri hates you, or that she's scared of your quirk. And I don't want to be mean, but if she was, everyone in class A wouldn't have been nice to you.

Shinsou: So now she's scared of my quirk, because you're not nice to me.

Midoriya: No.... That's because you're not really

Shinsou: I broke my laptop. And the ceiling. And threw some books.

Shinsou: I don't know why I did that. I thought it would help.

Midoriya: Help Eri... not be scared of you?

Shinsou: No. I felt weird. I wanted it to stop. And I kept thinking of breaking those things. But it just felt weirder.

Midoriya: Oh! So you just felt really mad.

Midoriya: I used to get really mad at Kacchan when we were kids, and sometimes thought about some violent things happening to him. Like his legs blowing off, or shoving him on the ground and kicking dirt in his face like he would do to me.

Midoriya: But since I didn't want to worry my mom, I would just write those things down and then throw away the paper, and it made me feel better.

Shinsou: That would be intentionally hurting him. And blowing his arms off would hurt him worse, it would ruin his career as a hero, probably destroying his will to live.

Midoriya: Right, I didn't actually want those things to happen tho! I just felt angry in the moment, but I wouldn't really want Kacchan to get hurt!

Midoriya: I guess I'm trying to say that it's okay to feel angry, or even want to do something awful, as long as you don't do it? To the wrong people?

Midoriya: Because I started feeling a lot better since I started training to be a hero, and taking down villains. Not that I really want to hurt them just because they're villains, but it's nice to hurt people who are hurting people, a little

Midoriya: That sounds bad. But what I REALLY mean is that you didn't hurt anyone when you were angry, and you didn't scare Eri, at least that's what it sounds like, so that's kind of okay? And it's okay to feel angry but there's probably better ways to deal with it?

Shinsou: Chisaki's dead, so I can't stab him. 127 killed him, but he tried to kill me too, and he's probably dead so I can't stab him either.

Shinsou: I don't want to go back to my room.

Midoriya: Where are you right now?

Midoriya: Shinsou?

Shinsou: Is it weird to be in a vent?

Midoriya: Not for you, and everyone is different. I don't think that's a problem, unless you stay in the vent too long.

Midoriya: But, I think you would feel better if you fixed your room? Even if you don't like seeing

it at first, or if it's scary, or

Midoriya: I DON'T THINK YOU'RE SCARED I'M SORRY

Shinsou: Fine. I'm not scared of my room. I just don't want to see it.

Shinsou: But Eri doesn't hate me.

Midoriya: Nope! She definitely doesn't!

Midoriya: *Tap to open 22kB*

Midoriya: She doesn't look scared at all to me! :)

Hitoshi didn't know Midoriya took this picture, but when he sees the pink blur on the corner that looks a little like Uraraka's gloves, it makes far more sense that he didn't. A few weeks ago after school, Eri wanted to show Mirio the first Sailor Moon wand Monoma gave to her, and they started singing the theme song. For some reason, she wanted Hitoshi to sing it too, and he lied to her by signing along instead.

But she loved it. Her eyes got so wide, she was so excited about the idea of learning how to sign that song that she stopped singing, demanding to learn how to do that too. Her interest didn't hold long enough for her to learn more than the first two lines, especially when Mirio was there and wanted to take her to play in the snow. But Midoriya is right.

She doesn't look afraid.

But he looks *weird* in this picture, and if he didn't know that Uraraka was obsessed about Eri, he would think she took this picture to blackmail him in some way. Hitoshi doesn't know what expression he was trying to make, but he just looks terrified and nauseous.

Shinsou: Don't take pictures of me. Don't let your friends take pictures of me.

Shinsou: I will intentionally hurt anyone who does that without hurting them physically or hurting their feelings.

Shinsou: But thanks.

Midoriya: Okay, I won't! And I'll tell Ochako that you don't like that, and she won't do that again. You don't have to hurt anyone. :)

Hitoshi closes the app when he sees the office door open through the vent's shutters, shoving his phone in his pocket before he sees it's just Aizawa. Aizawa, holding the two pieces of his laptop in his hand.

And looking at the vent. Hitoshi is still stupidly close enough to it that Aizawa can see he's still there. "You're not in trouble for breaking the laptop."

Hitoshi *knows* that, Yamada already told him. But he *should* be, and it doesn't make sense that they keep telling him that he's not. He hasn't had many things of his own to break, but whenever he breaks something, he's supposed to be punished. And he knows that the laptop is expensive. "I can't fix it. I can't... make amends with it."

Aizawa looks at the laptop, as though he needs to *confirm* it's broken beyond repair, before he puts

it on Yamada's desk. "No, this laptop can't be fixed. Hizashi is straightening up your room right now, but the laptop isn't worth being upset about. You can borrow mine, or...."

That doesn't fix the fact that Hitoshi *broke* it. He didn't even know what he was thinking, his body just felt too tensed and twitchy, he felt too trapped, he felt like it was the *laptop's* fault and if he broke it, he could break out of that horrible feeling. Throwing the notebooks wasn't satisfying enough, and he couldn't stop *thinking* that he needed to break something worse.

"It wasn't a good idea to take out your frustrations by breaking it," Aizawa says, stating the obvious. But for some reason, he looks guilty, as if he was at fault for that, when Quirk Thief was. "But the laptop was bugged. It could record everything you typed on it, for the investigation. It was an invasion of your privacy, and I'm not angry with you for breaking it."

"You could have—" Hitoshi turns to look at the ceiling above him, his words echoing too loudly. Aizawa looked at everything he typed on that laptop, and never told him. He did that for the *investigation*, as though he's ever typed what Boss' name is, where the compound is, as though he *knew* those things in the first place.

Hitoshi wanted to say he *could have* asked, but Aizawa *did*, and he didn't tell him. He wouldn't have told him what he knows, because he didn't know how little Aizawa *did* know. And he had other reasons not to tell him anyway. "You have the right to be angry with me for doing that."

He *is* angry, if anger feels like he wants to hurt *something* to make things even. If he hits the metal walls surrounding him, Yamada will hear it and get concerned. He can't hit Aizawa either. And it feels terrifying, but the words slip out of him numbly anyway. "You're an asshole."

Aizawa doesn't say anything, doesn't *do* anything like Hitoshi was sure he would. He doesn't even have the capture scarf so he's not sending it through the vent to strangle Hitoshi for saying something that disrespectful, and despite that fear, it just *angers* him to see Aizawa just standing there and silently taking it.

"And you can't use anything I gave you last night, if you were going to steal it like that," Hitoshi says, because he gave a *lot* of information to Aizawa, willingly, trying to make amends. Trying to make *progress* when Aizawa didn't seem to care, but judging from how tired Aizawa looks and how everything was messed with after he fell asleep, now organized in neat stacks, Aizawa might have done his part already.

"You would have been within your right to decide that, but I already shared that information with the rest of the investigative team," Aizawa says, gathering his hair into a ponytail with his hands before he just drops them, like he was stupid enough to forget he doesn't have a hairtie. And he looks stupid when he looks up at the vent. "I can buy you another laptop."

Bargaining. Aizawa *actually* feels like he's done wrong, and even if Hitoshi is physically looking down on him right now, it feels like he's even taller. And he doesn't want to let that feeling go. "I don't want another laptop, especially one from you. Another 'bugged.' laptop."

"What about a laptop from Santa?" Aizawa asks, and even with a straight face, he can sound so *mocking*. *Especially* with that straight face.

"I know he's not real," Hitoshi argues, and tries to keep his voice down just in case Eri is nearby. "You *bugged* my laptop and invaded my privacy, and you never told me. So now I'm...."

The problem with this distance between them, this height, is that it's hollow. He doesn't *really* have a way to hurt Aizawa right now, but he wants to have one. He wants to make Aizawa feel sorry,

instead of just saying that he is. The only thing he can really withhold is where The Miasma's compound is when he finds it, and that will hurt Hitoshi far more than him.

"I'm not going to tell you what Yamada's secret mission is," Hitoshi says, rolling onto his back fully with the finality of his decision. A *bluff*, he knows that. But Aizawa doesn't. "It's important for Eri's birthday, and you're going to *embarrass* her if you don't know about it. And Yamada told me to tell you, because he won't, and if I don't tell you, it's going to be a disaster."

"Hitoshi," Aizawa calls, raising his hand before he looks at his own laptop. His mouth looks weird, his lips drawn too tight, but when he looks back he actually looks sad. Regretful. "I'm sorry about the laptop. I'll make it up to you any way I can, but if I don't know about the 'secret mission-'"

"Too bad," Hitoshi interrupts, *far* too satisfied with the way this has played out. He *really* bought it. "And I don't know how long it will take, so I probably can't help you with your class. You'll have to deal with All Might being so cheerful and supportive all on your own."

Aizawa sighs, half a groan of agony at that idea, something that Hitoshi barely considered doing when he wasn't sure if Aizawa really enjoyed their conversations about the students' shortcomings in the first place. But looking at Aizawa bent over, braced by a hand on Yamada's chair, makes him feel even better than vengeful. "I... *hope* you'll be free tomorrow, then."

Hitoshi can't help the grin at that, and hopes Aizawa doesn't see it. But it fades quickly enough as he runs a hand through his hair, still tangled but now sweatier than he thought. He probably should get out of the vent, especially with the mission that he doesn't know about.

Aizawa hums, and Hitoshi's nerves sing with the sound. He waits for the test to really fail, for Aizawa to say he was playing along just to see how far Hitoshi would go, to tell him that he's offended Aizawa too fully at this point and he'll have to face the punishment for it. "Coffee's getting cold."

Hitoshi rolls his eyes, because cold coffee isn't *that* bad, even if Aizawa seems to hate it. But he starts rolling over on his arms and knees to make his way back to his room, listening to see if Aizawa would keep talking to him when he's not there.

He hesitates at the entrance to his room, because the vent cover was moved to the desk. Because Aizawa said that Yamada was 'straightening up' his room, so he might still be there.

But Hitoshi pulls his head out and looks around, and sees that the door is closed, Yamada *isn't* there. His notebooks are stacked on the desk instead of scattered on the floor, he doesn't see Yamada's jacket so he might have taken it back.

Hitoshi lowers himself down to stand on the chair, tossing Mocha and the mochi pillow to his bed before he takes the vent cover to fix it. The white part of the ceiling is cracked, but when he lines the cover back up, the cracks are hard to spot. Two of the holes where the screws went in are warped, but when he unscrews then rescrews the others, they seem to lock into place.

He sees a robot scurry over, it might be the same one that he saw the first time he disappeared into these vents. He watches it almost bounce up and down, gears whirring like it's surveying the damages. What he did when he was angry.

'Sorry,' Hitoshi signs, the bandaids around his fingers feeling tighter with that small movement. He doesn't know if it's stupid to apologize to the robot for damaging its home, if the robot even *knows* sign, if he's just stupid. But he feels sorry.

The little screen display pops up over the robot's domed body. 'Apology accepted. :3' 'May perform some.' 'Renovations.' 'For easier access in emergencies.'

"Thanks," Hitoshi says quietly, as though he can't convince himself that Yamada isn't nearby or just hiding from him.

Hitoshi can't even see the dust that he thought he did before, but he can see the lines on his carpet like Yamada vacuumed in his room. He still checks that the door is closed, and can't help but check the closet. He *knows* Yamada isn't in here.

But his *jacket* still is. Hanging up in his closet like it belongs there, like Hitoshi is free to wear it. Yamada probably *wants* him to, so he can take a picture for whatever weird reason he has to do that.

He likes the jacket, but he doesn't want to give Yamada the satisfaction, so he changes his clothes into a fresh set he didn't sleep in, with the light purple sweater that Eri picked for him. The one she picked as her favorite when he was taken to UA from the interrogation room.

And he faces the door, knowing he still needs to make sure he never hurt her.

*

Eri looks at her science kit that Momo got her spread out on the kotatsu, and tries to be excited about looking at the microscope again.

Winter breaks are supposed to be fun, but they're kind of not. Everyone seemed really excited about not having school, even Yama and Zawa and especially Aunt Nemmie, but it's really really *boring* without school. Instead of getting to wake up and eat breakfast together, and seeing all her friends every day, and learning a whole bunch of stuff, she's been spending too much time inside. Even watching TV with Yama or playing in the snow is kind of boring.

She played in the snow a lot on her sleepover trip with Mirio, Tama, and Neji, and met a lot of new friends, but when she got back all of her hero friends were sad because Haga had to leave, and Haga didn't even say goodbye to her. Twenny hasn't said goodbye to her, but he's been leaving a lot, and today he decided to leave to go spend time in the ceiling.

Eri sighs when she swivels the microscope around, looking at the sea monkey slide *again*. Science is *really* fun, but mostly when she learns different stuff. And there's not a whole lot she can learn about sea monkeys that live in the little glass rectangle, even when she looks at them under different colors like red and blue and green. The sea monkeys never move, and they don't *really* look like monkeys.

It's another fun day of winter break, when she's just waiting for Mizzy to be done with school so they can talk, or waiting to eat lunch, *maybe* with Twenny and Zawa there. Maybe Mirio will come over today, but it seems like he's busy now that he's in love with Tama. They better not get married and forget about Eri being the flower girl though.

Eri hears someone coming down the hall, and wonders if Yama's already done with his shower or Zawa's done with his important phone call, but Twenny is out of the ceiling now. "Twenny! Are you okay?"

Twenny smiles at her like he does when he's just Twenny, and that doesn't always mean that he's happy, but he holds up his hands with the bandaids that Eri picked around two of his fingers on each hand. "I'm okay. I just hurt myself on accident."

Twenny looks at her kind of like he's worried, and he kind of dances on his feet before he goes to the kitchen to get breakfast. Eri gets up to follow him, because Zawa just made cereal but Twenny sometimes makes good food, but he's just getting coffee. And he didn't even ask her to pick out a mug for him, and she would have picked a cuter cat mug.

Twenny looks at her like he's surprised she's there, and Eri must be getting really good at hide and seek if she can hide from Twenny when she's not trying to. But Twenny looks back at the kotatsu, instead of looking at her when he talks. "Are you working on a science project?"

It's not really a project, when she's written all her observations about the glass slides down already, and she can't really find new questions about them. But maybe Twenny can help her find new questions. "Kinda. I can show you how it works, 'cause I didn't show you yet!"

Eri takes Twenny's hand, and makes sure not to touch the places where he's hurt, and makes him follow her to the kotatsu, where she turns the microscope over to him. Even if Eri's tired of looking at the sea monkey slide, it's still the coolest one.

And Twenny looks at it like he thinks it's cool, maybe this is the coolest microscope he's ever seen. "I got the sea monkey slide in there, with the blue color I think. You can move it around to zoom in or change the colors, and I got other slides too."

Twenny leans down to look through her microscope, and he twists the color wheel and the zoom wheel really careful, even though Eri didn't tell him to be careful like Yama did. "It... doesn't really look like a monkey."

"I *know*," Eri agrees, and she *still* doesn't know why they're called that. Even *Momo* didn't really know, so it's impossible for anyone to know the answer. "But it's still kinda cool. They're supposed to swim around in the ocean, but they're *so* tiny. Even if Fishie and Fishio's house was full of sea monkeys, we wouldn't even see them."

That kind of sounds like a good experiment idea, because Mirio said that sometimes fish need bigger houses to grow, and Fishio and Fishie might grow bigger because they were in a bigger house. So even though the sea monkeys in the ocean are still really tiny, maybe if she just had *one* sea monkey in a *big* house like Fishio and Fishie have, it would grow into the *biggest* sea monkey ever.

Eri gets her notebook to write down her experiment idea, so maybe when she sees Momo, Momo can make her a baby sea monkey to test it out. She writes down her big question, and her evidence about fish growing in big houses, and how she's gonna test it, but when she reads it to make sure she's got everything down, Twenny's just staring at her with a little smile on his face. "Do you wanna help me think of experiments?"

"I can't really think of any," Twenny says, but he doesn't look sad about it. He's still smiling a little, kind of a whole lot like Zawa does when he's happy but for a long time, and especially when he picks up his coffee and drinks it. "Your experiments always start with a question, right?"

"Yup, that's how the Science Method works," Eri says, because that's her favorite part of learning science. It's never bad to ask questions, because that's what scientists do all the time, even for little stuff. "You gotta have a question, then write down all the stuff you know about it, and think of an experiment idea, then do it, and write down what happens and what it says about your question."

"I have a question," Twenny says, and Eri grabs her science pencil with the circles that Momo said are 'atoms' on it so she can write it down, even more scientifically than using her crayon. "But I don't want to test it. It's not really a science question."

Twenny is talking kind of small, and he keeps hunching closer to the table, like he's scared of the question. So it's got to be a really serious question, and maybe they need Zawa to talk real serious about it.

"Do you..." Twenny says, and he keeps curling his arms up like he wants to take a nap, and he's trying to be *really* small, and not look at her. "Were you ever scared by my quirk?"

Eri shakes her head at first, before she remembers how Twenny is sometimes. "Nope."

Sometimes, even after Twenny started asking her questions again, Twenny is scared to ask questions. Twenny is scared of his quirk after they got rescued, and even if it doesn't make sense to Eri, it kind of does. She's still scared of her quirk sometimes, but she thinks if she uses it more, she'll feel better, just like how she was really scared to stop it in the mountains, but she wasn't scared at all after she did. She felt a lot better.

But Twenny said he doesn't want to 'test it,' so Eri knows he doesn't want to use his quirk on her. But she doesn't really know how to make Twenny not scared of his quirk any other way. "Your quirk isn't scary, Twenny. My quirk can be scary, but it's not now, and I can learn to use it better so it won't be scary at all. But sometimes your quirk feels kinda nice and floaty, even if sometimes it feels like you're scared, but even then that doesn't make me scared. It just makes me sad, because I don't want you to be scared."

Twenny looks up at her with his arms crossed to kind of cover his face, like he's still kind of scared of that. "I'm sorry. I probably make you sad a lot."

The way Twenny says that makes Eri *really* sad, and she has to pull up one of Twenny's arms so she can hug him really close, and squeeze the sad really hard so it goes away. But Twenny holds her too, and even if he doesn't squeeze her as hard, it works to squeeze out all of her sad. "You don't make me sad all the time, Twenny! You make me really happy too! So don't be sad about making me sad, 'cause you make me happy more than being sad. And that's an experiment!"

Eri gets really excited when she figures it out, and she has to lean back and grab Twenny's face so he pays really good attention this time. Twenny's eyes look really red, kind of like Zawa's sometimes, and she has to be careful not to grab the places where he got hurt on his face. But he looks like he's paying good attention.

"Sometimes, you gotta do an experiment a lot of times to make sure it's right, and sometimes it doesn't come out the same way, but if it comes out one way more than the other, that means it's right. So, you gotta spend a lot of time with me, and I can write down how many times you make me sad, or make me happy, and prove that you make me way more happy than sad," Eri says, and she thinks it might work better if she can get more stickers to count all the times that Twenny makes her happy, but maybe she made Twenny happy again, because he smiles a little better this time.

"I think that sounds like a good idea. Science always has the answers, huh," Twenny says, and he gets an itch behind his head when he looks at the rest of her science kit. "I think you know more about science than me right now. Maybe you could help me do my science workbook."

"Twenny," Eri says, and she *tries* not to pout, but Twenny is being *ridiculous*. "You know a *whole* lot more about science than me. You've been learning stuff before I was even born! And you always used to read books, all the time!"

"Yeah, but..." Twenny's head must be *really* itchy, and he kind of frowns at it before he puts an arm around her, and kind of hugs her like that, so she sits on his leg to get more comfortable. "I

didn't learn the things that you do now, when I was your age. I'm learning a lot now, but...."

"But you learned different stuff too, and just because we know different stuff doesn't mean you're dumb, because everyone thinks that Sailor Moon is dumb but she's really smart about making friends!" Eri says, even though Twenny isn't good at making friends, or sometimes cooking, but he's good at a lot of other stuff. "And you're really good at talking with your hands, and reading books, and singing. And it's okay to be scared of singing with other people around, because the other Yama gets scared of that too, but Kyou makes him do it. But I won't make you do that, 'cause it's okay if you only sing to me."

"And it's okay if I..." Twenny starts to say something else, and he's only kind of scared to say it. He keeps looking at her science kit, and the coffee, and Eri *really* wants to know what it is, so she can tell him it's okay. Because that's her job sometimes, because Twenny is scared of a *lot* of stuff that's dumb sometimes.

But Yama comes in and scares Twenny anyway, even though Yama's just dressed up like he's gonna go outside, with an extra hero jacket in his hands. "Hey little sciency listeners! Are we ready to go and trample some snow with a little boy's only adventure?"

Eri *was* excited and ready to go, but only Twenny and Yama and Zawa going out and leaving her here is *mean*. "Yama, you can't have a boy's only adventure 'cause that's not fair! I wanna play in the snow too!"

"It's not that, it's-" Twenny looks at Yama, but he kind of looks mad when he looks at the door, so mad that his face is kind of red. "Training. With my quirk. We just have to walk in the snow to get there."

"Ah, yep! Yep, that's what it is, just training with two guys who have talking quirks- voice quirks and all," Yama says, and now he looks kind of nervous. It doesn't really *sound* like good training like the heroes get excited about, it sounds like the *bad* training that makes everyone scared or tired. And Twenny sleeps too much already, so Eri doesn't really want him to be tired. "And it *sounds* like Shou might be up for a little training for a little bean, and maybe you can crash the herolets' training too, make sure they remember that someone's special day is coming up."

Eri doesn't know which one she's more excited about, training with her quirk with Zawa or getting to see all her hero friends again. "Okay, but you gotta get ready Twenny, it's cold outside!"

Twenny's already wearing a comfy and soft sweater, but he needs a jacket, but Yama holds the jacket from his hero costume up for her, and that's *almost* perfect.

"And you gotta match, 'cause you're training together!" Eri says, and Yama smiles at her a whole lot when she gets up and grabs the jacket, before he runs into the office to get another one out of the bunch that he has in there. But when she tries to give Twenny the jacket, he looks like he really doesn't want to wear it, but that's too bad. "Twenny, it's the rule that if you have fun with Yama or Zawa, I gotta pick your clothes."

"Eri..." Twenny says, and he looks kind of sad at the jacket, but his face is *really* red, like he's *really* embarrassed. "Can you please pick-"

"And we're ready to go!" Yama says, and he's smiling *really* big after changing into his hero jacket, even if it looks kind of weird without his speakers or his black pants, and his hair can't even swoop when it's under his beanie hat. "Just waiting for one little listener to get ready for the show! Or snow!"

Twenny pouts, a *whole lot* at Yama, and Yama has to drop his arms and sigh a whole lot, like he's play-sad about it.

"I promise not to take a picture, and not tell a soul, but if that still isn't okay then *maybe* a little bean can pick another jacket that doesn't match. Maybe for a batch of apple cider when we get back?" Yama says, and Eri *really* wants some more apple cider after the first time he made it. It was so warm, and sweet, and cinnamon-y, and it's just like an apple over but she could drink it!

But Twenny takes the jacket and puts it on, even if he still doesn't seem happy about it. And his face still looks *really* red, but it looks really cute when Twenny and Yama match like that. "Have fun at training! I love you!"

"I love you too, little bean," Yama says, and he even slides down on his knees to give her a hug, like he's *really* happy with her, even though he's leaving. But maybe he'll still be happy enough to make her apple cider if she asks really nice. "You deserve the whole world, kiddo."

"I love you too," Twenny says, even if he's trying to hide his face in the part of his shirt that covers his neck, 'cause he kind of forgets that it's not supposed to cover his chin sometimes. Or maybe his chin gets cold.

But when Twenny and Yama leave to go on their training adventure, Eri feels kind of cold, so she puts up her science kit to get a hug from Zawa and feel better, and ask about their training.

Because even when science is fun, sometimes spending time with Zawa is the best thing ever.

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In Yamada's defense, he just meant to bring out the jacket as a little *joke*, a little teasing since he feels like he's been missing out on the opportunity with Hitoshi lately, and he wasn't prepared for Eri to lay down the law like that.

Maybe that was a little underhanded of Yamada to let Hitoshi simmer like that, before he tried to talk the little bean down into a fashion choice a little less mortifying, but Hitoshi *does* need opportunities to assert himself. In hindsight, he can claim that's exactly the reason he had the jacket in his hands in the first place.

But now, he and Hitoshi are wearing *matching* jackets from his hero uniform, the kid *refuses* to look at him and he keeps looking around campus like he's terrified someone will spot him and call him out for being a fan, and Yamada is still battling the urge to make sure Hitoshi is comfortable with him but also *take a picture of this moment because it might not happen again*. The horrifying prospect of someone seeing them like this makes the quick trip to the cafeteria an even quicker step, and if Hitoshi just *happens* to walk a little closer to him when he sees a small group of students in the distance, Yamada pays it no mind.

The quiet walk where Hitoshi is too mortified to sign anything just means the reveal of the 'secret mission' is all the better, and it seems like they're halfway in the cafeteria before the kid realizes where they are, and starts to question what they're doing in this empty place. "Breaking in like we really own the place, but don't worry! I got everything squared away with Nezu and Lunch Rush, they understood that this project is just way too big for our kitchen."

Our kitchen, Yamada never thought he'd say that to anyone other than Shouta, and only mean it in the technical sense that they'd both rent an apartment that had a kitchen in it. But for all those little things that are similar to Shouta as a teenager, the culinary skills are *completely* Hitoshi's own. And Yamada can't help the proud little tingle in his chest when he throws open the doors to the

bigger-than-industrial sized kitchen, with all those gleaming stainless steel appliances that Shouta wouldn't even be able to name, that makes Hitoshi's eyes almost *glow* at the possibilities that Yamada hasn't even explained yet.

"So, I know a few things that Eri likes to eat, and while apple flavored cakes are a *thing*, I thought it might be worthwhile to whip up a full course sample to make sure we've got the perfect combination, and this is the perfect place to go *wild* with it," Yamada says, and sees that Lunch Rush already did him a favor on top of the huge one they're standing in with several mixing bowls and necessary tools already laid out on one of the giant prep tables. "Chocolate cakes, vanilla cakes, fruit cakes, any cake that we could name, we've got the stuff to make it right here. We can make a few combinations in cupcake form, then take them home and see who the winner is, and since it's just a *sample*, we won't have to worry about ruining sugar for her for *life*."

The cupcake idea *might* have been news to him when Lunch Rush suggested it, but luckily Lunch Rush is enough in the know to set out a *couple* cupcake tins instead of thinking that Yamada would keep the sample selection to a mere dozen on the cake base. Yamada has all the recipes he could think of with icing flavors too, and he's sure there's a lot of produce that might go to waste if they *don't* sample a small selection before it's dispersed to the student dorms to bulk up their kitchens.

The quick decision to shut down early left a lot of preparations around that lacking, but Lunch Rush wasn't going to let the students go hungry on his watch and worked out a *fantastic* plan, as expected of the Culinary Hero himself. The cafeteria couldn't be operational as Lunch Rush always took the winter break off to work some *magic* for various soup kitchens and homeless shelters, but even if the students wouldn't have a chef who could whip up a meal in seconds from 57 different menus, they wouldn't go *hungry*.

Yamada strips out of his own jacket and Hitoshi seems *eager* to follow, but he can't seem to fight that twitch on the corner of his mouth that *almost* works into a smile. '*How many?*'

His favorite sous chef, back in action in a *big* way, in honestly the biggest stunt Yamada has ever tried to pull. "17 cake batter flavors to start with, but we've also got ten icings in the mix and five topping ideas, so...."

'340?' Hitoshi asks, with a *little* horror in his eyes. Not entirely writing off the project, but Yamada figures that his math is a little more sound than the vague idea that Yamada had before he actually tried to work out the logistics that far.

"...*Maybe* we can whittle it down, we don't have to make *every* combination, just the ones that make sense," Yamada says, before he starts the hunt for a pen and paper to work out some cake planning, which he *probably* should have done before.

Yamada is still sold on those five toppings, because even if he's *sure* the glazed apples will probably win, sweet lemon, blueberry, strawberry, and homemade chocolate sauce can't be ruled out either. But he can stick to classic icings and classic combinations, chocolate sauce on chocolate whipped mousse on chocolate cake, strawberry reduction with buttercream icing and birthday cake. He manages to whittle down *a lot* on the complicated icings to wind up with four, and twelve cake bases. As a fiend for good cheesecake himself, he sets up a small cheesecake tin for a variety slice plan, to go along with all 48 cupcake combinations that will be baked in the cupcake tins.

Hitoshi pokes around the refrigerators to find a stick of butter to start preparing the pans while Yamada gathers everything else they need to start from scratch. The sight of the industrial sized bag of sugar that they'll probably use the majority of is almost as shocking as how heavy it is, but by the time that Yamada is done with all the heavy lifting, his favorite sous chef has every bowl and smaller ingredients set out, looking at the recipes on Yamada's phone like he's not entirely

sure where to start.

Yamada isn't sure where to start in another sense, but the distraction of cooking has carried him through many a hard time. "Let's see, we'll need to make enough batter for each of these cakes, and I'm pretty sure a cake's worth is enough batter for a few cupcakes. The cheesecake will probably take the longest, so we can start on that first, then set up the other cakes."

'*Can measure. Other cakes,*' Hitoshi signs, still glancing at the phone and signing slow enough that all the hesitation comes through clearly. The confidence still isn't quite *there*, despite all of Yamada's efforts to make the kid believe that he's a pretty fantastic cook, *especially* considering that he's only been at it for a few months.

"Divide and conquer! That sounds like a fantastic plan. You can start anywhere you want, and let me know if you need any help!" Yamada says, even if his mind is already tangling in the weeds when he thinks about what Hitoshi starts doing.

Yamada knows his mother's cheesecake recipe by heart, and it's simple enough to grab everything he needs from the row of refrigerators and get to cracking in his one bowl. But everytime he looks at Hitoshi he sees that pen moving around, behind his ear, in his hand, the corner of his mouth, between the mixing bowls which are all labelled with a piece of scratch paper in front of them, tallying up what Hitoshi has put in. He's making *twelve* cake batters at once, even if the amount of eggs and flour and milk doesn't change *much* between them, his kid is noting everything and double-checking the recipe about five times before he distributes.

Yamada's head is getting dizzy with numbers he isn't even *looking* at, and once again he's blown away by how *smart* his kid is. "Alright, where can I jump in, cake boss?"

Yamada dusts off his hands that only got a bit of powdered sugar so far, but when Hitoshi turns to look at him fully for the first time in half an hour, Yamada can see both wide eyes *and* a solid dusting of flour on the right side of Hitoshi's purple hair. '*You're done?*'

"One cheesecake is *way* easier to whip up than twelve at once, kiddo! You could even say it's..." Yamada *has* to do the finger guns, he's been *waiting* for the opportunity and he can't hold off any longer. "*A piece of cake.*"

He gets the *eyeroll* of all *eyerolls*, not even slipping into English could shield the teenager in front of him from the *agony* of that bad joke. Hitoshi shakes his head once he recovers his will to live, the pen that was hidden behind his other ear is tossed between two bowls on the counter.

'*Difficult,*' Hitoshi signs, then points at the bowls on the left side. '*Easy,*' the easier ones are apparently on the right, because not only is Hitoshi making *twelve* cakes at once, noting down every single ingredient he adds to keep track of the chaos, he's got everything organized in accordance to *difficulty* in the recipe.

It is almost *physically* painful to work alongside Hitoshi with the urge to ruffle his hair only growing *exponentially* with the flour streaked through where the kid might have gotten frustrated and forgotten how messy their work is. But it just gets *messier*.

Sifting, mixing, beating, hunting for the rarer ingredients that just *have* to be added to follow the recipe to the letter, the time *is* starting to add up as they work down the line, finishing up the more basic recipes that *don't* call for grinding fresh cinnamon because the jar *apparently* causes the spice to lose flavor. Yamada's shirt and the top of his pants are *done for* before they're ready to start pouring the batter, and Hitoshi?

That fuzzy lavender sweater apparently picks up *everything* like a walking duster. It's losing

pigment to the confectionary sugar and flour by the *minute*.

The batter-to-cupcake-tin-transfer does *not* get off to a great start. Hitoshi starts pouring from the bowl but loses his grip for a second, a second is enough to overfill the first hole and claim the first row for the vanilla batter. But Yamada *promises* that's what they wanted to do in the first place, it makes sense for that row to get filled so the flavors are in order, he finds one spoon to do some recovery work on the overfilled portion and a ladle to make distribution a *breeze*.

Hitoshi still looks at each batter's notes and checks the recipe again before they get to pouring, because Yamada *knows* he's pouring his heart into this as if this was Eri's real birthday cake, and not just a sample spread to pick out her tastes. Maybe the birthday cake doesn't *have* to be perfect, when Eri's only turning six and has plenty of time to develop a culinary taste, but Yamada knows all too well that she still hasn't had as much opportunity to explore sweet flavors like other little kids her age.

And he knows she's not the only one, but that's a sneaky little ulterior motive Yamada tries not to think about before the cakes are ready.

Yamada knows that a few recipes called for different baking temperatures and times, but it *should* work out fine. He'll check the tins when the first batch is supposed to be done, and at worst, he'll have to retrieve the cupcakes by flavor as they move down the line, but with three ovens filled - the poor cheesecake all by his lonesome - they have four icings, double batches of fruit reductions and a chocolate sauce to make and about half an hour to make them in.

"Alright, so we can start off with three buttercream batches and add the flavors for the caramel and strawberry afterwards, then the chocolate mousse," Yamada says, pulling up the buttercream icing recipe even though he's *pretty* sure he's memorized it, Hitoshi pulling out another scratch paper to triple the ingredient count close to his side, elbows touching. He's pretty sure he's not imagining how Hitoshi's head keeps getting closer to his shoulder before it jerks away, never making contact but getting *close* to that little habit his kid has.

Or had, before last week. Yamada thought he would be lucky if Hitoshi met his eye when he came back to UA after that trip into the mountains, and while he's *grateful* that it's better, there's a new way that it's not.

It's a shorter wall, but it feels all the more insurmountable when he doesn't want to *push*. "So, with the laptop. Do ya feel up to talking about that?"

Hitoshi looks at him, luckily looks a little more confused than fearful with the way his eyebrows barely move together. '*Zawa coffee said not in trouble. Talked about it.*'

"Of course, it's not really a 'trouble' talk," Yamada says, and he tries not to feel *uncomfortable* with his kid and broaching topics that might be a little uncomfortable on both their ends. Anger issues, dealing with that, how *not* to deal with a surge of power ripping them apart to create havoc on the outside. He doesn't want to *scold* Hitoshi for feeling that way, if anything he knows it could be a step in the right direction to assert himself, to feel when he's been wronged. There's just better ways of doing that without going too far in that power surge. "It's pretty normal to feel overwhelmed like that, and I think it might be kind of new for you to feel like that. Especially at your age, when the hormones are getting all kinds of crazy. A lot of guys your age might knock holes into walls or scream and shout, and you can probably guess which one I was doing a lot of."

Screaming. He can still feel how his cheeks would burn from his *grin* when his Heroics teacher would say that they had quirk training that day. Yamada could bottle up a *lot* inside, and whenever he checked his surroundings, sometimes he had to dig a little deeper to find just enough space to

stuff more of it away. He can't even *imagine* what his poor mothers would look like if he hauled off and punched a wall, he was still terrified to find out what people would see if they saw that raw side of him. So, he wore a mask, on top of the bottle, and found other ways to let loose.

Hitoshi is looking at him, recipe and pen forgotten in his hands, like Yamada is suddenly telling him the secrets of the universe. Maybe, he's just gone quiet because his hands are full, but Yamada tries not to think about how that really wouldn't stop him now. "Shouting is much better than punching, for the most part. You can still get a nasty sore throat, but that's better than busted knuckles. A lot of what it boils down to is recognizing the right time, right place, and right means to let out some steam so you can tackle what set you off with a clear head, even if it's tempting sometimes to let the power do the talking for you. But that almost always turns out bad, because you're not entirely you when you're like that. It's a part of you and all, but it's... no filter. Just a lot of hurt and fear coming to the surface trying to get out of your system in the worst way."

Hitoshi tilts his head, staring at the mixing bowl in front of Yamada, considering something before he puts the pen and paper down to put them to words. '*Eri after quirk. Scream with you.*'

"Exactly like that," Yamada says. "Eri gets pretty worked up after she uses her quirk like that, and she needs a way to let off steam in a way she's comfortable with, and will actually help her out. Ripping up paper or tossing things around might work for some people, but Eri doesn't seem to like seeing how she got like that, so our little scream concerts work out pretty well. She likes to wear my headphones too, since they cancel out all the noise, and all that mad can get out without the little bean getting startled by it."

Yamada starts unwrapping the butter sticks, just so they can both have a task to take their minds a little off the conversation, Hitoshi already reaching for the sifter for the confection sugar. He doesn't know if he should bring up Eri as an example, *especially* after the mess Hitoshi's quirk startled him into the vents, and there's not really a vent to crawl into in here.

"There was a quote from a book I read, that kind of helped me understand why that happens. 'Your anger is the part of you that loves you, and doesn't want you to be mistreated again,'" Yamada says setting the bowl into the paddle mixer and flipping the switch to a low and slow beat to start breaking up the butter. He can see out of the corner of his eye that Hitoshi is sifting into another bowl, *almost* like he didn't hear it, but that tiny frown at the corner of his mouth is thoughtful. "Even if it's scary for Eri to have that kind of feeling, all that anger is probably welling up like that to try to keep her safe from getting hurt. Because she had you around to let her know that she never deserved to get treated like that."

The sifting stops, Hitoshi's hands frozen even if he doesn't look at Yamada. Yamada wants to make it *perfectly* clear that Hitoshi still isn't at fault for that, he *can't* take on what Chisaki did as his own doing.

"That's honestly a great thing for Eri, you know! If she didn't have you to protect her, to show her how she should have been treated and cared for, she might not have recognized how bad it was," Yamada says, because *he's* done that math, he knows how malleable a toddler like that would have been to those horrific circumstances presented as *normal* in that isolation. "It's not hard to love Eri's tantrums and grumps when you see it as a little girl standing up for herself with a lion roaring behind her, demanding to be treated *right*. Miss 'You Can't Have A Boy's Only Trip Because That's Not Fair' wouldn't *know* that's not fair if she didn't have a certain little listener telling her that she deserved the world from the start. And I'm proud of both of you for that."

Hitoshi does turn to look at him with those words, sifter lowering into the bowl. Terrified, open, *vulnerable*, Yamada knows he's inching so close to Hitoshi's heart the more he keeps talking about

how that painful past was wrong but Hitoshi made a *miracle* all on his own, when he shouldn't have had to. And he knows there should have been someone in his corner telling *him* that it was wrong to be put in that situation.

And that voice might have only started talking recently, making all the more trouble with that sudden noise. "Being angry is okay, and being mistreated *isn't*, and it's hard to work through that moment where it's all too much. It's kind of like what happened this morning. At the time you were angry about your quirk, and how you thought it made Eri feel. Probably a little angry that you were put in that situation, which is good, that's totally normal. But it's a lot to feel at once, and taking it out any way you could by yourself sounded like a good idea. There's other ways to do that, but you figured out the basics all on your own - step away from the situation so you can come back to it with a clear head, and afterwards it sounded like you were able to talk to Eri to work everything out."

Hitoshi nods, slowly glancing at the mixer, but the kid looks all the more worn out by the memory of that. '*Hate quirk,*' Hitoshi signs, quick and with a flash of a curl on his lip to show how much he still *means* that. '*Eri fine. Still. Hate it.*'

Yamada nods, he knows hate is a strong word to level at any part of yourself, at a quirk or an emotion or even how tall and gangly you are in middle school, but it's starting to line up with something that's been bugging him this whole time.

Hitoshi's signing is just a *little* off, like he's gotten just a *little* rusty at it. Because he talks to Shouta, he talks to everyone else, he doesn't use sign language as much anymore.

Because sign language definitely can't work through Hitoshi's quirk. "It's just my opinion, and I know I can't change the way you think, but I still think your quirk is pretty nifty. If there's anyone I would trust to wash my brain and take control, it would be someone that wouldn't want to hurt me, wouldn't want to hurt anyone. Someone who cares a lot for other people in his life, and deserves a whole lot of care in return."

Which, is another big concern at the edges of this conversation, about how Hitoshi shouldn't be pushing his friends away out of fear that they'll get hurt, and about how Hitoshi *deserves* to have friends and be safe and Yamada will be *damned* if he can't convince the kid to believe him despite the recent attack as evidence to the contrary, in his mind. But all of that falls out of Yamada's head when Hitoshi steps a little closer, his shoulder just a few inches shy of Yamada's own pressed behind Yamada's own, his forehead falling against his collarbone because this is *kind of* how Hitoshi seems to define comfortable physical interaction - with the ability to hide his face. But with a few purple hairs ticking Yamada's chin, what really seals the deal is Hitoshi's arm hovering around Yamada's waist, not confident enough to make contact, but enough to *try*.

They're making great progress on the hugs, and Yamada can't help but wrap his arms around the kid to make it a technical one.

The butter is *beyond* whipped when that quiet moment is over, where Yamada finds himself too awed by the vulnerability to press further and Hitoshi can't sign anything with his hands around Yamada's back. But honestly, Yamada might be more whipped than the butter.

Because he's *honestly* considering waging a one-man war against The Commission if they try to take this kid away from him, just because Hitoshi doesn't feel comfortable talking to him yet. Hitoshi doesn't have to be anyone other than Hitoshi to deserve what he's got right now, and Yamada might have needed the reminder that the kid still cares about him.

And that has nothing to do with talking to him.

*

If Hitoshi never looks at another cup of sugar in his *life*, it will be too soon.

He can't get the smell out of his nose, he can feel the *dust* in his lungs, and the taste is still in his mouth even if he's only tasted the reduction sauces to make sure they're right. Yamada thought that the lemon wasn't *sweet* enough when it was almost *perfect*, but at least they're almost finished.

He's not entirely sure he wants to be. Despite how much work it was at first, how much of a *mess* it was to figure out, even when he's looking at all the cupcakes cooling on the rack and he can't wait to see which one Eri likes, how excited she'll be by the surprise, he missed this.

Just being with Yamada. Just talking to him, just hearing his voice. Even if it's almost painful at times with the things he says, the crazy things he seems to *believe* about Hitoshi when he *shouldn't*, he still missed hearing them.

But when Hitoshi looks in the huge refrigerator stocked solely with *fruit*, still thinking about something he's sure wouldn't work out well, as he picks out a pear to eat, the hunger gnawing at him unbearable now, Yamada says something crazy enough to make Hitoshi think he can read minds. "Been thinking of ideas for Eri's birthday present?"

Hitoshi shuts the door and takes a bite, walking away as though that's not more *obvious*. It's stupid, but he wanted to make sure there were plenty of apples there, plenty enough for mistakes. But with the pear already bitten, he can't put it on the counter and has to hold it in his mouth to sign, and probably looks *stupid*. '*Not sure. Eri wants me to spend time with her. I want to make apple dessert. For breakfast.*'

Everything he thinks of is *stupid*.

Eri at least told him the minimum requirement - to spend every moment from the time she wakes up until after she goes to sleep with her, but that's the *minimum*. That's not even a gift, that's only a deviation to their *new* normal at UA, before they were rescued they would spend all their time together. The biggest complication to Eri's birthday is how that's not true anymore, there are other people involved.

Even the idea that keeps sticking in his mind, to make those apple turnovers she loves so much, is *stupid* because *Sato* is involved. He's going to make them exactly the way that Eri likes, Hitoshi knows that for a fact, and he knows that any that he tries to make will at best pale in comparison but probably turn out *awful*.

He knows that Mirio has a gift for Eri already, and he doesn't even need to know what it is to know it's going to make her happy. Aizawa, Yamada, 1-A, Monoma - they *all* planned in advance to get Eri the perfect gift from all of them, and 22 perfect gifts means that he has *no* chance to give Eri something *decent*.

Which means he's going to give her a bad gift for her birthday. Her first birthday since getting rescued, her first *real* birthday. And he's going to ruin that, because he's that outnumbered, and hopeless from the start.

"That's perfect, Hitoshi! Getting those little 'apple-overs' to start off her day, then spending the whole day with her favorite 'Toshi,'" Yamada keeps talking like that, and Hitoshi can't decide if he's being mocking or not. For the birthdays he tried to give her before they were rescued, he at least had *something* to give her. A torn teddy bear, a bar of soap, a new book to read, he had

presents even if he couldn't give her the certainty of being safe that day, and *any* of those things would just be insulting now. So he has *nothing*. "Eri's probably going to get a lot of 'things,' and with Christmas coming up too, I doubt she's going to have much room left in her room at the end of the holidays. But getting something special from someone who knows her that well is worth treasuring."

There's another reason why he picked that, why he gave up to the inevitability that he wouldn't be able to give Eri a proper gift, and shouldn't try. If he gave her something to be treasured like that, she'd keep it.

And she shouldn't, especially now. "*But*, a little birdie told me that we have some clothes shopping to do, and since I haven't seen any action on my Amazon account, maybe we can take some time to revamp your wardrobe."

Hitoshi looks at Yamada, who *looks* like he's just looking at his phone. But he *knows* that Yamada is gathering his strength before he tries to frustrate Hitoshi into giving up on living.

Hitoshi has to take another bite, closer to the core of the pear, when he brings himself to lean against the counter beside Yamada and see that Yamada was already looking at *black leather pants*.

The jacket is comfortable. The pants *would not be*. He doesn't have to try it.

There are a *lot* of impractical clothes that Yamada insists on looking at. He already has a pair of pants that have tears in the knees, he would think that they were old and damaged if he didn't see students on campus wearing them sometimes. Yamada does pull up some pants that are practical, that are *complete*, but there's a pair he seems to scroll away from quickly that grabs Hitoshi's interest.

They're black, they have a *lot* of pockets, and even if Hitoshi doesn't have to think about places to store weapons or anything else, he still thinks that's useful. There are also chains falling loosely on the sides, along with some extra fabric that almost looks like a skirt. Easier to hide a knife underneath, or even several knives.

He could put snacks in the pockets too, but he's too curious about whether the chains can be detached as weapons to let Yamada scroll away from it, tapping the image and picking another picture that shows that the chains *do* come off at both ends. The picture says it's for washing. But they probably have to say that, legally.

"Oh, yeah. I didn't know Tripp was still making pants. Those are cooler than the parachute pants I used to rock back in the day," Yamada says, a little nervously. Maybe he doesn't want Hitoshi to get it, and when he looks at the price, he understands why. Maybe he shouldn't. "It's practically a right of passage to own something a little punky, a little out there like that."

Hitoshi has to look at Yamada, to make *sure*. He wants them, Yamada seems to think he *should* have something like this. They're not damaged, they're *useful*, and he can't deny that he *wants* them.

Yamada takes the phone back, but before Hitoshi can think of convincing himself it's fine, he's flipping through the colors available. "How many do you want? Five? One for every day of the week?"

Hitoshi actually has to *argue* to just get two, the solid black and the one with purple seams and a purple skirt. He tries *not* to think about money.

But Yamada seems like he wants to spend even more of it. Yamada looks at jackets, and Hitoshi doesn't tell him why none of them catch his interest, but they're not spikey enough. Even if Yamada still wears too much leather to be practical in a fight, the spiked pads are useful, and his jacket is loose enough on Hitoshi that the restrictive leather wouldn't bother him.

The boots that Yamada moves on to, 'combat boots,' *are* interesting. Some of them have steel to reinforce the heels and toes of the boots, he can *imagine* how powerful it would feel to kick with them. Yamada has a lot of opinions about the brands, he's apparently worn a lot of these boots, and he does still wear them when he's in his hero costume.

There's a pair that Hitoshi can't bring himself to ask for, even when it seems as simple as looking at Yamada to do that, and has to bite his lip as though that would stop him. They would be *perfect*, even if they don't have spikes on them.

Yamada taps on them, only to go back and search for shirts, but he hands his phone to Hitoshi to check on the cupcakes. But that seems almost *intentional* how the opportunity to still put those boots in the cart is left in his hands in Yamada's absence, and though Hitoshi looks again, he can't bring himself to do it. He *has* shoes, he doesn't need shirts either. He just needs pants, because most of them are too tight now.

But, curiosity still gets the better of him, probably *because* of those boots. 'Eri cat outfit?'

His attempts to find it himself lead to too many results and *none* of them are right, and Yamada talks about certain names like 'Tripp' or 'Doc Martins' so he knows the outfit Eri wore when she was in the hospital *should* have a name. But Yamada is looking at the icing bowls, moving them around like he's getting ready to decorate. He isn't looking at Hitoshi, so he didn't see him sign.

It should be easy, to just open his mouth. Just to talk to Yamada, to even pretend that he's Aizawa if he has to.

But he's *not*, no matter what Yamada said. No matter what Aizawa says, the thought keeps twisting in his head until it nearly turns his stomach, the image of Yamada's green eyes glazing over like that is *horrible*. Even if he could convince himself it wouldn't work, it's too difficult to risk it.

He doesn't need another cat shirt anyway, he has plenty. They all still fit. They're just not the same one Eri has.

And that's probably how it should be.

Hitoshi *still* looks at the boots one more time, but this time, there's a picture of a suggested product he hadn't seen. It's a mask, but not a face mask. It's a *real* mask, or at least, that's what it looks like.

He taps on it, because he's not sure if this is something that easy to buy. If Yamada or Aizawa could just add that to their cart and end their worries with him and his quirk, but it's not *exactly* a real mask. It has spikes and straps, but the two clasps at the bottom don't have anything to lock into, to keep his jaw shut. He sees a picture of someone wearing it, the sides of their head shaved with a bright red spike for their hair, *almost* like Yamada styles his hair, but it fans out more. People willingly wear that mask, just because they like how it looks. It's probably comfortable, 'adjustable' according to the notes beside it.

There's more masks suggested under this one, one of them he knows is meant to poisonous gases out of the wearer's lungs. It also has spikes, and green radioactive symbols on the ends that stick

out on either side, those protrusions look a little like speakers.

“Find anything else?” Yamada asks, and Hitoshi shakes his head, making sure to click on the cart before handing back the phone. Yamada can decide if he really wants to buy all of that, he doesn’t have to know what Hitoshi was looking at.

Hitoshi isn’t sure if he wants him to know, and busies himself by picking a cupcake up, even if he wants to watch Yamada decorate the first one. To at least give himself a *chance* not to fuck it up, even though he knows Yamada will make it look better, since he makes *everything* look better.

He doesn’t know if Yamada really bought those things until he puts his phone on the counter, smiling at Hitoshi. He doesn’t say it, but there’s something in his smile that convinces Hitoshi that he did. Even the pants that he’s most excited about. “We can listen to some tunes to get those artistic juices really flowing for these cakes! You can change the music anytime, it’s my playlist, but *you...* are officially the DJ.”

Hitoshi barely stops himself from rolling his eyes, because *Yamada* is the professional DJ. But he’s never disliked any of Yamada’s songs, and he’s had plenty of opportunities to find something he hates. Even when Yamada and Byte Sound try to argue about a song or band, and ask for his opinion for a tie breaker, he doesn’t really have an opinion like they do. He just likes it.

And the music that Yamada picks is no different. It’s a little louder than the songs he usually plays, a lot of guitars and drums that roar and clatter, the singer seems to just be growling the words instead of singing, so it’s hard to pick out what he’s saying. It sounds *angry*.

And he can’t deny that even now, even when he’s more at peace than he has been for what feels like weeks, he likes it.

“I like listening to certain tunes when I’m feeling a certain way, kind of ‘vibing’ with it,” Yamada says, nodding in a loose and slow way that’s almost mocking, especially the way he squints his eye a little. He’s not paying much attention to how he spreads the icing on the cupcake, but Hitoshi is. “Some people like to sing along to it too, yell out their frustrations. I’ve been to a few punk concerts when I was younger, and moshing and headbanging, throwing people around and getting thrown around yourself... It’s almost a cleansing experience.”

Hitoshi hasn’t ‘moshed,’ and he’s not sure if headbanging is something more than banging your head against something, but the way Yamada says it doesn’t seem like it’s something that could result in a concussion. He’s never been thrown around in a way that really felt ‘cleansing.’

But he can’t deny that sometimes, throwing someone else around *does* feel like that. “*But*, I heard there’s a little bean that thinks someone’s singing should be hers alone.”

‘*Right*,’ Hitoshi signs quickly, trying not to feel how his face feels hotter when Yamada laughs softly like that. He’s not *singing* for anyone else, only Eri. If Yamada ever heard him, he’d probably die immediately. He’d just stop breathing and not a single person could tell him to breathe again.

“It is a little embarrassing, putting yourself out there like that, I can definitely understand. Shou still can’t make it through a full song whenever the mood strikes him, he just gets too embarrassed,” Yamada says, and Hitoshi can’t really *imagine* Aizawa singing. For any reason, but he’s not sure what it would sound like either, how his voice would change. If it would still have that growl he almost always has, if he would sound like this singer does and how he practically *roars*.

Yamada somehow makes the icing so smooth by the end, the sides of the cake are coated in a

perfect white and the caramelized apples don't slide off the edges by how carefully Yamada puts them on top. Hitoshi wants to make sure that Yamada makes all the cupcakes with the apple topping, because he knows that one will be Eri's favorite, but he nudges the icing bowl closer to Hitoshi as a reminder that he *should* do something with the cupcake he's just holding.

"So, I don't want you to get embarrassed or anything, and if you don't want to talk about it, it's cool, but I just want to know... what happened with Monoma this morning? With the pickle jar and all," Yamada says, and Hitoshi *doesn't* want to answer. He has a cupcake to decorate, and he could use that as an excuse to bide his time, to come up with a lie that isn't as stupid as the truth.

But something gnaws at him, like a hunger, convincing him that he shouldn't lie to Yamada, especially now. He'll just have to carry the weight of that lie, and he wants this to be a 'cleansing experience,' like it feels like already. *'Thief came with gifts. Had coffee. Didn't want to ta- see him. Threatened. A little.'*

Hitoshi picks at the butter knife he'd rather be using in the pause he takes between signs, he *almost* signed 'talk' but he knows the rest of it, if he goes on, would be wholly incriminating. He's almost certain that Yamada knows, but he hasn't said it. Aizawa *definitely* told Yamada that he can talk, but Yamada hasn't told him that he knows. If *Hitoshi* tells him, there's no denying it, it's out in the open.

It's honest. Even if everything is ruined, at least he'll know. *'Used quirk to make him drink juice. Probably wrong.'*

"Yeah, I can see how that could be a little funny, and I know you're not really a fan of the guy," Yamada says, and Hitoshi is too thankful that his attention is drawn to another cupcake, now that Yamada *knows* he talked to Quirk Thief, he just doesn't want to see what he thinks of it fully. To see his face, if Yamada looked at him. "But, a little prank like that is kind of hard to pull off with a friend, a little embarrassment is fun but you have to know someone pretty well to know where the line is, before it goes too far. He didn't seem too upset by it though, so maybe you can patch things up with him. If you want to, and all. I know Monoma comes on a little strong, just a *little* more than good old Bakugo."

Hitoshi *told* Yamada that he can talk, that he can use his quirk freely, that he *did* to make Quirk Thief suffer. And Yamada just wants to talk about *friends*? And *Bakugo*? *'Should apologize. It was wrong. Don't hate him.'*

As much. "A little apology goes a long way, and I think that's the right idea! Just talking things out with that person, trying to smooth things over after a little kerfuffle. Everyone makes mistakes, and that's no reason to leave a good friendship behind."

Yamada has already finished another cupcake, and even if Hitoshi picks up the knife and a wad of icing, he has other reasons to do it. He knows what Yamada is going to say, *somehow* he knows about that. Hitoshi probably made it obvious, if Aizawa didn't tell him outright. He doesn't know if he wants Yamada to say it, until he does.

"And it seems like maybe something might have happened with our herolet friends on campus? Haven't had a Bakugo study session in a while, or any antics with any chats," Yamada says, because he already *knows*, but he wants Hitoshi to say it.

The knife clatters too loudly when Hitoshi drops it in the bowl, no matter how loud the music is, *he* feels louder. *'Blast-chan stupid. All stupid. Don't care. I don't need friends.'*

He looks at Yamada, even if everything feels *wrong* now, it feels horrible again. How just a glance

at Yamada's green eyes seems to strip away his skin, everything *hurts* and he just wants to get away from it, especially when Yamada turns to look at him like that. "I get it, you know. And I'm not trying to say that you *have* to have friends, or that you have to patch anything up if things got a little messy. If these herolets are just dumb and annoying and you're *relieved* to have a break in your social calendar, I'm more than happy for ya, kiddo."

But Yamada *doesn't* think that. He doesn't believe that's what Hitoshi wants for a *second*.

"Apart from the rules we all live by, about not hurting people with words or otherwise, there's no rule to make you have friends, and there's not really any written rules about making friends or keeping them. It gets pretty messy when everyone is different and has their own needs and opinions and boundaries and stuff, it's easy to make a mistake," Yamada says, like he knows that it *might* have been a mistake. It feels like one, even if Hitoshi tries to convince himself it's not, it's not *guilt*, it's not *wrong*, it's best for everyone involved and he just has to get used to it. It's just *easier* if he does. "And sometimes it's easier to apologize than it seems like before you try. Since it's easy to make those mistakes, it can be easy to try again afterwards, because we're always learning about people, even if we've known them for years."

It's not that easy, and it shouldn't be. Midoriya is just *weird*, but he's the only one, he knows Bakugo would never forgive him and Ashi *shouldn't*. Asui shouldn't either, and it's almost a crime that Midoriya would forget what he said about her, what he threatened to do. What he *did* when Asui was trying to rescue him, they should all *know* better now.

"The worst anyone could say is 'no,' but that's after you've said your piece. Just getting everything out in the open, so it's not on your shoulders, the ball's not in your court, and you can stop having it hang over you," Yamada says, before he shrugs, before the *relief* comes because he's back to looking at the cupcakes. But it doesn't linger. "Just like me and Shou back in the day! You wouldn't know it, but back when we were younger, Shou tried everything he could to shake me off, but I was like a tick stuck to him. Probably *way* worse than our Monoma, now that I think about it. Shou said some pretty rough stuff, *did* some rough stuff, but when he came to his senses and apologized, he probably thought I'd finally figure out that he was doing all of it intentionally. But I already knew it, and knew why, and I forgave him from the start."

Forgiveness that came that easily, from understanding. Yamada and Aizawa knew each other for years before that happened, Aizawa probably knew from that time what would hurt the most and he might have used that against Yamada. But Yamada understood. He didn't leave him.

Forgiveness that comes that easily. Even if it's probably wrong, it's not born from making amends, it's blind to the wrong that's done instead of acknowledging it. Hitoshi wonders.

But the words stick in his throat all the same. He's just lucky that Yamada doesn't see it, doesn't hear it.

It's just easier to forget that he tried to say it.

Training, Confidential

Chapter Summary

As a homeroom teacher, it is Aizawa's responsibility to guide his students on their path to further their potential, and the most common way to do that is to oversee and guide their training exercises. With a young girl stumbling into self-confidence, a promising student on the cusp of greatness despite his inner worries, and a particularly stubborn ward, Aizawa sets aside his time and attention to see who they are, and what they can become with both a push and some praise.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Bug mention, bleach torture mention, 50 mention, Aizawa reflecting on Shiori's "death" at the end of the chapter

Previously on Wards of UA: Yamada and Shinsou left for their 'secret mission/training exercise' which is in fact cupcake baking, leaving Eri, who wants to 'train' with her quirk, and Aizawa to their own devices. Shinsou guided Eri to use her quirk on him to heal his sprained ankle, which resulted in Shinsou being Rewound 4 days. Eri has chosen to call attempting to use her quirk 'training,' after Shinsou said that he trained with his quirk, and after Eri has seen the hero students training during school hours to hone their quirks. Eri spent a great deal of time with Emi/Ms. Joke when she went to the Ketsubutsu training camp in the mountains, and Ms. Joke and Midnight are in a romantic relationship. Eri developed a mild fear of cats after Sushi, the first cat she encountered, swatted at her when he was in a bad mood. Eri has a friend her own age, Shoji Mizuno, whose mutant wings give off strong scents based around her mood. Yo Shindo tried to help Eri visualize her quirk to help her control it, with some results when she was able to stop it on her own. Eri had previously tried to see Shinsou while he was bathing, out of a natural curiosity for a young child, leading Aizawa and Yamada to ask if Midnight would help answer those questions. Shinsou's clothes and hair got messy from baking in the last chapter. Shinsou's birthday is July 1st, Yamada's July 7th, and Mirio's July 15th, and Shinsou knows when all three of those birthdays are. Shinsou threw away his stash as well as almost all of the things he's gotten from the hero course students when he decided to throw away 'useless attachments and distractions.' Shinsou has recently been able to use his quirk without asking a question. Shinsou has avoided talking to Yamada, but with an upcoming test to evaluate the validity of the wardship placement, whether Yamada's hearing aids will keep him from being affected by Shinsou's quirk, Shinsou will have to talk to Yamada. Ms. Saito, the Commission representative overseeing Shinsou's wardship, told Shinsou that he will be moved to an institution at the end of the wardship. At the Shichi-go-san festival, Shinsou stole a few bags of specialty candy from vendors, which Aizawa was aware of and covered up by paying for it after Shinsou left. Monoma agreed to leave Shinsou alone after Shinsou was distressed from Monoma Brainwashing him, and Midoriya still wanted to befriend Shinsou after Shinsou Brainwashed him into running into a wall, which hurt his hand.

Aizawa rolls his head around his shoulders, gaining a few pops but not entirely *relief*. His eyes are burning too, despite the eyedrops. This brand of fatigue seems *particularly* resistant to Hizashi's brand of coffee grounds, which he's trying to fix with a second pot of his own.

But while that brews, Eri sits at the counter, kicking her feet with her small hands under her chin, waiting expectantly. She seems to hum when she catches him looking at her half-sized horn, and the uncertainty that brings. "Did Hitoshi help you when you used your quirk on him, with his quirk?"

Eri's feet hit the legs of the chair she's sitting on, punctuating her frown with that. "Kinda. It wasn't really working when I tried, so he helped, but I still kinda had to... pull it. And I kinda remember how to do that. And I wanna try."

Despite how fruitless the effort might be, Aizawa can't suppress the pride in his chest when he smiles, leaning his arms on the counter while he tries to find the right words to say. To think that Eri would *want* to use her quirk, to learn how to control it further, after she had so much to fear from losing control or being reminded of how powerless her previous circumstances had made her feel. He doesn't want her to lose that sense of power to disappointment. "It might not work today, but trying to use your quirk even when it's ineffective will help you in the long run. It's progress, even if it doesn't seem like it."

"Like training," Eri says, as Hizashi has pointed out Eri has paid more attention to her surroundings at UA and acclimated her vocabulary to them. Eri rolls the plastic wand that Monoma left for her today between her hands, Aizawa isn't completely sure, but he thinks it's for the green Sailor Scout. He's not sure which planet she's from either. "Zawa, what's your quirk feel like when you use it?"

Aizawa hums, considering his answer. *Painful* probably isn't the right one, but it's the first that comes to mind, now that after USJ, the ache of an overused muscle has been replaced with splintering *pain*. Something that probably shouldn't make him miss his regular patrols so much. "It feels like 'pulling' for me too. I can open my eyes, and not activate my quirk, but when I was younger it was hard to know the difference."

He made more than a few children at his daycare cry, mourning the loss of their newfound quirks, until his teachers acquiesced to his mother's insistence on an eyepatch. He knows now that measure stunted his quirk control, as without having both of his eyes uncovered, unable to see with both of them, his quirk wasn't able to activate. It felt almost as though there was a void where his eye was, it was *unnerving* in a way he doesn't like to remember.

Aizawa touches the corner of his left eye, the one that wore that eyepatch the most. His vision had always been worse in that one, probably as a result of that treatment. Far worse after USJ, but only enough to *consider* wearing glasses now. Even if his vision blurs out at long distances and with only that eye open, he's still cleared to work without correctional lenses, he can still *see* those blurs well enough.

But he doesn't need glasses to see Eri perfectly at this distance. He can see the eagerness thrumming in a childlike way, from a child who hasn't had much experience to want things for herself. Especially power, which Aizawa can't deny is the root of what Eri's quirk *is*.

"And if you feel overwhelmed, or if you want to stop, I'll be there to help you," Aizawa says, a reassurance he doesn't think Eri needs at this point, but he needs to say it. "And you might be able to help Nemuri in the process."

“Aunt Nemmie!” Eri cheers, raising two fists in the air as though she’s *tragically* deprived of Nemuri’s presence. Hizashi’s words about how Aizawa approaches both wards with ‘low energy’ seem like half an accusation in the face of Eri’s excitement, because Nemuri tends to be anything *but*.

But given that Kayama seemed half asleep when Aizawa made the arrangements, he hopes that Eri won’t be too crushed or too distracted if Nemuri doesn’t greet them with her usual energy. He prepares a thermos for himself, black like coffee is *meant* to be taken, and another that’s watered down and ruined by the hazelnut creamer that Hizashi likes. It’s an offering to smooth over the intrusion, suddenly rare over the past few months.

And Aizawa takes Eri’s hand, not having to worry about either of them bundling up for the cold weather when Nemuri’s dorm is next to theirs, with all the dead house plants he’s made sure she still has ripe for the training. “Eri! You’re ready to move in with me, right? Spending all that time with Emi must have made you realize how awful Shou is to be around.”

Nemuri is dressed like she’s ready to either lounge around all day or sleep with the sweatpants and loose shirt barely able to cover both shoulders, but she brightens too eagerly for Eri. Mostly for the opportunity to drive another splinter under Aizawa’s skin.

Given the *dead houseplants*, Aizawa doesn’t exactly *trust* her with Eri’s custody, even if he knows that Nemuri has risen to the occasion with other wards. But not with Eri.

“Zawa’s not awful at all!” Eri defends, swaying Aizawa’s hand in hers and Aizawa can’t help but *grin* at the victory, to Nemuri’s pouting. “Zawa’s really nice, Aunt Nemmie, but you make him do his teacher face a lot, but I don’t.”

“*Exactly*,” Aizawa says, unable to keep himself from rubbing it in a *little* more even as he hands the thermos off to Nemuri. “You shouldn’t make me scold you so much, or I’d be nicer to you.”

Aizawa lets those words slip out, because he *knows* Nemuri wants to twist them to her usual teasing. And she *can’t*, not with an innocent child between them.

Nemuri fumes, but she still smiles at Eri to allow them inside, and she’s even arranged for all those neglected houseplants that neither Nemuri nor Emi can take care of properly to be gathered in a row on the floor of her living room. Even if there’s not much of a difference, there was an attempt to clean up. Less clothes scattered on every piece of furniture, no dishes left waiting to be washed. He’s still sure the sink is full of them.

But there’s another occupant that Aizawa thought Nemuri locked up, that Eri seems concerned with when she presses herself a little closer to Aizawa, her hand tightening on his. He honestly feels more torn than he should be. “Is Sushi in a good mood?”

Aizawa has to look away from the elderly tabby staring at them curiously from the arm of a couch, to see Eri looking at the cat with fear, but not as much as he expected. This is the same cat that swatted at her and made her fearful of Todoroki’s cat, instilling a phobia all the more tragic for how much she adores the idea of cats and their image. But not real ones.

“Maybe not right now,” Nemuri says, an accurate assessment to Sushi’s posture, his feet planted below him ready to flee or attack, but his eyes are locked on them to assess these ‘strangers’ in his domain. Aizawa must have made himself a stranger to the cat recently. “The grumpy old man just needs to watch you for a while, then he might be up for a little petting. He just has to get to know you again first.”

“Hi Sushi,” Eri says, waving and greeting the cat even if it’s done a bit timidly. She seems to understand that Sushi’s observance of her is the most important part of the ‘introduction,’ but Aizawa does appreciate her own introduction.

Nemuri pretty much collapses onto the couch, her head falling next to Sushi’s armrest which means she might not be conscious for this entire visit. Aizawa finds a place to sit on the floor, on the edge of the row of wilted plants gathered in front of them. Eri sits by his side, her side pressed against his and her knee digging sharply into his thigh, until she shuffles just a small distance away. That seems to rattle her confidence a bit, to remember that her quirk relies on physical contact, but it’s not restricted to only a part of her. She can’t be touched while her quirk is active.

“We have plenty of options,” Aizawa notes as a distraction, two bonsai trees with reversed bends, probably meant to be displayed as a pair, have few leaves on their branches but plenty on the potting soil. There’s also a white flower with large waxy petals, wrinkled and curled a bit too much, next to a small pot of a ‘lucky’ bamboo shoot that looks *particularly* unlucky with those brown spots.

Eri has a beanstalk of her own, but Aizawa wouldn’t use something that precious to her for training purposes. Eri raises her hand, but hesitates between her options, before she decides to pull on the flower pot to bring it closer to her. It’s one of the healthiest of the selection, one of the *newest* he assumes accordingly, but Eri tugs gently at one of the lower petals before she closes her eyes, straining to concentrate.

Too soon, Eri opens her eyes to look at him, disappointment that he expected from her age, but he offers reassurance in resting his hand on her head, because she needs it. It’s telling of how close she is to giving up already when she doesn’t react with fear from that at all. “It takes time. Even if nothing happens today, you’re working towards that.”

“I’m doing it right,” Eri insists, her fingers curling on the edge of the pot. “And my horn wasn’t big when I used it on Twenny. It doesn’t have to work like that... right?”

That note of fear, woven in how her voice grows higher yet weaker, reminds Aizawa that Eri isn’t entirely referring to her horn being fully grown. She has enough memories of how she was forced to use her quirk to convince her those cruel methods may be the only ones, even if Aizawa knows better. “There’s a lot we don’t know about your quirk yet, but if Hitoshi was able to help you, there should be a method to use it yourself. We know it’s related to how you feel.”

Eri’s fingers start digging into the soil, her head tipped under his hand, almost like she wants to shake it off out of frustration clear to see in her frown. This is new to her, Aizawa knows, and he knows it’s frustrating at her age. He knows her quirk makes it harder than most to hone it.

“Midoriya also struggled to learn how to use his quirk,” Aizawa says, and he’s not blind at all to how the name draws Eri’s interest when she turns to look at him. One of the heroes that saved her, *Deku himself*, struggled with his quirk. “Even when he started high school, in my class, he couldn’t depend on his quirk like he does now. There were many times he tried to use it, and it wouldn’t react at all. It took months for him to understand it.”

Aizawa knows *now* why that was, the details of how Toshinori gave the child a *quirk* the day before his *entrance exam*. The vague story about being a late bloomer already didn’t bode well, but Aizawa saw enough potential in his ability to adapt beyond his quirk, something that was *uniquely* promising. Especially among students who focus too much at first on what they think they can do, limiting their image as heroes to their quirks, but he saw the foundation for a great hero in how Midoriya would look beyond that from the start.

Though, if Eri asks how he did succeed when he struggled, Aizawa doesn't want to answer with the truth that the Problem Child resorted to breaking his *bones*. "That means that for months, Midoriya's training would look a lot like this. Trying, with no results. But it does pay off with time."

Eri nods, looking again at the flower with determination renewed this time. Aizawa pulls away his hand, but places it close enough behind her. He tries not to watch, to put more pressure on her even if he wants her to know that he's there and attentive. For all the consternation growing on Eri's face by the minute, how her nose wrinkles and she holds her breath at times, there's not a flicker from her horn nor growth there. Nor shrinking.

Aizawa thinks it takes about ten minutes before the renewed determination of a five year old peters out again, and he only catches a flash of her wide-eyed disappointment before she falls into his side, clinging to him for comfort. With his arm wrapping around her, it's easily given. "It's difficult, but it will get easier. I'm still very proud of you for trying."

"But it's not *working*," Eri grouses, muffled against his shirt. "All the heroes know how to use their quirks, and I *can't*."

"Mizuno doesn't," Aizawa prods, *thankful* that he has a better comparison to offer Eri than the teenagers *far* outside her own development. "Mizuno has trouble controlling her quirk, and Kota has been working with his quirk since he developed it nearly three years ago, but he's still learning. It's normal to struggle when you're learning, when you're new to it."

"Like Izuku?" Eri asks, and he can only see one red eye looking up at him from where Eri has pressed herself to his shirt, a small fist pulling at the bottom of it. Aizawa nods, because he knows she needs the reassurance. From a *unique* hero.

"He struggled too," Aizawa says, and sees the similarities too clearly now. How Midoriya would also scrunch his face, trying to force a quirk that wouldn't answer when he didn't know how to connect to it. And he realizes that there's a question he never asked, that he should have. "What does your quirk feel like to you?"

Eri fidgets a bit closer, looking away. She seems a bit uncomfortable, and Aizawa prepares himself for something he knows in many senses, but not this one. Not from Eri's own words. "It hurts sometimes. It used to always hurt, but with Izuku, and with Twenny.... It was like a flower opening up. That's what I wanted it to feel like."

"Did it hurt just now?" Aizawa asks, impressed that his words come out evenly, even if his chest aches at the thought, that Eri wasn't determined or focused but in *pain* right next to him. Falling into memories she shouldn't have, that he *wants* her to forget in time, rather than feel them.

Eri shakes her head, burrowing closer to his shirt. "It didn't feel like anything, even when I imagined it like Yo-yo said, and Twenny. Twenny just has to pull a string and he can use his quirk, but mine's *difficult*."

Aizawa's lip twitches, though he doesn't want to show any amusement towards the honest frustrations of a child. "Your quirk is different from theirs, because it's an accumulation type. It's very much like Midoriya's, which means it will take time."

The same little girl who asked him if he could take her quirk away permanently only months ago, now looks up at him with a similar sadness to the thought that she'll have to wait to learn how to use it. She's grown so much, thriving now under more normal circumstances, but he knows this is the barest promise for what the future holds for her.

He can't wait to see it.

"Oh," Nemuri calls out, and Aizawa turns his head to see an old friend walking towards them, Sushi's head lowered and gait slow, but confident. Curious even, now that he seems convinced that Aizawa and Eri intended to ignore him, and he wants to rectify that with a cat's usual aloof attitude. "It looks like someone wants to say hello now. He must be in a better mood."

It's only the clarification that Sushi is friendly now that draws Eri to look at him, instead of continuing to hide in Aizawa's shirt. Aizawa stretches his hand out first, offering a finger to sniff for a cat that certainly isn't a *stranger* to him. "Sushi prefers to smell someone's hand before they can pet him. Cats see that as being 'polite.' And if he wants me to pet him...."

Aizawa sees how Sushi licks his lips, satisfied to remember Aizawa, before he brushes himself along Aizawa's still outstretched hand, rubbing his cheek against it pitifully. Begging to be scratched as though the cold shoulder before was just *another* cat, not the one in front of him.

"He'll show me exactly where he wants to be petted," Aizawa says, unable to help the grin as he trails his fingers over Sushi's cheek up to his chin, where the cat closes his eyes and seems blissful. He wonders if Sushi remembers that this is UA, if he even remembers how Aizawa bottle fed the poor kitten between classes until Nemuri agreed to take him in. At 16 years old, Sushi likely doesn't remember those things, he's probably earned the right to be a bit surly at times.

One of Eri's hands moves to curl around his sleeve, but the other stretches out confidently, if a bit shaky. Aizawa lowers his hand to the floor to deprive Sushi of the affection he wants, to make him realize there's another hand to offer it. But he keeps it close enough that if a foul mood strikes in the worst way, he can protect Eri from another frightening swat or bite.

Instead, it seems like Sushi has forgotten all of that unpleasantness, his nose twitching as he smells Eri's offered fingers and even quicker, he licks his lips to accept the introduction. Instead of a cheek, he bows and bumps his head firmly against Eri's palm, making her gasp and look up at Aizawa with a beaming grin, incredibly proud of this victory. "He likes me!"

Eri has to lean forward a bit more in order to properly pet the top of Sushi's head. The cat bows lower to the floor, his eyes closing again, but that just makes it more difficult. "You can get closer to him, just slowly. He's easily startled."

"It's okay," Eri coos softly, rolling onto her knees to inch forward *ever* so carefully, this time for the sake of Sushi's fear instead of her own. "I just want to pet you, 'cause you're very pretty."

That compliment seems to push the cat over the edge as he rolls over onto his back on the floor, rubbing his head back and forth with the fluff of his belly exposed. Eri's hand hovers above him, and she seems worried that she might have overstepped, but it's anything but when the cat yawns, punctuated by a pleased '*mwrrrp*' at the end.

But Eri's hands bravely yet gently stroke the tabby's cheeks, as he closes his eyes and starts to stutter into a purr that Aizawa is sure will grow louder with all this attention. It's almost overwhelming, to see Eri and Sushi getting along so well.

It only makes him more aware of her white hair, and how honest her rarest smiles are.

"That reminds me," Nemuri says, groaning as she rolls off her couch to look through the piles of books on the bottom section of her coffee table. "There's a couple of books that I think a growing girl might need, now that she's turning *six* years old!"

Eri watches Nemuri eagerly, smiling expectantly, but Aizawa's heart catches in his throat when he sees the cover. When Nemuri grins with a *particular* brand of sadism at him, as she already *knows* neither he nor Hizashi want any part of this. But she's *trapped* him now.

"Here you go, sweetheart. These books might answer some questions that you might be having, and if you get confused or curious about some parts, you can talk to me, or ask Shouta or Hizashi to read them to you!"

Aizawa. Doesn't want to read. 'It's Not The Stork!' to Eri.

Especially when Aizawa is *highly* aware he's not Eri's biological family, he's an unrelated adult man who has been given the great privilege to raise her. And he would feel *far* more comfortable if Nemuri would take over the most awkward part of that discussion, given that Nemuri doesn't have the body parts that would be the most shocking for Eri to learn about.

He knows it's not wrong for Eri to have that curiosity or questions, and he doesn't feel like Nemuri is tainting her by handing her those books on the subject. He's known that a part of raising Eri means that he needs to be able to answer the questions that she has, before she tries to answer them herself with childish means of investigating.

But Eri has taken those books into her hands. She holds them out to Aizawa, and he feels the weight of this expectation too fully. He takes them and he *hopes* she'll be distracted by Sushi again.

"Thank you Aunt Nemmie!" Eri says, standing up to give Nemuri a hug, which causes Sushi to scatter. Nemuri hugs Eri back, and sticks out her tongue with a finger pulling down her eyelid, the perfect taunt and Aizawa feels she's *solidly* won.

He *hates* her.

And though it might be kind to get out of Nemuri's dorm so she can rest, Aizawa mostly wants to escape to try to find some way to avoid the conversations that lie between the pages of these two small books. He's not prepared, *at all*, and he needs time to come up with a better strategy to tackle this. "Maybe Nemuri could part with one of these plants that she can't take care of too, since someone's birthday *is* coming up."

Aizawa tugs the flowerpot closer, because he's sure that there is no protest. Eri doesn't even have to look at Nemuri before she seems passionately onboard. "Of course! But that's *not* really a present for someone's *big* sixth birthday. I've got something much better up my sleeve, from me and Emi both."

"*Really?!*" Eri cries, her eyes wide in astonishment at the notion. He hopes that the gratitude will last when Nemuri and Ms. Joke will truly be one of *many* gift givers this weekend. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

Nemuri laughs and pulls Eri in for another hug as the child bounces on her heels, but soon enough Eri is staring at the plant with *wonder* in her eyes.

She might have been that excited for a new plant anyway, which unfortunately defeats the purpose of trying to use her quirk on a less consequential target. "What's the flower's name?"

"It's a lily," Nemuri says, answering an innocent question with an innocent tone, but the wink she directs at Aizawa reminds him of the *connotations* that flower has for Nemuri and Emi specifically. "It's a flower of purity, just like *me*."

Aizawa isn't quite as capable at smothering his laugh as he should be, but Eri seems to decide he only sneezed. "I'm gonna name it... Lillio! And Yama knows how to fix wilt-y flowers, if I can't fix it. Yama should teach you how to do that too, Aunt Nemmie!"

"He should," Aizawa agrees. "At Nemuri's age, she should be able to take care of her plants responsibly."

"My *age*?" Nemuri asks, smiling tensely with a voice too sweet for the vein throbbing at her forehead.

"How old do you think she is, Eri?" Aizawa asks, and he sees Eri's head tilt in consideration, as Nemuri glowers at him. It could be anything from six to 32, Aizawa estimates, but he hopes that Eri will shoot a bit higher than that.

"Twenty!" Eri guesses, and gets caught in another embrace as Nemuri gushes *far* too proudly. "'Cause that's how old Emi is, and you guys are good friends! Just like me and Mizzy!"

"*Yeah*," Nemuri agrees, trying to hide her amusement it seems, before she looks at Aizawa and grins. "We're *good* friends, just like you and your best friend Mizzy."

Aizawa has years before that becomes something to concern himself with. Eri having agemates, having friends, is necessary to her development. He has absolutely no issue with whoever Eri chooses to play those innocent elementary school kissing games with, but he knows for a *fact* that he's not an outlier for not having such experiences. His first kiss was in high school, and if Eri would like to follow in his footsteps, he would be completely unconcerned by it.

Aizawa gathers the flower pot and books under his arm, taking his thermos of coffee with his free hand before he remembers it's not free. Eri would still like to hold his hand on the short walk back to their dorm, so he tucks his thermos into the bend of his elbow accordingly.

Eri bids Nemuri goodbye, again thanking her for the books and new friend 'Lillio,' and Aizawa asks her where to put this new friend as soon as they get back to their own dorm, hoping it distracts her from the books. It still doesn't bode well that Eri wants to put this dying lily on the ground below her beansprout's perch on the windowsill, when he doesn't want her to form an attachment to something she could Rewind out of existence.

But Eri takes pride in including the plant in her usual self-imposed chores, feeding the pet goldfish and watering both plants as she hums, and Aizawa watches. She surely knows that her quirk isn't the only way to help others, even plants. It's unnecessary in the face of her boundless compassion.

"Dad, can you read my new books to me?" Eri asks, with an innocence and excitement he doesn't know how to answer.

He *doesn't*, he imagines he can answer specific questions if he's pressed enough, but he'd rather not risk the revelation of certain bodies being different from her own happening right in front of his eyes, where she might have the perfect *target* of those immediate questions right in front of her. "We can do that later, but it's almost time for my class' training session."

He can arrive early to meet with Toshinori, to discuss the training exercises for a while. And if Eri feels inspired to ask if 'Lillio' can come too, that only means he has more time to spend finding a small enough shopping bag to carry the plant in.

Arriving an hour early isn't terribly strange, after all, when he wants to make sure that his students have a worthwhile exercise.

*

It is yet another day shrouded in this heavy air, humid from the maelstrom of darkness.

The uncertainty of these past few days have forced his peers and himself beyond their limits, in some ways more severe than others. A mad scramble for clarity in these uncertain times, hearts clutching for the rope of salvation only to find a spider's thread. Perhaps, one day these frayed strings can be woven into a hero's mantle, but for now the edges seem too sharp to suffer.

Tokoyami would have rather gone home for winter break, just to find some solace from the demands of his school for a full month.

Alas, it is not so. And though their classes have ceased to demand their time, there is *truly* no rest for the wicked. A training exercise, claimed voluntary much like a scorpion might claim to a frog that it will not *sting*, has been scheduled for every weekday of the current week, until the holidays *truly* toll, and a brief reprieve from campus may be gifted to some. Only for internships once again to call upon its victims.

And Hawks turned him down. A busy man, Tokoyami knows, but there was a part of him that bristled at the opportunity to work with one of Hawks' sidekicks that happened to patrol his own hometown. He knows every angle from which to take that offer, a kind gesture to allow Tokoyami a bit more time to catch up with his family, something that many of his peers would envy. To still hone his flight feathers under the watchful eye of a similar hero, even if the one he wants has made the distance clear between them.

He wanted to speak to Hawks, face to face. There is a part of him that wants nothing more than to stoop to a most unbecoming burst of anger to be treated to this understandable rejection, something he still cannot wholly convince himself is not a *slight*.

Especially after all he's done, in his 'continuing' internship at UA.

Tokoyami was guarded at first, convinced that this was all that he was invited for at the beginning of his internship with Hawks. He didn't want to discuss the incident at USJ, *especially* not the Summer Training camp incident, he didn't want to discuss his peers or his teachers, he wanted to *learn*. He wanted to observe the hero who kept flitting away to chase further incidents, leaving Tokoyami and his sidekicks behind to clean up after. It was almost a stinging rejection in itself, a punishment for his held tongue. *If you want his attention, you have to earn it on his means, and accept that you're only a source of information instead of a student.*

Tokoyami demanded answers instead. He *demand*ed to be seen for his potential, to be *seen* by his mentor, and on that night he flew at Hawks' side for the first time, he felt it. The raptorial gaze surveying him anew, that was *almost* what he was seeking, but the weight of Dark Shadow's wings was no shelter from the fierce winds they rode among.

If he wanted to be an equal, to be a *hero*, he had to see what Hawks saw. That was terrifying, to catch a glimpse of it, and so he settled for Hawks seeing his own vision, through his eyes.

He kept in touch with Hawks, though he had nothing truly to report about any suspicious behavior from his peers or teachers. Hawks still asked, in a way Tokoyami only thought was a casual mask, but it was incessant and prying enough to seem like *truth*. 'Yeah, but how was school? Super boring?'

Hawks took an interest, farther than what Tokoyami offered. He *wanted* to know even the minutia of his routine, in a casual way that was almost *terrifying* to come from such a great height.

Hawks would remind him that he's not giving a report, that he could 'relax' and just tell him how his day was. Tokoyami attempted to do so, but his own train of thought tends to be what Hawks perceives as long-form prose. He seemed to find humor in it at times.

Tokoyami wasn't blind to what he was doing. He was supposedly helping a hero who had an interest in the unprecedented villain attention focused on his class. Hawks had a reason for that, and Tokoyami was no fool to it. He trusted Hawks, and Hawks trusted him in kind.

And he aches to know if Hawks trusts him less now, with this failure. When he didn't see any sign that Hagakure was a traitor, when that seems to be exactly what Hawks was looking for. He knows he won't see honesty in the messages already sent and received, *that* conversation Tokoyami doesn't wish to dwell on.

He wants to meet Hawks' eyes, and ask if he can be forgiven. If he can still fly alongside that great hero who saw his potential *once*, then brushed him away after this failing. Something he tries to argue isn't related, a voice arguing that thought sounds a great deal like *Hawks*.

He'd like to hear it outside of his own head, to believe it.

This turmoil is his own, hidden away from prying eyes, but he will be tested. *Soon*, and *brutally*.

It's one of those days that Aizawa-sensei sees fit to deal his heavy hand in their training regimen. Perhaps it's due to the week coming to a close, the final chance to prepare them before their voluntary internships begin after the holidays. Tokoyami should look forward to the individual attention that his teacher distributes evenly among his peers, to discuss their own goals and struggles before being guided towards new pathways towards progress.

Tokoyami is only able to focus until he sees Shoji release the fists he had manifested among his arms to talk to Aizawa-sensei for his turn. Tokoyami knows that Todoroki will be the target between them.

His stomach twists, and his burning skin calls him a coward, but Tokoyami feigns the need to take a water break. And once he arrives to the corridor that bears both the locker rooms and water fountain, he sees that he's not the only student who has considered taking a more lackadaisical approach to this time, though he's keenly aware that Midoriya still intends to remain in the building while Tokoyami wishes to flee before he's seen.

Midoriya is crouched on his heels in front of Eri, with a potted white lily that has withered closer to death between them. Midoriya's hands cup his own face, and as attentive as he is towards this flower, Eri bares her teeth in a toothy grimace, both eyes closed and hands buried among the soil, as though she's trying to manifest the spirits of the dead.

A disappointingly futile effort, Tokoyami has found. The dead seem to appear only when they aren't wanted. "I'm disappointed not to be invited to this seance on fertile grounds."

Midoriya's concentration seems to break more violently than Eri's as he nearly loses his balance. "Oh, we're not doing that! Eri is trying to use her quirk on this plant, and I was trying to help."

Taking the excuse to loom over the child, Tokoyami assumes, but it is probably better if someone were there to call for Aizawa-sensei if his quirk is needed, given that All Might was also making a few rounds with helpful advice. He wasn't sure if it was at that point that Midoriya decided to excuse himself from attempting to meditate within the moment that he used Air Force Shoot Style, the movement that seems to birth those mysterious, abyssal tendrils that have mystified him thus far. "I wanna train too! And Izuku has a quirk like mine, 'cause it's difficult."

Eri's precocious words are tinged with enough sadness that Midoriya turns to argue against them with encouragement. And though Tokoyami remains silent, he feels the same reassurances echoing within his chest. "It's hard at first for everyone, Eri! But you're trying hard now, and that's the only way to get better at it!"

Midoriya's eyes seem drawn to Tokoyami, almost like he wants something. Almost like he wants to clarify that quirk control is difficult in a *myriad* of ways, and put forth that horrible assumption that it's not at all false with a sentient quirk like Dark Shadow. It's *far* worse.

"Maybe, if you don't mind helping Eri too?" Midoriya asks instead, and Tokoyami is positively *flounced* by that surprise. "Eri's quirk is an accumulation type like mine, but it's also linked to her emotions, like Dark Shadow. She said that she was able to use her quirk by imagining it as a 'flower,' and that it felt warm, and I thought that might be because it was linked to feeling happy-"

"A quirk reliant on emotional states is particularly unruly," Tokoyami says, he can't help to say with this unpleasant coil of pressure beneath his heart, but regrets immediately as he sees Eri's face fall with those words. Perhaps too harsh for her, when they were meant for his own ears. "It's difficult, but not impossible to control it. But manipulating your own emotions is both dangerous and a truly vain effort, in ways."

Tokoyami takes a seat on the floor, forming the triadic symbol of power around this plant that serves as a sacrifice. But despite himself, he can't offer much hope that it will leave this altar changed in any way by Eri's hands.

"I have the opposite issue with Dark Shadow. It was far more necessary for me to learn how to stop the flow, and negotiate with the dark beast before it took its dazed reckoning," Tokoyami says, feeling the coil thud like his dear friend was knocking upon the material world's door *politely*. Such manners weren't always so. "When I was a young child, my tantrums were acted out on Dark Shadow's behest. And by the time that I found I *wanted* to manifest him, the channel between us had begun to open, as though Dark Shadow had finally learned proper speech. Even though it took him three years longer than myself."

"Ah! *Don't say that!*" Dark Shadow begs as soon as Tokoyami opens the door for him, a pitifully small piece that curls next to his shoulder with exaggerated eyes. "*That's embarrassing!*"

"Aw," Eri coos, reaching out to pet Dark Shadow's head, and Tokoyami can *feel* how pridefully his quirk preens. What a horrible manipulation for affection. "It's okay to have trouble talking, Shaddy! Twenny has a lot of trouble talking, and sometimes I did too, but that's just 'cause I'm little, and it's cute to not talk properly."

"Right!" Midoriya agrees, and Tokoyami is grateful for such a powerful endorsement burning in his classmate's eyes, far beyond what little Eri probably knows. The warmth is easy enough to feel, when Tokoyami knows what monster tried to abuse the poor child into 'talking properly.'

"Dark Shadow is fueled by darkness, both physical and mental. Negative emotions such as sadness or anger can also make him unruly, as much as a dark room," Tokoyami says, but a voice apart from Dark Shadow's whispers '*worse*.' He knows that much, he knows the cage he had to build around his heart and the consequences of loosening it, the devastation that could be unleashed even now. "But I've never manifested those emotions intentionally. If reflecting on things that bring you happiness does not work, perhaps your quirk relies on more honest feelings than that."

Eri's small hand curls away from Dark Shadow as her expression pinches in worry towards him. "Toko, are you sad right now? 'Cause Shaddy is out?"

“No,” Tokoyami says, and intentionally keeps himself from questioning it, *because* Dark Shadow is out. “When Dark Shadow is as small as he is now, he does not require fuel to enter the material plane.”

Eri’s eyes catch his, almost as though she already understands. It’s easy enough for him to forget after honing his technique, in the many unseen battles he’s had with the beast he now calls friend, the only path he has to becoming a hero. But, he forces out the horrible truth all the same.

“When Dark Shadow does require those negative emotions, it’s easy to fall into the abyss for them,” Tokoyami admits, something that he’s said before with different, more palatable and less honest words before, but they catch Midoriya’s attention as though the difference is greater than it is. “It is easy to find darkness for those that seek it, but I imagine honest and pure feelings of happiness are more difficult to attain. If your quirk requires you to chase that fleeting light, I hope that we can all make that easier for you. But I understand that it is a difficult thing, indeed.”

Eri frowns in what he tells himself is consideration, when she looks at the subject and vessel meant to hone her powers. He imagines if Dark Shadow required something as difficult from him as being happy, he would be nigh quirkless now. And he’s aware that his circumstances are a dream compared to Eri’s. “I am happy, though. I think about how happy I am a lot, but it’s different when something makes me really happy. Like, when I think about how happy I am to spend time with my friends, it’s different from spending time with them. Is that why it’s not ‘honest’?”

Tokoyami nods, but immediately feels conflicted about such a complicated thing being made so simple as he tilts his head, almost in shame for such a decisive answer. “Perhaps, it’s more powerful to catch the fullness rather than the reflection. In that moment that you bask in the warmth of another’s company, you need only open your eyes to it. In solace, too many warm spirits must be conjured up to capture it.”

“But, what if that’s only part of it?” Midoriya asks, his chin cupped in thought, staring at the wilted vessel just as intently as Eri. “When you use your emotions as fuel for Dark Shadow to manifest, isn’t it also with intention behind it? With my accumulation quirk, I have a- uh, I think of something to tap into it and kind of imagine what I want to do with it. Kind of like, I become that thing and at the same time, I’m thinking of what I want to do with it?”

“It’s... similar,” Tokoyami admits, not sure how exactly to frame it. “Indeed, I tend to think of negative emotions linked to what I wish to do with Dark Shadow. The consequences of failing what I intend to do, morbidly enough, fuel my success.”

The link between himself and Dark Shadow is a razor now, now that he knows how powerful his quirk has and will become on his journey. During the Sports Festival when he turned his quirk to a battering ram and forced Yaoyorozu beyond the boundary, he can still taste the fear that kept Dark Shadow tethered despite the early summer sun high above them. *You will lose control, in front of all these watchful eyes. You will hurt Yaoyorozu, you can see the terror in her eyes because she knows it. You are a **monster**, only allowed to participate for your successes **thus far**. There is always a beast in wait inside you.*

Tokoyami pulls Dark Shadow within himself as the spectre whines, and Eri’s attention seems to be drawn to his defense. “Maybe, that makes sense. But I tried to think about how happy I would be if I used my quirk on Lillio, and made her pretty again, and it didn’t work. And how happy I would be if I could fix Mirio. And if Zawa said he was proud....”

“Aizawa-” Tokoyami and Midoriya seemed to have the same idea in mind, but Tokoyami nods his submission to Midoriya speaking those words, earning a nod in return.

“Aizawa-sensei *is* proud of you, and all of us are. We know that it’s hard at first to try to control your quirk,” Midoriya says, unflinching honesty and optimism scattered among his freckles, impossible to doubt in the full force of that. But that hand once again cups his chin, reflecting on Eri’s quirk, Tokoyami supposes. Correctly. “But maybe, when you think about all of those things, you start to get a little distracted? Because if you think about helping Togata-sempai, that probably makes you think about how he needs help, or thinking about how Aizawa-sensei would be proud of you makes you think that he’s not. But I might be wrong!”

Eri hums, and it sadly seems that Midoriya’s assumptions have struck true. “You and Toko are right. I really *really* try to be happy, ‘cause that’s how I want my quirk to work! But I get sad, when I think about that stuff. So it doesn’t work....”

“And that’s fine,” Tokoyami reassures. “The mind is a morbid mausoleum of twisting halls and dark chambers, at the best of times. It is difficult to shut a door that opens upon its own volition, in such a haunted place. But there may be ways to retain your focus.”

“Singing!” Eri declares, inspiration like a lightning strike breathes life suddenly into a small child who had been too small and sullen with dark thoughts. “If I sing about how I’ll be happy, then I’ll be happy because I get to sing! And if we sing together....”

“Yeah!” Midoriya cheers, encouraging Eri’s enthusiasm as it wanes, like dawn breaking as the lantern’s wick cools. “We can sing with you, right Tokoyami?”

Tokoyami would rather not participate in such an activity, as sure to flay him bare as any instrument of torture. He’s sure there are others better suited to the activity. But when he meets Eri’s pleading red eyes, “Every sacred ritual requires vocalizations, I suppose.”

Tokoyami has heard whispers of ‘The Bestest Beanie song,’ a humming melody that may gain words when necessary to spur the growth of a bean sprout that Eri was tasked to nurture. And while he takes a few more chants than necessary to learn the words, he falls into an unintentionally haunting chorus with Midoriya and Eri as they delve to give life back to this wilted plant.

“If I’m happy and I know it, I will sing. If I’m happy and I know it, I will sing. If I’m happy and I know it, and I really want to show it, then I’ll fix Lillio’s petals and I’ll sing,” the chant continues on, and Tokoyami finds reprieve as repetition seems to draw his consciousness into a lesser void, only allowing his voice to escape as his mind numbs to the torment.

He’s sure little Mizuno has taught Eri the original song, and perhaps he should be overjoyed it is not a rendition of ‘Baby Shark.’

“Tokoyami.” A dark voice issues forth, powerful enough to nearly slay him in spirit.

“Zawa, Toko and Izuku are helping me with my quirk!” Eri explains, and Dark Shadow whispers that cowering himself in darkness and fleeing may be the act of a coward, but it may be the cowardly blade that ends his torment.

“We endeavor to summon life anew into this plant,” Tokoyami further explains, as he’s well aware that rituals offer solace in dark times, and even if he is not believed, any association he can make to the dark arts may save his face, even before one he knows cares not about it.

Aizawa-sensei indeed doesn’t wear any scorn or judgement on his face, and the embarrassment is a burning coal only within Tokoyami’s flesh. “If you’re too busy doing that, then-”

“I,” Tokoyami begins, standing though he does not know where to go. The distraction of Eri’s

endeavors drew his mind easily enough from the torment of being under his teacher's gaze, and now faced with it, he wishes to *run*. He knows that is the path of a coward, not a hero, and though the exit is open to him, he shall close the door and face what may come. "Don't wish to waste any training opportunities."

He makes the mistake of looking down, to see those harsh words stinging upon Eri's disappointed face.

"But I will return to help you afterwards," Tokoyami amends, and finds that's a far easier crucifix to bear despite the burning upon his flesh, than Eri's sadness from his own inattentive hands.

"Okay! I'll train hard too! Good luck Toko!" The blessings of such a benign faerie may weaken Dark Shadow, but he bears them all the same, as he follows his teacher to the training ground proper to endure his thoughtful attention.

And it begins with a revelation he did not expect his teacher to be aware of. "Hawks submitted a request for your internship to be in Shizuoka, with one of his sidekicks. Are you sure you're ready for that?"

Tokoyami had no doubts, until he tries to find them in his teacher's monotone words. For all his incessant musings on Hawks' not supervising him properly, he had yet to *truly* understand what it meant.

"Pidgin is an experienced sidekick, but without a fully fledged hero on your team, you will probably take the role of the sidekick on patrol, instead of intern," Aizawa says, and yet no judgement falls to how well he thinks Tokoyami will do in that situation. "That's a greater responsibility than you should have on an internship, especially as a first year."

That's the judgement, however small it is. No matter what Hawks sees, what he's done, his rank in comparison to his classmates, that Sports Festival that he didn't win is still his crowning achievement of his *first* year. He is still young, unfledged. Not *truly* tested, it seems.

Tokoyami has weaponized his doubts, but in the face of his teacher, it's too easy to hide them.

"Hawks believes I am ready, and I will rise to the occasion," Tokoyami explains, but loosens his stance all the same. He knows this isn't a mere 'consultation.' How inefficient it would be if so. "If I am overwhelmed, I'm not so foolhardy as to overlook that for sake of pride. I don't believe you have cause to worry, Sensei."

Aizawa nods, but in a flash his stance becomes looser, in a mere *blink* the image of a sudden villain attack is presented before Tokoyami's eyes as demonstration. Tokoyami has learned Aizawa-sensei's methods well enough to keep the parry Dark Shadow provides to the capture scarf light, disrupting that cord's path and drawing back to protect him from the fist coming for him.

But in a single red instant, Dark Shadow falls into a void, and Tokoyami crosses his forearms for his own defense, the impact shuddering through him. Aizawa's glowing eyes haven't wavered, and neither shall he.

Tokoyami knows his own weaknesses, that Dark Shadow is useful enough to *overshadow* himself. His quirk is offense and defense and he is unprotected without. Perhaps, most of his peers would struggle right now with their teacher's quirk upon them and this quick flurry of unblinking blows.

But, his peers aren't *him*. They didn't earn third place, they weren't invited to intern with *Hawks*, they didn't earn that man's attention. He knows that his place has been elevated, by his own merit,

but he fights to climb *higher*.

Tokoyami doesn't see as much as feels when Aizawa-sensei blinks, and Dark Shadow surges forth from him. There is a moment that the beast is uncaged, unhinged, *too close* to Aizawa-sensei even as he dodges back, and Tokoyami fights to take hold of him.

That's the moment that he recognizes it from the corner of his eye, takes hold of the beast and pulls him *back* into a cloak, allows himself to be ensnared by the capture scarf but Dark Shadow spans his wings and pulls the pressure outwards.

The scarf falls, and his teacher rises, as though the test that Tokoyami just passed had not happened at all, only evident by a few strands of hair falling from his ponytail. "I've never approved an internship overseen by a sidekick before. And I honestly wouldn't, if you were any other student."

Such praise lances through Tokoyami. If not spoken so plainly, he would think it undeserved. Even when he attempts to temper his desires in his age, his accomplishments being only part of the whole of his education, hearing it from *Aizawa-sensei* makes it impossible to disprove it. The man would not lie to him. "If both you and Hawks believe I am ready for it, I cannot argue against it."

"*Are you ready?*" Aizawa-sensei asks, as he asked before. It seems pointless to ask now.

But it's not. And Tokoyami knows this. "I am."

It is pitiable, to be a bird tethered to the ground. To rely on the words of others to believe them. Tokoyami keeps his passions to himself, he finds the bold declarations of others terrifyingly loud. He wishes to speak quietly, so that his actions are believed. So he does not misspeak his own intention and curse it to failure, a fool of the future's jests.

But he wants to fly, untethered. That is a lonely place, he knows, and he cannot imagine it yet. But he can see it in his mentor's eyes, to act and speak boldly, to be believed because Hawks believes in *himself* before all others. Confidence.

Tokoyami is the dark imitation of that virtue, a mere shadow of it. And he wishes to change that in time, in his mentor's eyes.

"Then, I'm satisfied," Aizawa-sensei says, rubbing the back of his neck as he closes his eyes, seems even more weary for it. "Try to enjoy being at home while the others are scattered in other prefectures, or stuck at UA. Pidgin only recently moved to Shizuoka, so you might be playing the part of a guide. You should have fun with that."

Tokoyami tries not to take that information for what it's not. While he's aware that Hawks can be playful, bordering on irresponsible, moving one of his sidekicks to patrol Tokoyami's hometown *in particular* during the winter holidays is a bit.

Above his antics.

Possibly. "It will be a most amusing twist of fate, indeed."

Tokoyami imagined that the next student that Aizawa-sensei will consult with would be Yaoyorozu, but he can see her curiously examining Eri's project with a water bottle pressed to her mouth, as though she had already been run through that rack of torment. Then, Aizawa-sensei skipped his place in line, so that Tokoyami would be the last student.

So that Aizawa-sensei would not interrupt his *chanting* with Eri. Which was not singing. It was merely a ritual.

“Zawa! I gotta fix your hair!” Eri exclaims, though she seemed to be examining Yaoyorozu’s unkempt hairstyle for the same intention.

Intention, and emotion. Curious things that they are.

Tokoyami says nothing, as he’s sure he’s not the only one to see those sparks trailing from Eri’s horn as she stands to run to her caretaker, his teacher.

A man, who perhaps inspires happiness within them all, even if his words aren’t always ‘I’m proud.’ The intention remains the same, as it is felt that way.

Perhaps, Tokoyami doesn’t need to see Hawks as urgently as he thought.

*

Hitoshi knows it’s not unfair, but he *feels* like it is.

They were able to stack all the cupcakes and the cheesecake onto three huge trays, covering them with foil to make sure that nothing would fall off and get ruined when they carried them back to the dorm. It took a long time to clean all the dishes and make sure everything was put back where it should be, like they hadn’t used the kitchen from the start.

Since there’s three trays, it makes sense that one of them would just carry one. It *makes sense* that Yamada would carry two, because he’s a hero, Hitoshi knows he’s *ridiculously* strong, and stronger than he is. He knows for a fact that his arms are longer, because Hitoshi has to roll up the same sleeves of Yamada’s leather jacket that fall perfectly before Yamada’s hands on his wrists. He knows that Yamada really did more to make these cakes than he did.

But Hitoshi can’t get rid of this *stupid* irritation, because he wants to carry two trays, *because* Yamada did so much to make them. And he can’t. And he can’t convince himself to just forget about it.

But when the staff dorm comes into view, he can’t stop thinking about what Eri will think, what she’ll say. Maybe she would even like one of the cupcakes that Hitoshi decorated, more likely given that Yamada helped him do it, Yamada practically did everything. Even if Hitoshi didn’t entirely make them.

He just hopes that Eri likes them.

But when Yamada so *easily* shuffles two trays onto one arm to open the door, he already knows that they’re still at the training exercise because Eri doesn’t greet them like she usually does. Yamada seemed to be disappointed in that too, wearing it more easily in a sigh. “Well, I guess we can start making dinner if you feel up to it! Get something a little heartier on Eri’s stomach before she gorges herself with sugar, if you want to and all. Probably all baked out already!”

Hitoshi isn’t, even if maybe he should be. The promise of food, and cooking something that isn’t caked in *sugar* is too promising, especially with Yamada. Yamada picks something quick to make, just a stir fry because Yamada must be tired of all the cooking. But Hitoshi isn’t.

He knows that he should shower, and change his clothes, but the hunger gnawing at him in a way that makes him forget the pear he ate earlier entirely makes him wait until they’ve finished cooking at least. Even if he should wait until they’re all together again, so he doesn’t break that rule about one meal each day being a communal one, Yamada tells him that they shouldn’t let it go to waste, and he can’t argue with him.

Hitoshi has eaten most of his bowl, barely noticed the silence stretching between himself and Yamada, when the front door opens, and Hitoshi can't help but smile when he hears Eri calling out to them. "Yama! Twenny! Auntie Nemmie got me a new plant!"

The plant is *wilted*, in a bag that Eri probably insisted on carrying, and though Hitoshi *liked* Witching Hour, he might have to revise that if *this* is Eri's birthday present.

"And *we* got you a little present too! More cakes than you can possibly eat in one sitting, made with loving hands and practically stuffed with love, and iced and decorated with it," Yamada says, his arms sweeping out to display the cupcake trays.

It probably shouldn't have taken until this moment to realize it, but looking at Eri now, even knowing how excited she is, Hitoshi realizes that they have enough cake to *build* another Eri with it. There's no way she can eat all of this by herself. "Did Toshi get love in his hair too?!"

Yamada laughs, but Hitoshi feels the mess clinging to him all the more fully for it. *Yamada* only got a little flour on his shirt, but Hitoshi's hair and all of his clothes are covered in it, he has batter on his sweater too, and his arms are coated with an almost mud-like mix of flour and water from when he was washing the dishes. "I need to take a shower, but..."

He doesn't have to say it, when Yamada looks at him and smiles like that. "I think we need to taste-test some of our creations first! Let's see here, let's see what we've got."

Hitoshi follows Yamada to the kitchen counter, where their trays had been resting until now. Hitoshi pulls the foil off of his tray, making sure that the cupcakes are still perfectly decorated and not damaged by the trip, and he sees Eri's eyes go wide with awe as she sees what they've done. "I get *cake* for my birthday present?!"

"It's a lot of cake, but it's not your birthday present, little bean!" Yamada explains, sweeping his hands over the selection. "We've got a cupcake in practically every flavor, to make sure that your birthday cake is the *perfect* one! And it's probably a good thing that we've got three days until the big day to go through these."

"You *gotta* help me, though! It's a *lot*," Eri insists, but that's not how this works. She doesn't have to eat the entire cupcake, but she has to decide which one she likes best on her own. "Which one did Toshi make?"

She *probably* wants to avoid that one. "We made all of them together, with teamwork! So, let's get some forks and knives and get to picking our favorites!"

"Cake before dinner?" Aizawa asks as he raises an eyebrow, like he has any room to argue. He didn't make the cakes *or* the dinner, and Yamada should remind him of that fact.

"Hey, we've got some dinner on the stove, and a little dessert before dinner never hurt anyone," Yamada argues, but Hitoshi can feel his excitement too. It's just too much, seeing Eri's awe, practically seeing her pick apart which cupcake she wants to eat first, and deny her of that. Not when they want to know what she thinks too.

Yamada gives Hitoshi a fork too, even if he doesn't need one. He's still a little hungry, which is why he doesn't argue, but this is supposed to be for *Eri*. She's the reason that they went through all this effort, to find the cupcake that she likes.

He holds his breath when Eri picks the first one, cinnamon cake with vanilla buttercream and the glazed apples he knows she'll love. And when she hums so loudly, smiling so brightly with a bit of

icing on her nose, the smile that he wears himself makes it all worth it. Even with just one bite.

Yamada cuts up each cupcake into quarters to sample, and Hitoshi tries to keep track of the ones that Eri says are good, but not quite as passionately as the ones she means. She doesn't like the sweet lemon topping, maybe because it's too sweet, but it's Hitoshi's favorite compared to the others. She doesn't like the chocolate mousse as an icing either, even though that was the hardest one to make. She likes the plain buttercream, though.

Yamada hums like it was *predictable* that Eri likes the red velvet cupcakes, just because it's Aizawa's favorite too. But Eri might just be saying that, just because it's Aizawa. Just because he has that kind of influence on her. "Wanna try a little of this cheesecake too? Kind of cleanse the palate and all."

If Eri tries it, they all have to try it, and that seems to be the rule right now. Hitoshi can't stifle his own excitement, knowing that Yamada made the cheesecake by himself, and Hitoshi just decorated half of it. He takes a bite of the plain slice after Eri does, and he has to keep the fork in his mouth to stop himself from getting more. Or trying the piece that has the lemon topping. "It's yummy! But I like the cupcakes better, kinda."

Hitoshi swallows a sound that he knows would just embarrass him, trying to plead with Eri with his eyes to convince her to try another bite, even if it's not the lemon one. She can't just give up on this cheesecake, it's *delicious*, and he won't be able to take another bite if she doesn't. "A solid vote for a cakey-cake for a little bean! I guess you can taste how Hitoshi had the most to do with those. How about you, little listener? Think I did alright with my mother's recipe?"

Now, Hitoshi *has* to try each slice, to make sure that Yamada made it well. And he does, even if he tries to hide how eager he is to do it. He saves what he thinks will be the best for last, but he's unfortunately wrong. The lemon topping is still too sweet, but the plain cheesecake is by far the best.

And when Yamada looks at him, with the weight of that expectation on his shoulders as heavy as the jacket he hasn't taken off, Hitoshi has to meet it. *'Very good. Plain is the best. Toppings too sweet. Perfect on its own.'*

"*'Perfect on its own,'* that sounds like a cheesecake done right!" Yamada says, grinning too much as though Hitoshi's opinion really matters here. He's not exactly an expert when it comes to taste, he's not a 'foodie,' and he knows it. "I'll have to keep that in mind when July comes around, I guess."

July is half a year away, and Hitoshi has no idea why he needs to make a good cheesecake then. Unless Yamada intends to make a cheesecake for his own birthday, which honestly sounds sad. Not even Aizawa could be so incompetent to make him bake his own birthday cake while he does nothing. He could at least buy one.

Unless, Yamada isn't talking about his own birthday. He's talking about a cake that he wants to make for someone else. Someone else has a birthday in July. *Mirio*.

It seems weird that Yamada would ask if Hitoshi likes this cake, when he wants to make it for Mirio's birthday, but it's enough of a reason that Hitoshi can put down his fork, satisfied that he helped. He tried the cheesecake, and Eri likes all of the cupcakes she's tried so far. When Yamada starts nudging more of the plain buttercream cupcakes her way, all the while talking about how she should probably only have a few more before she gets too full to walk around.

Hitoshi should probably take a shower, if Eri doesn't pick her favorite this time, if she has more

time to do that. She likes the cupcakes that he and Yamada made, and Hitoshi should be satisfied with that. With how much effort he knows Yamada is putting into her birthday to make her happy, how everyone else will do the same.

How he doesn't really need to be here, at the end of it. The end that's coming soon.

"Toshi, did you have fun training with Yama?" Eri asks, her voice cutting through his thoughts too loudly, almost making him flinch. Especially when he realizes he was staring at Aizawa, probably making him unnerved by it.

"Yeah, it was... just learning to bake cakes, though. It was a surprise," Hitoshi mutters. It was a stupid *lie*, something he came up with on the spot to explain why Yamada would want to take him away from the dorm for the 'secret mission' he hadn't told Hitoshi about yet. The idea of training with Yamada is practically a nightmare, the more that he thinks about it. Having to risk hurting Yamada if they sparred, the idea of training with his *quirk* on Yamada is nearly enough to make him nauseous.

But Eri frowns, as though the deception hurts her feelings more than Hitoshi thought they would. "But that's not fair! I got to train with Zawa, and all the hero students did too! And you like training with the floaty scarf!"

If there *is* something close to being as horrible as training with Yamada, it's training with Aizawa with the capture scarf. He knows that Aizawa already knows how much he struggles with it, how he still can't quite master making it stop squirming at times, and how the scarf reacts with a mind of its own when he tries to manipulate even the smallest section of it. He can already imagine Aizawa's focused attention on him, seeing all his failed attempts, getting frustrated with his inadequacy, getting angry at him for wasting his time.

"If that's something Hitoshi wants to do, I'm fine with that," Aizawa says, as noncommittal as it is *nonsense*. He's probably had enough of Hitoshi, after staying up last night working on the investigation. He must be even more tired after training his students, he probably wants Hitoshi to turn him down.

'I do,' Hitoshi signs, waiting for a flinch that he knows he should earn, how Aizawa's eyes should narrow at him because he's *tired* and he doesn't want to be around Hitoshi at all. But he made that offer, and he should learn not to.

"Whenever you're ready," Aizawa says, before he takes another piece of a red velvet cupcake like he *immediately* regrets those words, but he hasn't yet. Hitoshi nods, and stands up to leave to make *sure* that he will.

He wanted to take a quicker shower, to make sure that Aizawa wouldn't have time to eat the stir fry that Hitoshi and Yamada made, and he didn't, because as soon as the water hit the flour in his hair, it clumped into a mess that takes longer to wash out. He should probably rinse his clothes before putting them in his laundry basket, even though the washing machine means that he doesn't have to wash them fully like he would have before he was rescued, but that would take even more time.

In his urgency to get ready, he forgot to grab a change of clothes from his room. He considers wrapping a towel around himself, but the risk of someone looking down the hall and seeing him like that is too much, so he changes into his dirty clothes anyway, just to strip them off as soon as he's in his room and the door is closed.

And his room hardly looks like his own, now that he's forced to look at it fully.

Without the laptop that he broke, without the decorations that the hero students gave him, it's almost as though this is the same room that he thought was so luxurious and *full* when he first arrived to UA. But it's not. Even when he looks at the plushies on his bed, Mocha and the mochi pillow that Mirio gave him, and the Grengar, these things hardly seem *enough*.

But it is. It has to be. He threw away his stash, and he cleaned up his room, because it was crowded. Because he doesn't need those distractions.

Because he knows his room will become more barren eventually, after he finds The Miasma's compound. He'll have to leave, Aizawa said it himself. In a few months.

Yamada can bake whatever cake he wants in July, Hitoshi won't be there to eat it.

Now that Hitoshi has the opportunity, he can dress like he's going to train, unlike all the other times that he didn't have warning before he was attacked or the opportunity presented itself. He picks one of the few pairs of black pants that still fit him, and a loose black shirt. He doesn't know what to do with Yamada's other jacket, since there's already one hanging up in his closet. Even if he knows that Yamada has *several* of these, he doesn't *need* two when he shouldn't wear either of them again.

He hangs it up all the same, but his hand hesitates when he looks for another warm jacket to wear. The Delete Face shirt is still hanging in the back of his closet.

He's seen people wearing T-shirts over long shirts, so he knows it's not weird. It feels weird, but he stretches his arms and makes sure that it's not *truly* restrictive, before he grabs the thickest black jacket in his closet.

He runs a hand through his hair, and knows it usually dries faster than it is. It might be getting too long, but while he waits he thinks about the knife sitting on top of his desk. He didn't need it with Yamada, because Yamada would protect him. He doesn't know how far Aizawa wants this training to go, if he wants to see his skills with a knife. If Aizawa thinks that just because he has that tanto knife strapped to the back of his belt, that he could teach Hitoshi *anything*.

He decides against it, just in case. If Aizawa wants to insult him like that, he'll have a reasonable excuse. And if they're attacked, as impossible as that sounds if Hagakure was the only reason he was, then Aizawa can prove his word and protect him.

But when Hitoshi opens the door, his hair still a little wet at the ends and drooping because of it, he can hear that they're still gathered in the kitchen. They probably haven't noticed that he's ready to leave his room, and Aizawa has probably had enough time to eat by now, since he took so long.

The insult on his shirt doesn't feel heavy enough, and a pull draws him to the laundry room, just to see if he'll get caught on the way.

He's not, he's still trained well enough, so Aizawa really has *nothing* to teach him. If Aizawa can't tell that Hitoshi left his room, then he should realize how unaware he is. Hitoshi should prove it to him, to really rub it in his face that Aizawa has no idea what he can do when he's left alone, *unescorted*.

The duffel bag is still on the top shelf, even if the bleach is gone, but Hitoshi stands on the tips of his toes rather than pulling the bag down to unzip it just enough, fumbling blindly until he finds that cold plastic that he wants. Aizawa's goggles.

He folds them up, putting them in the opposite pocket of his jeans from the one that holds his

phone, and tucks his hands in the pockets of his coat to pull the end of it over that pocket to hide them better. If Aizawa tries to get too high and mighty, Hitoshi can prove to him that he's already won, *again*. Yamada probably told him how he stole his goggles the first time, and he just left them in the same place, like an *idiot* trying to get robbed.

But right before Hitoshi reaches the end of the hall, he remembers a *rule* that will sting Aizawa before he says a word to him. Eri and Aizawa are both eating the stir fry, even though Eri has a noticeably smaller portion. Yamada should probably be careful not to feed her too much, or she'll get sick. "Eri, is it okay if I wear this?"

It's a rule that Eri picks his clothes whenever he leaves her, mostly enforced when he leaves with Aizawa or Yamada. Eri has to approve of his choice before he leaves, she has to approve of the shirt he's wearing. The insulting Delete Face shirt that Aizawa is already pulling a face at.

But Eri clearly loves the idea. "Yeah! You're already dressed like Zawa, and it looks cute!"

He's *not* dressed like Aizawa. Even if he's wearing black from head to toe, *like* Aizawa does, he's done that for years, just like any Number would. Black helps him blend in with the shadows, it makes him more intimidating when he's a bodyguard. *Aizawa* just *thinks* he's stealthy, but he's not, and Hitoshi is far better at it than him.

Yamada makes a weird coughing noise, drawing Eri's concern, but he has a weird smile after he clears his throat. "Yep, rocking the 'all black' number, that's definitely a look! You sure you don't want to pair it up with my jacket?"

Hitoshi shakes his head, he wants to give *both* of those jackets back because this is clearly a joke that Yamada wants to take too far. He's *not* wearing that jacket again. Ever. Especially outside, where people could see him and think something as untrue as it would be *embarrassing*, that he's a *fan* of Present Mic.

But Aizawa seems to know that Hitoshi is ready, that his time to eat is up, as he stands up to take his dishes to the sink, running a hand over Yamada's shoulder as he passes him but pausing to rest his hand on Eri's head. "We'll be back, but that means that training with Lillio is over."

"That's okay, 'cause Yama can help me fix her with his green thumb!" Eri says, and 'Lillio' must be the name she picked for that wilted plant, a better name than that reject really deserves. "Have fun! I love you!"

"I love-" Hitoshi stops, because *Aizawa* was saying it too. That's not allowed, he *never* does that. After all the times that Eri has told him that, only for Aizawa to try to hide his face or stare at a wall when he just told her 'goodbye,' he *decides* to say it now. When *Hitoshi* is telling her.

"I love you," Aizawa says, just to be completely insulting. Eri still smiles like she doesn't see it, kicking her feet under the table because she can't fathom how *horrible* Aizawa is, when it's too obvious right now. "Have fun."

Yamada just smiles, like he doesn't see it either. Clearly, he can't, because he *married* Aizawa and all. "Oh, we will! I think we might be up for a little movie marathon after the gardening special, or maybe-"

"We can read my new books that Auntie Nemmie got me!" Eri says, and she seems so excited to do that. She's getting everything she wants, just as simply as asking for it. Just like it should be.

"Absolutely!" Yamada agrees, like Hitoshi knew he would. Aizawa pats his shoulder for some

reason, before he turns around, and Hitoshi can see how much he hates the Delete Face shirt even clearer when his back is turned to Yamada and Eri.

When it's just them, and they can be more honest with their feelings. Which is exactly what Hitoshi wants, as they leave the dorm, and he feels like the mask is almost slipping off his face once he's out of Yamada's sight.

*

Just as Aizawa suspected, the silent irritation hardly lasts long enough for Aizawa to pull his hair back after stretching to warm up, still unsure what Hitoshi would *like* to do with this time, when there are several things that Aizawa would like to correct. "I'm not like your *eggs*, there's nothing you can really show me that I don't already know."

Starting out strong, it seems, and Aizawa turns around to face Hitoshi, the perfect image of teenage arrogance that Aizawa personally *delights* in smothering in other circumstances. With his students, which Hitoshi *is not*, and those students will apparently forever be known as 'eggs.' "You need practice with your quirk control, your hand-to-hand combat skills could be better, and you seem ready for introducing movements to the capture scarf. Or, 'floaty scarf' if you prefer."

"*I don't*," Hitoshi answers in a growl, insult reflected in his half-lidded eyes and flash of teeth when he scowls. "My hand-to-hand combat skills are *fine*, that's literally the first thing I started training for. I was training with Bug before I learned how to *read*."

It takes a moment for Aizawa to steady himself after hearing that. It's become too easy underneath these barbs, all the ways that Hitoshi can manifest aspects of any other teenager his age, to forget that he *isn't* any other teenager. And it's become too easy for Hitoshi to say that name, it seems, when Aizawa is never unaffected to hear it, and remember what that woman *did*. "You can afford to be more offensive now. You have a solid foundation, because in most fights, you would be at a physical disadvantage, but the gap is closing."

Hitoshi doesn't have to fight like the frightened child he was, relying on redirecting his opponents' brute strength with what little pressure he could manage, in order to *survive*. The thought of Eri being forced to fight like that *sickens* Aizawa to his core, and he doesn't want to imagine Hitoshi at that time either. Hitoshi narrows his eyes a bit more, as though he noticed where Aizawa's thoughts try to travel, to a dark place where he would feel nothing but pity for the child in front of him, but his words are an accusation, deep and measured. "You watched me fight Midoriya."

"Not all of it," Aizawa admits, because he had other matches, more *dangerous* matches, to keep an eye on at the time. "But enough to see that you didn't press all of your advantages. Midoriya is stronger, and faster, but he's observant enough to recognize your pattern--"

"I don't," Hitoshi starts and stops, an *attempt* to argue that he *doesn't have a pattern* falling short as he glances at the ground. "*Fine*, I don't like making the first move. It's easier to react, and that's why I was put on bodyguard duty. I've tried to get over it, and it's not going to happen."

Hitoshi shrugs, staring at Aizawa as though he's made his point and turned down the offer for help. But he hasn't entirely, in too many words he's described the issue and ended it with a lack of confidence for change, but none of that is new for Aizawa. "Reaction is a good strategy. I've never said that the way you fight is wrong, only that you can afford to add new techniques now. You know my strengths, and if I were your opponent, how would you attack?"

Aizawa watches as Hitoshi's eyes seem to change, his scowl dropping off his face and retreating into that unnerving blankness he hasn't seen for a while. Aizawa lets himself be examined,

Hitoshi's analytical gaze lingers on his eyes, on the capture scarf, two of the most powerful weapons Aizawa has. "Low and to the side, avoid the capture scarf and try to break your line of sight with your own body."

Aizawa smiles as he pulls a hand to his scarf. "If you're worried about my quirk, then you're planning to use your own."

As soon as Aizawa pulls the capture scarf to flare loosely around his shoulders, waiting for Hitoshi's move, it falls limply around him as does his hand. As Hitoshi makes *that* move, with a shit eating grin on his face. "It doesn't usually work the second time, because most people are smart enough to avoid it. But you're *really* not good at that."

Aizawa watches Hitoshi walk towards him, unable to respond, and trying not to linger on the unpleasant buzzing those words have stirred up inside his skull. Hitoshi raises a fist that Aizawa can't guard himself against, can't react to at all, but he sees the hesitation that comes. Hitoshi's fingers uncurl, and Aizawa sees him meet his own eyes.

Before the twerp *flicks* his nose to break him out of the brainwash. Aizawa raises an eyebrow as Hitoshi steps back, the bravado disappearing as he seems both ashamed and eager to get back to *actual* training now that he's had his fun.

But this isn't *actual* training, and a *bit* of fun can be allowed. "Did you have trouble breaking the control on your own, or did you just want an excuse?"

Hitoshi huffs, and that irritation is a far better look for him than that guilt and blankness. "This isn't quirk training. I *could* have broken the control, but you wanted me to make the first move."

Aizawa fights not to roll his eyes, because flicking his nose wasn't what he had in mind. But it's a necessary reminder that this *isn't* the training that Aizawa is used to, or that Hitoshi is either. And he wants Hitoshi to keep that in mind. "You don't have to do anything that you're uncomfortable with. I can help you with anything you're struggling with, whatever you want to use this time to explore."

The disgusted curl of Hitoshi's lip seems to indicate that he's *still* not enthused with the idea, especially frustrating because Hitoshi *wanted* to do this, it seemed.

Unless, it's not what it seems on the surface. "Unless you didn't want to be left out, when Eri made it sound like she and my students were getting more attention."

Hitoshi *glares*, but his lips pull tight and his shoulders tense, and Aizawa can guess that he's probably right. Even if Hitoshi instinctively wants to deny that. "I don't *need* your attention. I don't need you to tell me all the things I'm doing wrong or how *you* think I could do them better, I just...."

Aizawa waits, for the explanation that he wants, that Hitoshi seems to want to fight against giving when he looks around, purposefully avoiding looking at Aizawa. Aizawa has to wait while he sorts out his own issues, and hope that *maybe* admitting them will make this time pass more smoothly.

"I can't talk to Yamada," Hitoshi admits, something that Aizawa was hopeful had been sorted out, but he knew not to expect something that complicated to be resolved that easily. "He knows that I can talk, and he didn't say anything about it. And I know he's going to be fine, but I don't...."

"Why do you find it easier to talk to me?" Aizawa asks as he crosses his arms, even though he has his own assumptions. Hitoshi likely finds it easier not to care about what Aizawa thinks of him,

given that their relationship has progressed from terror on Hitoshi's part to irritation bordering on outright hatred, though Aizawa wonders if he's the only one who can find it companionable at times.

He's not sure if he wants to find the truthful answer, but he asked for it all the same, and Hitoshi seems less nervous to give it than sorting out his reasons behind not talking to Yamada. "You know how I am. You don't see me the same way Yamada does. He just... thinks I'm this *great* person, like I'm not stupid, like I'm *not* messed up. But you don't care about me, so I don't have to care about what you think."

Hitoshi shrugs, as though not a single word he's said hasn't driven a nail into Aizawa's heart. He honestly *wants* this to be a taunt somehow, to not be *honest*. What Hitoshi *honestly* thinks about him. "You think... that I don't care about you?"

Another shrug, Hitoshi looks away and to the side as though his words shouldn't be doubted, that they're truth. He *does* believe that. "I'm only here for the investigation, that's the only reason you're putting up with me."

"I *care* about you," Aizawa says, still in disbelief that it needs to be said. That Hitoshi *honestly* doesn't believe it. "You don't have to help with the investigation to earn that, you deserve to be cared for regardless of that. Neither I nor Hizashi have ever thought that you're stupid or messed up-"

"That's *bullshit* because I *am*," Hitoshi snaps, his eyes narrowing as he sweeps his hand out, as though there's any real logic to what he believes. "That's the only reason I'm here, as soon as you find The Miasma, I'm *gone*, you can *say* I'm not going to some institution-"

"Because you're *not*," Aizawa argues, dropping his arms as he looks at the ground, trying to collect himself. Snapping back at Hitoshi won't help the situation. "Hitoshi, I care a great deal about you. I'm not going to let you be mistreated, ever again, and I've never seen you differently than you are... because you *are* a great person, a kind and smart person, and every aspect of yourself that you seem to doubt is in *spite* of everything you never should have gone through. You're not-"

Brainwashing him as a means to interrupt him is getting *old*, but Aizawa has no choice but to silently stew about it, as Hitoshi huffs and turns around, turning his back to him like he doesn't want to see him, as much as he doesn't want him to continue talking. Hitoshi's hand runs through his own hair, before he growls. "You're *seriously* so full of *shit*. Full of absolute *shit*, you really think that I... Like I'd *believe* that."

Aizawa knows it's useless to try, but he fights to move just his hand. Just his finger, to break out of Hitoshi's hold, to do *anything* to convince Hitoshi to see what Aizawa sees.

He sees a kid who has been through hell, but has never let it *become* him, never let it change who he is as a person in any way that matters. A child raised by monsters that still clings to his morals, that still has boundless kindness inside himself. A kid who was taught to fight before he learned how to *read* and has more enthusiasm for his studies than his own students do.

None of that is the reason that Aizawa cares about him. Aizawa doesn't *need* a reason to care what happens to Hitoshi, to care for his wellbeing, he just *does*. It's only rational to care about him.

Hitoshi turns around, tucking his hands in his pockets as he looks at Aizawa, a tight frown and a glare with no heat behind it falters into something unguarded and unsure, before he speaks. "Raise your right hand if... you like coffee."

The static inside his skull roars to the point that Aizawa feels sick, and though he can't feel much of his body, he can feel the tips of his fingers while they twitch. This is worse than when Hitoshi speaks without a command, it feels nauseating under a strain he can't fully feel, while his mind seems to struggle to understand a complex command.

He isn't the only one made uncomfortable, as he watches Hitoshi's softly glowing eyes wince like he's trying to sneeze, before he pulls a hand under his nose, and there's *blood* under his nostril, smeared on the edge of his hand. He's pushing too far against his limit.

But Aizawa feels the static cut out, even if the hold on his body doesn't yield. Hitoshi looks up, and to his *right*. Aizawa can't feel his hand, but it must have risen.

Hitoshi *has* a quirk perfectly suited for interrogating him, if he *needs* to test whether Aizawa likes coffee or not. And if Hitoshi wanted to hone his skill with that quirk, Aizawa *might* have agreed to it, admittedly wary about what Confession would force him to say. "Hm. That wasn't fun."

Hitoshi's casual admittance of some apparent discomfort is all the reason he really *needs* to drop the control, but instead he steps towards Aizawa, ignoring the nosebleed still steadily trailing down his lip. When Hitoshi stops, he looks away to wipe the blood off with his sleeve, but when he looks at Aizawa again, his eyes seem wider. Caught between innocence and accusation.

"Put your hand down if you care about me," Hitoshi commands, his eyes glowing again with Confession's influence, and Aizawa can practically *hear* the migraine building from the back of his head forward, alongside the static he can hear as deafening white noise. He can see Hitoshi wince and curl forward, clearly in pain as he cups his nose, he could just *stop* this and Aizawa fights to use his quirk to stop it himself, before Hitoshi hurts himself.

But the static finally quiets. Aizawa can't feel whether he put his hand down, but he knows he did. He waits for Hitoshi to look up to see it.

When Hitoshi does, his eyes watering from the pain, his upper lip *covered* in blood and speckling his chin, he knows from how low he's looking that he sees Aizawa's hand is *down*. He *cares* about this reckless kid who has a *perfectly good Confession quirk to use if he doesn't believe him*. "Raise your hand, and put it over my head."

Aizawa can see his hand hovering over Hitoshi's mess of purple hair, the command flowing so easily it feels natural in comparison to those conditional commands. Hitoshi still glances up at it, his shoulders rising before he tucks his chin towards himself, almost as though he's trying to hide inside a scarf he's not wearing.

"M-move your hand up and down," Hitoshi says, and Aizawa wonders *why* he wants that, his numb hand flapping the ends of Hitoshi's hair outside of his control, until he *understands*. Right before Hitoshi *says* it. "*Pat* my head. Like you do with Eri."

The last part of that, almost growled under Hitoshi's breath, sings with a ghost of that nauseating static before his hand lowers to the top of Hitoshi's head. He doesn't pat it, not like Hitoshi originally ordered, but Aizawa watches with trepidation as his fingers comb through Hitoshi's wild locks, ruffling his hair in a way he hopes is still gentle. Given that Hitoshi has complete control over him, he shouldn't be the one full of fear with this.

He doesn't avoid touching Hitoshi like this, like he does with Eri, because he cares *less* about him. He knows that it's new that Hitoshi can stand to be touched at all, in any casual way. He knows what Hitoshi went through from the bleach bath torture, how that *bastard* Chronostasis had grabbed him by his hair and forced him underwater. He knows that Hitoshi has dissociated from

someone touching his hair like this.

But Hitoshi is allowing it, not exactly *asking* but *forcing* Aizawa to do this. The teenager's shoulders tense further at first, as though he's expecting a blow, until he *relaxes*.

Despite the blood on the lower half of his face, the scabs still burrowed inside the scars already earned from that mask, the bandaids wrapped around his fingers probably made bloody again when he tried to clean himself off, the kid in front of him is a *mess* of reckless self-destruction probably spurned on by self-hatred. But when his eyelids start to fall further closed, his eyes focused on Aizawa's chest, his head still bent and the circles of exhaustion so *dark*, he just looks *tired*.

Like a tired kid, who's fought alone too long for any moment like this. A moment where he feels safe, and cared for. And that kind of relief, even if it doesn't look pretty right now, is all that Aizawa has ever wanted for him.

It seems to be *too* relaxing, Aizawa realizes, or else the strain of misusing his quirk was too great, when Hitoshi starts to tip forward, and Aizawa's hand follows him. Sensation rushes back to him in full color, as he realizes he has a teenager pressing their full weight on his chest, his hand still trapped in his soft hair. He wasn't able to realize how soft it feels while he was under Hitoshi's control.

But Hitoshi springs back, eyes wide with panic, as though he didn't realize the control had dropped that quickly. As though he thinks any part of that was a misstep or mistake, and even if it *was*, Aizawa doesn't have any intention or ability to reflect on it. "Hitoshi-"

"Why is your face stupid?" Hitoshi blurts out in what seems to be an obvious panic, in what seems like an *attempt* to use Confession with his eyes flashing violet, and Aizawa *wishes* that his throat wouldn't tighten out of his control when it seems to *work* as such.

"I forget to shave unless Hizashi reminds me that my beard is too long, and I don't have much opportunity to sleep with either of my jobs, or you or Eri. And my eyes are bloodshot on a good day, due to overusing my quirk for years," Aizawa answers, pointing out the few insecurities he'd hardly call that, given how little he cares for his physical appearance, before he falls into static again.

This time, when he blinks and finds his faculties restored to him, Hitoshi is nowhere in sight. He ended the control on his own, Aizawa's memory is completely lost to him for that time, and Hitoshi is *missing*.

"Hitoshi," Aizawa calls out, the echo of Gym Gamma taunting him because he *knows* it can't be that simple. "If you're in the vents again-"

"I'm *not*," Hitoshi's voice answers this time, from a slight distance but lacking an echo that would have been *dangerous*. Aizawa has no idea if Nezu has programmed the robots in every building to recognize that Hitoshi is allowed to be in the vents, and he'd rather not find evidence that he *hasn't*.

Aizawa finds himself grateful for Hitoshi's *insatiable* need to be argumentative, as he throws his capture scarf to the railing of the walkway overlooking the grounds of Gym Gamma, pulling himself over to see Hitoshi sitting on the floor, his arms wrapped around his knees. *Glaring*, but Aizawa can't put the image of an offended kitten out of his head when he looks at him. "Are you okay?"

Hitoshi pulls a hand to wipe under his nose, the blood still leaves a stain but at the very least it's not

still flowing. “M *fine*. And that means I’m *actually* fine, my head hurts a little but it’s *fine*.”

Aizawa honestly thinks that Hitoshi could put his head in a woodchipper and still argue that he’s ‘fine,’ but he winds the capture scarf back around his neck and walks slowly towards his ward. Slow, measured steps, keeping an eye out in case the teenager bristles. Exactly the same way he’d approach a feral cat in a foul mood.

Aizawa manages to sit beside Hitoshi, still at a comfortable distance, and imagines that it’s also easier for the kid if he doesn’t have to look at him. Or his ‘stupid’ face.

“I care about you,” Aizawa says, testing the waters for receptibility for further conversation, and when Hitoshi seems to be more interested in glaring at the railing in front of him, he takes that as permission to move forward. “Hizashi cares about you. We both want you to be safe, be well, be *happy* at UA, and as much as we can accommodate that, we try our best to achieve that.”

“But I have to talk to him,” Hitoshi argues, pulling his legs tighter to himself as he does. “And... you don’t *get* how that... I don’t want to see him like that.”

Hitoshi’s voice nearly falls into a whisper, the pain beneath the anger pulled into the open, as vulnerable as it ever could be. More painful, even illogical as it may be, than Aizawa assumed it was.

“If you’re wrong about the hearing aids, and I have to see him like that, if I take control of him.... I just don’t *want* that, I don’t want to do that to him,” Hitoshi says, his arms winding tighter around his legs as his eyebrows furrow with fear and hurt that *seems* so much lesser than what he’s been through before, but Aizawa knows that it’s not. “I hate how it looks, what my quirk looks like. With you or Eri... it’s just worse seeing it on *him*.”

“You haven’t seen it,” Aizawa reminds, Aizawa *has* to remind Hitoshi of his reality when he knows that he’s creating monsters worse than they could ever hope to be in real life. “If that happened, you know how to break the control. You wouldn’t have to see Hizashi like that any longer than you wanted to, you have control over your quirk. And you have control over what you do with it.”

It’s a mere glance, Hitoshi’s eyes wandering to him so full of vulnerability. Aizawa doesn’t know what he’s done to deserve it, doesn’t know if he can meet Hitoshi’s needs where they are, when he needs *someone* to convince him that his world won’t come crashing down if he uses his quirk on Hizashi. If the test fails, when Aizawa knows it won’t, they have evidence and logic to prove it.

But Hitoshi’s worries run deeper than that. As much as he still hates and fears his quirk, he hates and fears something else. “You won’t hurt Hizashi with your quirk. I know that for a fact, as much as I know that if you did, he would forgive you. There’s nothing you could do to change that, or make either of us turn away from you.”

“That’s not true,” Hitoshi argues, the weakest attempt at it he’s ever made as he turns away, shaking his head. “If I killed someone, or if I broke the law. You don’t even know what I did before, even if you say it wasn’t my fault, I still did it, and you’re both heroes so you’d hate me for doing that.”

“I’m *aware*,” Aizawa says, leaning a bit further against the wall as he tries to get comfortable, to force himself to look more open as he stretches out his legs. “That there were a *few* more bags of chitose ame that Eri had at Shichi-Go-San than we bought. I don’t *hate* you for that.”

Hitoshi doesn’t take the bait, he almost seems to ignore Aizawa completely, but the lack of panic

for being found out is probably as promising as Aizawa could hope for.

“Hizashi and I being heroes has nothing to do with how we feel about you. I know you well enough to know that you wouldn’t kill someone, you wouldn’t hurt someone intentionally and without reason like that,” Aizawa says, seeing Hitoshi’s arms relax just the slightest amount, because even if the teenager *did* doubt that Aizawa and Hizashi knew him that well, he knows for himself that he’d never cross that line. In complete spite of the circumstances he suffered, Hitoshi has a higher code of ethics that he clings to with the same passion that he holds for Furokage Muzuki’s memory. That fleeting kindness that woman gave him was enough to shelter his humanity this much. “Even if you did, even if you didn’t have a reason, Hizashi and I would still care about you. You would have to face the repercussions of your actions, but even then, we wouldn’t abandon you.”

“Even 50 would,” Hitoshi mutters, his fingers picking at his own sleeves. “I’m not going to do that, but I know that there’s a limit. I could do something unforgivable like that, and you can’t say that there’s nothing.”

“There are a lot of unforgivable things you could do,” Aizawa says, and he doesn’t like to reflect on them. He’s always known how *easy* it could have been for Hitoshi to give in, and accept that his quirk was villainous, to allow himself to be used for the worst of intentions. “And I know that you would never do them. In spite of everything, you’re one of the kindest people I’ve met, and you sell yourself too short to ignore that.”

“Better than selling me cheap, like my mother did,” Hitoshi says, pulling a hand to wipe under his nose again, and Aizawa can only *hope* this won’t be a new habit for him. “I’m sure Midoriya *really* thinks I’m a kind person, and Monoma. I’m sure you’re not just making that up to make me feel better, or something stupid like that.”

“That would be pretty stupid,” Aizawa agrees. “I’m sure there’s no reason for Midoriya to accept your apology and want to talk to you after that, or a reason for Monoma to agree to leave you alone because he was worried he made you uncomfortable.”

“He doesn’t *care* about making me uncomfortable,” Hitoshi argues, tilting his head with an attempt to glare, so poor it’s almost pitiable. “And Midoriya is insane, he doesn’t count.”

“I can agree to an extent,” Aizawa says, even if his stomach drops when he realizes that he *shouldn’t* be encouraging one Problem Child to bond with another. If Hitoshi and Midoriya became friends, they’d get themselves killed in a matter of months, if he’s being generous. “You can hurt people you care about, and still be forgiven. You can forgive yourself too, and I don’t believe you’ve ever done that.”

Hitoshi looks at him, as though that’s any revelation for a kid who still blames himself for what he had to do, under the threat of death. When he didn’t have an escape, or any sign of salvation, when he was failed by heroes for *years* and yet somehow, still believed in them enough to hope Eri would be rescued.

A kid who has been through enough pain, and needs to learn how to stop dealing it on himself. “If the test fails, and you take control of Hizashi, he won’t see it as something you did intentionally to hurt him. He knows how difficult it is for you to do this, and we both wish it wasn’t necessary. It won’t fail, and it won’t be your fault even if it does. You were forced into this, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s... better,” Hitoshi mutters, tipping his chin forward to rest on his knees. “I’m not mad about it. I know that’s how it works, and I *know* it’s not going to fail. I just... wish it was easier.”

Aizawa wants that too. More than anything. “Tomorrow won’t change anything, about how either of us feel about you. It might be better to take your mind off of it.”

Aizawa reaches up to pull the capture scarf from his shoulders, immediately feeling too bare with that. But somehow, it’s grown less uncomfortable to hand it over to Hitoshi, especially at times when his well-guarded interest isn’t as hidden as the kid would probably like it to be.

‘*Hold it,*’ Aizawa signs, reminding Hitoshi that the scarf always responds violently when someone talks around Hitoshi, his quirk can make mastery over the capture scarf more difficult, but in ways Aizawa can hardly imagine, more *powerful*. “The scarf reacts to your quirk, and follows the emitter signals that it makes. I want you to hold the scarf at its end, and see where it will fall.”

Hitoshi rather *wisely* tosses the loops of the scarf away from him, holding onto the end he’s selected with a bit of trepidation that Aizawa tries to guard. The scarf reacts *wildly* to Hitoshi’s quirk, but Aizawa has to trust that he’s adept enough at ceasing its movements, given that Erasure isn’t entirely effective on him. “Okay.”

There’s nothing, until Hitoshi turns to look at him. Almost asking why it isn’t working, until Aizawa realizes it’s a question of permission. “Alright.”

And the scarf *flares*. As soon as Aizawa speaks, it nearly makes a perfectly straight line to the walkway on the opposite wall. The sheer force of Hitoshi’s quirk acting on that, from that simple *word*, is a force that Aizawa struggled to manifest for himself for nearly a *year*.

He sees Hitoshi squint, his hold on the scarf adjusting as he stares, and Aizawa sees the opposite end veer to the right, before it finds a rail and starts wrapping itself around it like it’s acting on sheer memory. But Aizawa *doubts* that it’s something so simple. “Did you just-”

The guilt pulls as the scarf does, Hitoshi yanked forward to stand with his hand braced on the railing in front of him. Aizawa stands too, a hand on his shoulder to catch him, but the scarf is now bowed limp towards the floor below them.

There’s a smile on Hitoshi’s face, so open and honest that Aizawa is awed that it doesn’t falter when he turns to look at him.

“I *did*. I was trying to use the smallest end, but when it’s like that,” Hitoshi huffs, looking back at the scarf, and what he’s *done* completely on his own. “It’s so much *easier*.”

“The capture scarf reacts as a whole to your quirk. Manipulating a small part of it, even with the railing,” Aizawa says, and still has to *stare* because he can’t believe it. “Is a difficult technique.”

Something that Hitoshi just *did*. With barely any training, with a quirk made powerful and unwieldy in ways that Hitoshi struggles to control fueling the scarf, Hitoshi manipulated the scarf that *intuitively*. “It... was kind of easy.”

Then again, with the nature of Hitoshi’s quirk, he might have an advantage for asserting his control over the scarf. He only needs the confidence that he *can*, something earned by *doing* it. Something Aizawa could easily accommodate. “Try unwrapping it from the-”

Aizawa blinks away static again, and turns to make sure that Hitoshi hasn’t run away from him *again*. Instead, he sees that victorious smile is gone, the capture scarf is laying on the middle of the floor below them, and the guilt at the way Hitoshi refuses to look away from it with his head bowed is unbearable. “Sorry. Slipped.”

“That’s fine,” Aizawa says, his hand rises before he thinks about it, but *when* he thinks, he

hesitates above Hitoshi's shoulder.

It's a bit awkward, to hold his hand out and in front of Hitoshi's forehead, but he imagines there should still be some warning offered, some means of consent. With a cat, Aizawa knows the method of introduction, and when Hitoshi glances up at it, he half expects him to butt his head against Aizawa's offered hand.

It's almost more confusing when he almost *does*, leaning forward a bit instead, but Aizawa tries to convince himself there will be no repercussions as he rests his hand on Hitoshi's head, as confidently as he would with Eri. Though he can't deny there's more warmth under his palm than he expects. "You're learning. And you're an undeniably quick learner. You'll have full control of your quirk in time."

Hitoshi's half lidded eyes fall further shut, the undeniable proof that Aizawa honestly *needs* to know that Hitoshi is fine with this new boundary. But despite the tension falling away from Hitoshi, slowly enough that Aizawa worries yet knows it isn't affecting him like he fears, he's startled completely when Hitoshi starts to lean towards him. Almost falling to the side, but *slow* enough to make Aizawa wonder if it was intentional.

Aizawa pulls his hand away before he makes that connection, and whatever semi-hypnosis Hitoshi seemed to be under breaks as he rights himself. Still refusing to look at Aizawa, but it seems more to do with embarrassment.

Something that still makes Aizawa's guard rise, because he *knows* Hitoshi hasn't reacted well to feeling embarrassed lately. "I'm... just tired."

Aizawa nods, not that Hitoshi would risk looking in his direction right now, but he'll accept Hitoshi's understandable exhaustion as a reason that he didn't try to pick a fight to distract from that moment of vulnerability. Aizawa checks his phone for the time, pulling a grimace as he does. "It is getting late. I should take you back to the dorm."

"You're going to the 1-A dorm?" Hitoshi asks, his voice wavering when he makes it a question. Something shy enough that it's nearly painful to know that he's trusted with something that vulnerable, especially now.

"I am. It's my night," Aizawa answers, quick enough to show no hesitation. Even if the relief is hard to see, he still hears it when Hitoshi sighs, probably unintentionally. "You can come with me, but you'll rest better in your own bed, instead of the cot."

"With you," Hitoshi nearly mumbles, his hands tucking into his pockets when he steps back from the railing, his posture so oddly loose that Aizawa can't help but notice when it stiffens for a moment. "I'm not avoiding Yamada, I just... would rather."

"That's fine," Aizawa says, even if he doubts that Hitoshi is telling the truth. Even if he *says* he's not avoiding Yamada, there's little other reason for him to pick a cot rather than his own bed, to choose the Safe Room over the dorm, or trade breakfast with Eri and Yamada's company for a jelly pouch and coffee. "Do you want to get another set of clothes?"

That seems to bring the familiar glare back, as Hitoshi's expression hardens, his hand *insultingly* possessive when it falls on the blurry picture beneath the 'Delete Face' logo. "*No*. I'm wearing this, and I'm not changing."

Aizawa fights not to roll his eyes, even if he loses the argument to not fall into another argument with Hitoshi. "It doesn't seem comfortable to sleep in."

“I’m *going* to sleep in it,” Hitoshi argues, *frustratingly pointlessly*. If Hitoshi wants to defend the point that jeans are comfortable to sleep in simply because he wants to try to irritate Aizawa with that *damn* shirt, Aizawa has no choice but to let him. “Actually, I’m going to ask *Santa* to get me a *lot* of Delete Face shirts. I’m such a huge fan of *Delete Face*, I’d love to wear those shirts every day. That’s *exactly* what I want for Christmas.”

“Do *not* tell Hizashi that,” Aizawa *begs*, and he doesn’t know how much he’s exaggerating when he does. He doesn’t know if his husband would buy 14 or *twenty* shirts if Hitoshi told him what he wants that plainly, but he knows that he *would* buy them.

Aizawa doesn’t know how many are on the market, now that Shiori isn’t selling them anymore.

But somehow, Hitoshi’s insistent fondness for that shirt continues to whittle away at that association. Maybe, Aizawa should feel guiltier to begin to forget her like that, but he’s learned that forgetting isn’t a violence to the memory. It’s living afterwards, in a way that the dead would like to see.

And Shiori would no doubt be *pleased* to see him suffer like this.

How It Feels

Chapter Summary

Shinsou has a nightmare the night before his appointment with a quirk specialist, where he will have to test whether his quirk affects Yamada in order to remain at UA as his ward. Midoriya introduces Shinsou to a new face whose reputation precedes her, Bakugo attempts to make amends, and Aizawa finds himself too flattered to dole out a strict punishment.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Blood, 50 mentions, Nightmares, Dog mention, Bakugo's POV has an insinuation of self-harm/suicide not committed by himself,

Previously on Wards of UA: In the interrogation with Chisaki, Chisaki said that he had Shinsou fight other members of the 8 Precepts of Death because Shinsou was violent and he had to give him an outlet, or else he would hurt Eri. Shinsou recently Brainwashed Midoriya to make him run into a wall, which injured Midoriya's hand. Shinsou's name had been changed to 'Dog' when he was at the 8 Precepts. When Monoma Copied Shinsou's quirk and used it on Shinsou, Shinsou recognized the feeling as being the same as when he dissociates. Midoriya recognized that while he had accepted what Bakugo had done to them throughout their childhood, he would like an apology. Hagakure was arrested recently for being the UA traitor, a blow that unsettled most of 1-A and especially Bakugo. Shinsou had been worried that his quirk causes Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome with repetition, but Midoriya sent him several articles on the subject and tried to convince Shinsou that since Eri is the most susceptible to the condition due to being a child and she doesn't have it, that Shinsou can't cause that. Shinsou cut his fingers when he ripped the vent cover off the ceiling in his room. Shinsou has been trying to threaten Midoriya by saying he will 'hurt him without hurting him physically or emotionally intentionally,' as the rules that Yamada, Aizawa, Eri, and Hitoshi agreed to forbid intentionally hurting someone with those two methods. Bakugo's nickname for Kaminari is 'Dinky shit,' playing off of 'Denki.' Bakugo messaged Shinsou on their chat that he obtained his provisional license while Shinsou was in the mountains, after the 127 attack. The last time that Shinsou slept a full night's sleep was when he got black-out drunk at Shoga's cabin. When Shinsou threatened 1-A, he neglected to mention exactly how Confession works, or that it was a separate quirk from Brainwashing. Someone holding Bakugo's wrist is a trigger for him that often makes him violently dissociate.

He's standing in the training room. There's a knife in his hand, and he knows who put it there. He knows his hand shouldn't be that small.

He knows that there shouldn't be that much blood on the knife. It's bleeding. "Hitoshi."

Yamada is kneeling in front of him, staring at his arm braced on his knee, squeezing his arm tight to try to slow the bleeding. He knows it's too much, as the wound keeps growing, the blood keeps soaking through Yamada's sleeve, running down his arm, pouring off of him and pooling on the ground.

When Yamada looks at him, he doesn't smile, his face twisted in pain he can't hide. His eyes are white. "Hitoshi, it's okay."

It's not. It's not it's not it's not, he hurt Yamada, he cut him like that, he didn't want to but it doesn't matter, he hurt Yamada, Yamada will never want to be around him, it's going to be so cold now- "Hitoshi."

It's 50 now. 50's voice. 50 kneeling on the ground, her thumb pulling at her skin to look at the cut on the curve of her arm, a fresh wound among all those scars. He still put that one there, that's his fault.

"It's okay," 50 says, smiling like she wants to laugh, like it's funny. It's not, it still hurts. "It was just an accident, not worth crying over. Come here."

He has to go to her. He feels like his arms are growing smaller, that he's shrinking more and more as he tries to hold her tighter. Tight enough to feel it. Tight enough to feel warm.

"It's just something to remember you by. You're too sweet, you know. You better keep that," 50 says. He knows she's stroking his hair, her fingers catching on the lock for the mask, even if he doesn't feel it like he should. "I'm gonna leave, but it's not your fault."

It is. It is, he wants to tell her that it is, it's his fault, he shouldn't have hurt her. But even if the mask feels loose his jaw is locked too tight. He can't tell her.

"I forgive you," 50 says, and she shouldn't. She shouldn't forgive him, he's just going to do it again. Even if he doesn't want to, the knife is still stuck in his hand. She should just get away from him, he doesn't even know where the knife is, if he's stabbing her now. "I'd forgive you even if you killed someone. Even if you killed 127. Even if you killed everyone. That's fine."

50's voice is wrong. Her words are wrong.

He tries to pull away, but she won't let him, her arms wrapping tight around him won't let him escape. "It's fine if you kill them. You could do it. I know you could, I know you want to. You want to ruin everything, you want to hurt everyone, if I let you go you'd do it, you're a monster, you'd hurt them, you just want to hurt them-"

"No!" He screams, he tries to fight to break free of this darkness that holds him, the darkness that isn't 50's quirk, she's not here anymore. Those aren't her words.

"Violent," Chisaki drawls, his hands slowly clapping as he walks closer. "Violent, I had to give you an outlet. I couldn't let you hurt Eri, hurt Yamada-"

"Go-" The mask clicks shut, his mouth shuts, his teeth won't open, he can't get out.

"Shinsou," Midoriya says, his voice is unsteady, he's still holding his hand where he hurt him, making him run into that wall. His fingers broke off against it, and despite the pain, he's just staring at him with those green eyes, his voice becoming odd. "Shinsou, Shinsou, Shinsou, Shinsou-"

"It's fine," 50 says, the darkness swirling around him, sure to devour him. He's going to be ripped

apart, and 50 thinks that he's fine?

"Why? Because I am here!" All Might bellows, too close to him, his face is too close and Hitoshi just-

"It's okay." Aizawa's voice. Bedsheets, too warm, a dark room. The computer screen, he's in the Safe Room. Aizawa is hovering too close to him, his hand pulling away. He looks worried, and Hitoshi is breathing too quick.

He pulls a hand to his face and realizes that he's crying, scrubbing the tears away while he tries to stop. This is just *stupid*.

"It was just a bad dream," Aizawa says, like it's perfectly *normal* to wake up crying like this, because of that *stupid* dream. Hitoshi hears the springs creak, he feels Aizawa sitting down at the foot of the cot. He wants to *talk* about it, and it's *stupid*.

"All Might," Hitoshi says, his voice cracked and *weak* to just make it *worse*, and for some reason he can't stop *crying*. "Fucking All Might, and-and him, and-"

"Hitoshi, just breathe," Aizawa says, and Hitoshi hears the springs creak again before he feels it, Aizawa's hand on his shoulder. Even if he flinches away at first, he tries to take that back, he tries to convince Aizawa that he didn't mean it by pushing back into his palm, and he can only breathe again when he feels it. Warm. Solid. Aizawa is here. "It was... a bad dream. But it's over now."

"I ca-can't stop," Hitoshi gasps, and this is just *stupid*. He can't stop *crying* like a brat, like an idiot, he's such a worthless piece of shit, he's probably forgotten how to *breathe* and everyone can laugh at him because he's finally *fucking* gotten that *stupid*. "Stop."

Aizawa moves closer, and Hitoshi lets his head fall against his shoulder, still flinching when he feels Aizawa's other hand on his back, too gentle at first. Too warm. He still can't stop *crying*. "I've had nightmares about him too," Aizawa mutters, as though that's not the *stupidest fucking thing* he's ever heard. It wasn't even *about* All Might, even if his face was horrifying in that dream, it still wasn't the worst part.

Hitoshi tries to drive it out of his mind but it *sticks*, he can feel the blood on his hands, even when he knows it's just tears and *snot*. He can't gather his breath, he can't stop *crying*, he feels like he's *drowning*. He can't stop *shaking*.

He knows he's wasting Aizawa's time, he supposed to be watching his students, not wasting his time with *him*. Not over such a stupid *dream*, what he knows isn't real, he doesn't need Aizawa to *tell* him that. "You're alright. It was just a bad dream."

Hitoshi closes his eyes, holding onto his breath even as his lungs seem to thrash inside his chest, trying to escape, trying to sob. When that broken gasp escapes, he just holds his breath again, trying to force himself to be steady. Trying to feel Aizawa's arms around him.

To feel where it's warm, real. He didn't hurt Yamada. 50 would *never* say that.

It was just a bad dream.

Aizawa starts pulling away, recognizing that Hitoshi has calmed down. He's tired enough that his head just falls off of Aizawa's shoulder, enough that he can't raise it to face Aizawa's judgement, just staring at the sheets below him. Twisting his fingers in the cloth, to remind himself that he's real. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Hitoshi shakes his head, and pulls a hand he hardly feels to his face, the edges of his scabs burning from the *mess* there. He should wash his face but he can't stand the thought of moving that much. "50. When I h-hurt her. Yamada was there. Chis-s-s..."

He grinds his teeth and swallows, *refuses* to let this sting him too. He can be a fucking worthless idiot, but not that much. "The scar on her arm?"

Hitoshi nods, starting to run a hand through his hair before he remembers himself. A disgusting *mess*. "The blu-blood. Y-Yamada was b-bleeding. He c-cou-fuck."

His fingernails dig into a scab before he can think about it, but Aizawa just takes his hand away, snot and all, like he's *not allowed* to do what he wants with himself. "Hitoshi-"

"I'm not *fucking* stupid! All Might wasn't even- and I can *talk*, I can talk like a normal fucking person, I'm not *fucking stupid*!" Hitoshi yells, even if he feels half numb as he does, as he swats his hand out of Aizawa's and glares him down. The *fucker* doesn't bat an eye, because he doesn't *care*, no matter what he says. "Oh, but that's going to be *hilarious* when I have to do that, when I have to talk to Yamada, everyone's going to *laugh* at the stupid fucking Dog who can't talk right-"

"*Hitoshi*," Aizawa says, his voice low enough that everything grows cold. Too cold, Hitoshi looks at the cot and doesn't know why the *fuck* he looked up, why he said that. Any of that, *anything*.

Aizawa sighs, and gets up like he's going to leave, like he *should*, and everything goes colder. He should have just kept his mouth shut, shouldn't have said a single word.

He hears the faucet running, before it cuts off. Aizawa walking back.

A cold rag on his face, sharp enough to sting, but he's not smart enough to just endure it. He pulls it away from Aizawa, but Aizawa doesn't recognize that insult he's too *stupid* to keep himself from doing. Aizawa just sits down, further away.

Hitoshi wipes his eyes, and wishes he could just go blind in this soothing cold that helps the stinging a bit. He wishes he *wasn't* an uncontrollable idiot. "You're not stupid. Stuttering isn't a sign of stupidity. If Chisaki had told you that-"

"Everyone did," Hitoshi says, unable to bite the words back after they slip out, sniffing to keep the mucus from running out too. "I don't care. He's dead and I don't care. It's stupid."

"You can still feel hurt by that, even if you don't care about the *idiots* who had that opinion," Aizawa says, and despite himself, Hitoshi flinches at the tone. He just feels too weak, too vulnerable. He wants it to stop. "You had a dream that you hurt Hizashi, the same way that 50 was hurt. I know you're worried about the test today, but you won't hurt Hizashi. I can be there with you, if that will help."

Hitoshi digs his fingers into the rag, dropping his hands into his lap. He's worried, the test is *today*, it's inescapable. Aizawa's quirk won't help, it doesn't work on him, on *Nomus*.

Aizawa is still too far away, when he drops his head a little further. That shouldn't irritate him so much. "What are you feeling right now?"

"Weird," Hitoshi answers, sniffing again and he'd rather *stop*. He'd rather have the energy to get up and blow his nose, if Aizawa won't leave him alone so he can blow it into the rag. "Cold."

He feels like his skin is burning and freezing at the same time, like he's outside in the snow without any clothes, even the ones he knows he's wearing. Aizawa still takes him too literally,

grabbing the blanket that was tossed to the side as though Hitoshi is too stupid to do that. “Tired?”

He is, but he shakes his head. His eyes are irritating, still burning from those *stupid* tears. He wants to just close his eyes but he can’t stand the thought of being less aware now. He trusts Aizawa, and he *doesn’t*, even when he tries to convince himself.

He wraps the blanket around his shoulders, even if it feels barely warmer, it helps. The blanket is too light, but it thaws him enough to consider moving. “Thirsty?”

Hitoshi pulls the blanket around him tighter, but that does nothing to cool the heat rising under his skin. “If this is an interrogation, I’ll start asking questions too, and you *don’t* want that.”

Aizawa just turns his head away, scratching the back of his head. He looks tired, and Hitoshi should probably stop being a *dick* to him. “You seem frustrated, and being aware of what’s making you uncomfortable can help the situation. It’s usually deeper than feeling ‘weird,’ but being aware of the ‘weird’ feeling will help.”

“Like not being aware of my physical limits,” Hitoshi says, *remembering* how Aizawa wanted to prove he can’t run like Mirio can, *despite* the fact that he’s trained longer than him. But somehow, he keeps the anger out of his words just enough. “I just feel *weird*. I’m not even cold, I don’t know why I said that.”

“Maybe you’re not cold anymore,” Aizawa says, looking back at Hitoshi. And *that* makes him feel cold. “But it might be something else. Just take a moment to recognize what you’re feeling, instead of what you feel like you should be doing.”

He should stop bothering Aizawa. He should just go to sleep, because he *is* tired. He should put the rag back in the bathroom, because it’s making his hands cold. He should just crawl inside some dark space where no one will find him, and no one will force him to talk to Yamada, he won’t have to see how Yamada’s face changes and his smile falls off his face and his eyes go *white* because he used his *quirk* on him and made him dissociate and Yamada won’t *forgive* him because he’s lying.

He’s not a forgivable person, and they’re just waiting for a better excuse to hate him than the ones he’s given, as though they don’t know what he knows, how rotten he is to the core.

Hitoshi forces his eyes closed for a moment, tilting his head towards the cot. His hands are still cold, and wet, his eyes don’t hurt as much but his head does, a bit. He’s *tired*, but he can’t scrub the feeling of that oppressive darkness from his skin, that wrong version of 50’s quirk trying to choke him, destroy him. Her voice turned so *wrong*. “Coffee.”

He’s thirsty. He doesn’t want to sleep, even if he’s tired. Aizawa has coffee right there, right on the desk, so he’s not bothering him. “I can get the decaf from downstairs-”

“I want to,” Hitoshi insists, scrambling to his feet faster than Aizawa can stand up. He doesn’t *want* Aizawa to go through that effort, he doesn’t want to be taken care of like a *child*, like he’s *Eri*.

Something falls out of his pocket, but he catches it in time. While his fingers trace the plastic of the shutters, he hopes that Aizawa doesn’t see it. He hopes that’s not why he’s looking at him like that. He only breathes when Aizawa looks away, to check the monitors. “Midoriya is downstairs.”

“I’m not scared of him,” Hitoshi insists, almost like he means it. That only draws Aizawa’s eyes back to him, and they see too *much*. “He was in that nightmare too. I just.... I’m not going to talk to him.”

Aizawa nods, like that’s all he needs from him. Just Hitoshi vomiting out every feeling and

weakness he didn't want to share in the first place, especially to *him*, before he goes back to sit at his desk. "Blame me if Midoriya mentions that it's supposed to be for the students."

Aizawa was telling him to *steal* the decaf coffee, that he doesn't own, that he has no right to. A hero telling him to commit a crime.

Hitoshi doesn't care about that, of course. He's stolen plenty of things, the least of which would be coffee that will make him feel better. He doesn't care if Midoriya blames him or not, he'll just have to deal with it.

He's not afraid of leaving this room, and seeing Midoriya.

He just feels cold, so he wraps the blanket around his shoulders a little tighter.

*

Midoriya looks in the refrigerator, just to close it for about the fifth time. He shouldn't, he knows that everyone figured things out yesterday just fine, no one seemed to really *miss* Kacchan making that overly-spicy breakfast for everyone. Even Ochako was fine with splitting some hearty oatmeal with him, and the cheesy omelette that Aoyama shared with anyone who would accept a piece was really good. It's not his fault.

It's not his fault that Kacchan hasn't come out of his room since he asked for an apology.

It's not like Midoriya wants a big, grand gesture. He doesn't even want Kacchan to *feel* bad. Just two words, 'I'm sorry,' even if Kacchan didn't *mean* it would mean a lot to Midoriya. He knows that Kacchan has changed, in some ways better. And he's pretty sure these community breakfasts were a way for him to lift everyone's spirits after Hagakure was arrested. Maybe, he wanted to keep that tradition going after Mic-sensei insisted on doing that while he was at the dorm.

Midoriya knew that Kacchan would be mad. He knew he would yell, he would use his quirk, he would call him 'fucking Deku' the same way he does when he's *really* upset. Midoriya knew that he caused that, they were having a good spar together and then he said that, and then Kacchan screamed his peace and left. And he hasn't come out of his room since.

And he knows that everyone's worried, especially since Kacchan missed training yesterday, even though they don't know it's his fault.

He tries to tell himself it's *not* his fault, Kacchan is just being too stubborn again, too prideful. What he's asking for is small, and what Kacchan did to him over all those years was *horrible*. He knows he wouldn't tell someone else that it was their fault, if Kacchan bullied anyone else like he did to Midoriya. He *knows* it was wrong.

It's not wrong for him to ask Kacchan to admit that.

It just *feels* like it is.

It *feels* like someone is standing right behind him, and when Midoriya glances over his shoulder and sees *someone there*, he jumps. Probably yells. He feels like he has a heart attack in that split second.

Shinsou just stares at him, with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. With red eyes, kind of like he was crying. But he doesn't say anything before he turns away, and starts opening a cabinet.

Midoriya can't bring himself to say anything to him. Shinsou clearly looks like he doesn't want to

talk, and he's probably going through a lot. Maybe he didn't mean to scare Midoriya, but there's still a good chance that he *did*. And it's pretty early, so maybe Shinsou just doesn't want to talk right now, not until he drinks some coffee, or gets whatever he's trying to get from the cabinet.

Shinsou puts a coffee cup on the counter, and then picks through the tea and coffee bags until he finds one of the communal bags of decaf. He pours the coffee grounds into the coffee mug. Puts the bag back.

Goes to the sink. Pours water into the coffee mug. Swirls the mug around a few times.

Drinks it. "Are... you okay, Shinsou?"

"I'm not sharing," Shinsou says, and that's *really* fine. Midoriya *really* didn't want to try it. But he turns around, his hands still around the coffee mug. His eyes seem too wide somehow, it's almost a little scary. It's almost like he's scared out of his mind. "No."

The way Shinsou whispered that, is almost painful to hear. Something is *really* wrong with Shinsou if he sounds like that, *looks* like that, his fingers keep grabbing at the coffee mug like he's trying to squeeze it into another shape somehow. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I'm not supposed to talk to you," Shinsou says, taking another drink when Midoriya would *really* rather he didn't. "I'm... weird. I shouldn't talk. I'm a jerk, I'll just take control of you. Kill you, I don't know."

"I... think you would know that, Shinsou. I don't *think* you want to kill me," Midoriya says, and he would probably feel more certain about that if Shinsou hadn't threatened to kill him before, with One For All, his own quirk. "And, it's okay if you take control of me. I know you've been having trouble controlling that. I don't really mind it."

Shinsou scoffs, almost laughing, still staring at that mug of water and coffee grounds, which he's *sure* Shinsou knows isn't coffee. "I hate it. Hurting people."

Midoriya flexes his hand, knowing he could probably count every single time that Shinsou has hurt his hands, intentionally or not, on one of them. And he would really rather not move on to the second hand. "But, that's a choice with your quirk, whether you hurt someone or not. Just taking control of someone won't hurt them. You know you can't cause Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, because Eri doesn't have it. You... read those articles I sent you, right?"

Shinsou nods his head, but still won't look at him. "Right, they have to test that too. The quirk specialist. And seeing what my quirk does to Yamada."

"Oh," Midoriya says, before he puts it together, his fist meeting his open palm as he remembers what Iida said about wardship policies. "Oh! Your quirk has to be tested to make sure that Yamada's quirk can cancel it out, right? Even if you're worried about that, Aizawa-sensei's quirk can still cancel yours-"

"It can't," Shinsou sighs, and he almost sounds angry about that for some reason. "I can Brainwash him too, because I have *Nemoto's* quirk, because I'm a *Nomu*, and if the speakers don't work, I'll Brainwash Yamada, I'll have to go to an institution-"

"Shinsou-"

Midoriya blinks, and he feels a static receding that feels kind of familiar. He can see Shinsou crouched on the ground, picking up the pieces of the shattered coffee mug as he wipes at the corner of his eye. His voice trembling and weak. "I'm sorry."

Midoriya was trying to get him to calm down. His hand was shaking so bad, the more he kept talking. The more upset he was getting. “It’s okay, Shinsou. I know it was an accident.”

Shinsou still flinches when Midoriya crouches down to help him, a jolt that makes him pull back, almost dropping the pieces of ceramic in his hands. His hands are still shaking, just a little better now, and Midoriya hadn’t noticed the bandaids around his fingers until now. He can’t stop looking at the scars on the backs of Shinsou’s hands.

He knows Shinsou is scared of things that he shouldn’t be scared of when he’s safe, when he’s at UA. When he’s been rescued. More times than he should have been. “You’re really a strong person, you know.”

Shinsou looks up, his eyes watering, but he hangs his head before he shakes it. He doesn’t seem like he wants to argue further than that, he doesn’t want to risk *talking*. But when Midoriya sees his hands start to tighten around those broken shards, he’s thankful that Shinsou doesn’t pull away when he takes Shinsou’s hands, the scars on the backs against his palms, his thumbs crossing Shinsou’s. He knows that Shinsou likes to hold someone’s hand when he’s scared, when he needs to know he’s not alone.

Eri does the same thing too. “I know that... you’ve had to go through a lot of painful things. And I know that things should have been easier for you, so you wouldn’t have had to. But someone who wasn’t as strong as you wouldn’t have made it this far, and you shouldn’t be so hard on yourself for making mistakes. There are a lot of people who care about you, who want to protect you, and won’t let anything bad happen to you. You’re at UA, protected by heroes, after all!”

Midoriya smiles, when Shinsou finally looks up. Even if he looks afraid at first, maybe he sees that things won’t turn out as bad as he thinks. Even if Shinsou’s quirk affects Mic-sensei, he’s sure that another teacher at UA would be able to keep his wardship. He’s sure that Aizawa-sensei and Mic-sensei wouldn’t let Shinsou be moved somewhere else, especially somewhere as ominous as an institution. “Punch me in the throat. So I can’t talk.”

Midoriya pulls his hands away so he can cross his arms over his chest, trying to convince Shinsou that he’s *not* going to do that before he has to risk that happening anyway. Outside of his control, if Shinsou *really* means that. “I *don’t* want to do that! And Recovery Girl would probably heal you in time for the test anyway, so that’s just going to make things worse but not solve the problem!”

Shinsou looks a little *horribly* disappointed with that. Midoriya just *hopes* he’s made a good enough argument to convince him not to Brainwash him and do it anyway. “There’s another way to solve it.”

Midoriya isn’t really sure if it’s a problem that can be solved, or *needs* to be solved. Shinsou talked about speakers, and it is common for vocal type quirks to have a loss of efficacy in their quirk or have their quirk’s effect completely nullified when they aren’t heard naturally. “You’ve tried to use your quirk with Present Mic’s speakers, and it didn’t work, right?”

For some reason, that comes off as embarrassing for Shinsou. Even though he turns his head away and keeps picking up the pieces of the mug, his face looks a little red. “I don’t know why Aizawa told you that, but he’s a *dick*. But, it doesn’t.”

And since Present Mic is one of very few hard of hearing or deaf heroes in Japan, he probably wears hearing aids most of the time. And Midoriya is *decently* sure that’s the same, even if he’s not sure.

But when he pulls out his phone to check, he can see that someone *in particular* is active on LNE,

and he thinks that she might be able to explain things better than he can. And maybe even test it, if Shinsou is still worried.

And *definitely* be distracting enough to keep his mind off of it. “I have an idea, if it’s okay to go to the Support Department studio?”

*

Hitoshi isn’t supposed to leave without asking for permission, without Aizawa escorting him, but Izuku *has an idea*. He has a solution. Maybe, he knows how to find the ‘Commission rep’ who is forcing Yamada to do this, and they can just kidnap them. Kidnapping *isn’t* against the house rules after all, as long as Hitoshi doesn’t intentionally hurt anyone.

Of course, Izuku is a hero, but Hitoshi can still be hopeful.

Dawn is still barely breaking, and Hitoshi doesn’t feel much more awake than how he started. For some reason, he feels more settled, even if it’s cold even with the blanket serving as somewhat of a coat. Izuku isn’t wearing a coat at all.

Like Hitoshi suspected, he’s insane. Completely, undeniably, insane. He’s barely human.

He’s still *smiling*, and he *offered* to hold Hitoshi’s hand. *Insane*.

He still doesn’t know what Izuku plans to do in this ‘Support Department studio,’ but when he opens the door, Hitoshi’s thoughts darken with suspicions of what it could be. The place is dimly lit, the hard edges of metal scattered around, it’s almost like a torture chamber but he doesn’t even have the solace of knowing what torture implements are laid out here. “Hatsume! Are you still-”

“Duck!” Some woman with pink hair rushes from the right, one of the vent robots clinging to her arm. She grabs both of their shoulders to force them to crouch down, before she lifts the arm with the robot and Hitoshi can hear something ricochet *off* of it.

Are they getting *shot at*?

Two bullets, Hitoshi’s mind numbs as he waits for more, unable to peer around Izuku to see where the gunman could be without risking the cover that the pink haired woman has established. A third, and then she stands up, sighing. Hitoshi and Izuku are still crouched on the ground, and Hitoshi imagines that Izuku is probably rattled from this. “Ah, Yuyu-sempai almost got me with that one! Tranquilizer darts, programmed to fire when anyone enters this building between midnight and 7 in the morning, but try as she might, she can’t stop *inspiration!*”

“A...are we supposed to be here? *Allowed* to be here?” Midoriya asks, and Hitoshi would have *appreciated* it if he made sure of that *sooner*. He has no idea who this ‘Yuyu’ person is, but he doesn’t want to get on her bad side. *Or* get tranquilized.

“*May-be,*” the pink haired woman practically sings, with a too wide grin on her face. The goggles over her eyes hide what they look like, but when she slides them up to reveal those yellow irises and oddly shaped pupils, they just make her smile look more *unhinged*. “But, you’re here! Here to see my newest babies! I know we’ll get a lot of orders in after the internships for costume changes, but it’s best to get ahead of them, do the thinkin’ for you hero guys!”

She clicks her tongue as she mimics shooting them with two guns, and Hitoshi looks at Midoriya, who *really* needed to explain why he brought him here, to this crazy lady who had-

Babies.

“You were the one who made that sign language translator,” Hitoshi realizes, remembering that *thing*. She scared *Yamada* when it sparked and nearly electrocuted him, before he even put it on, and she wanted Hitoshi to *wear it*.

“Did I?” Hatsume asks, before she scratches the back of her head, trying to look more like a dolt instead of an attempted murderer. “Oh, I *kinda* remember that! Just a little last-minute project before Midterms, I think you might have saved my butt on Literature! Did it work out? I didn’t really get time to test it-”

“You’re planning on using her to take out Yamada,” Hitoshi asks, turning to face Midoriya, who must have had a misunderstanding that Hitoshi was that *desperate* to keep his place here. He wouldn’t stoop to that level, to hurt Yamada and knock him out to avoid the test.

But Izuku looks just as horrified as Hitoshi feels, so maybe he didn’t. “*No?* I-Hatsume, can you make something that can mimic hearing aids?”

Hatsume looks *disappointed* when Izuku asks, and Hitoshi hates her. But she hums, drumming her fingers on her chin. “*Mimic*, so you don’t want *actual* hearing aids, even though we have a few pairs of those. What... do you *want* my new baby to do, though?”

“Uh, to see if Shinsou’s quirk works on hearing aids?” Izuku asks, and Hatsume stops drumming, whatever that means for her. “He has a vocal type quirk, and it shouldn’t work through speakers-”

“A speaker... in my throat,” Hitoshi says, not sure if it’s possible, but Hatsume grins at him like it is. And she’s excited about it. “It wouldn’t work anymore, and I could be quirkless.”

“*Right!*” Hatsume cheers, clapping her hands together, and even if Midoriya looks horrified, he’s *wrong*. If this works, practically all of Hitoshi’s problems would be solved just like that. “Oh, but I can’t do minor surgery anymore, and that’s a *little* more than minor, I think.”

Hitoshi barely holds himself back from collapsing, because that shouldn’t hold her back, that could solve *everything*. He could know that his quirk would never slip from under his control, he wouldn’t have to worry about Brainwashing Yamada. He wouldn’t lose his place here.

“Okay, step one! Let’s make *sure* that your quirk truly loses efficacy during digital conversion, so just step into my office!”

It’s not an office, it’s more like a separate room full of benches, most of them cleaned up. And Hitoshi isn’t *really* hiding behind Izuku when he sees what’s there.

There’s just a *mountain* of *things*, illuminated by the only bright lights in this place, wires and metal and bottles of liquids that he doesn’t want to identify, tools that he’s *sure* have different purposes he doesn’t want to endure. And while Hatsume digs through the pile like it has any kind of organization at all, Hitoshi tries not to feel like his spine is tingling. Like someone else is *there*.

He doesn’t like the dark, for several reasons. But this dimly lit place reminds him of one of them.

“Ha! Microphone!” Hatsume *says*, but that tiny button must be a bug of some kind, it’s not at all like the microphone at Yamada’s radio station. “And speakers!”

It’s another vent robot, but it looks like it’s seen better days. Some of its legs are missing, the dome that’s supposed to protect it is gone. Instead, there are two blocky cubes attached to the top.

He wonders if this crazy lady hunts the vent robots for *sport* or something. He wonders if it’s okay for him to feel pity for them, and want to protect the one that talks to him in the vents above his

room. “*And*, to make sure that there is no natural sound from your quirk influencing us, we can use *this*.”

It’s a mask. It’s black, and it’s weirdly *floppy*, like it’s entirely made of rubber. There’s six protruding holes that look like it’s supposed to hold something cylindrical between them, and maybe Izuku recognizes it, because he looks horrified. “Hatsume, Shinsou can just stand outside, he doesn’t have to wear that-”

“I can... breathe in this,” Hitoshi asks, and he shouldn’t *have* to ask, but when he picks up the mask he can see that there’s foam on the inside, molded to make it even more form-fitting. Those tiny holes probably don’t allow enough air inside on their own.

“Whoops! Almost forgot the air supply!” Hatsume says, going back to the pile to grab something that looks like a *spider*, already filled with a weirdly shimmery liquid. “Okay, it’s not *normal* air, but unless you have a pre-existing lung condition, you can breathe it in for up to four hours! And while you’re wearing it, we won’t be able to hear a thing! Even if you scream!”

That sounds incredibly useful. Hatsume puts the spider thing in its place, attaching each of its legs to the holes, then finds what looks like a wad of gum to attach the speaker to the inside of the rubbery mask.

The thick rubber loops dig into the back of his ears, and though he’s a bit wary of breathing in once the tight mask is in place, practically suffocating him already, he tests it and doesn’t really notice a difference. Maybe she’s lying. “Are you lying about this being dangerous?”

He can only hear his voice from the speakers, and it’s *weird*. He can’t hear it from his own mouth, and he didn’t realize how *weird* that would feel. “Nope! That was a big red warning on the box when we got a shipment of that stuff, but Komori wanted to test out some more lethal spores with her Mushroom quirk, and didn’t want to get caught in the crossfire!”

There’s *nothing*. No string, Hatsume’s eyes are still unhinged but not white, it doesn’t *seem* like Confession worked on her. He didn’t see a flash from his eyes, and he didn’t feel like Nemoto possessed him. “Are you angry at me for breaking your fingers?”

“Wha- *no!* That was an accident, and I kind of broke my fingers on my own, even though I didn’t really mean to, but that wasn’t your fault!” Midoriya is able to lie to him, so Confession *really* can’t be used at all.

“It’s working,” Hitoshi says, which makes Hatsume grin with her fists raised in triumph, and maybe it *should* be that simple. Maybe it *should* be enough to convince him.

It’s not. “It’s working, or you can’t use your quirk at all? Total loss of efficacy or partial?” Hatsume asks, and Midoriya seems interested too.

“Total, I can’t use it,” Hitoshi says, and he knows this mask should feel like a muzzle because of that. It should feel like *the* mask, the one he’s used to.

But it doesn’t, and it makes him want to ask. “Okay, so your first question of whether the hearing aids will affect your quirk has been tested and it’s a total loss of quirk efficacy. Hearing aids usually come with enough ambient noise suppression to completely nullify your natural voice, and sounds are heard from directional microphones that transmit the sound through speakers within the ear canal. There may be partial efficacy if you’re trying to use your quirk on someone with partial hearing loss who doesn’t have that ambient noise suppression dialed up enough, but-”

“Yamada is deaf, so it won’t work,” Hitoshi says, relief coming when he realizes he doesn’t need to worry about the noise suppression. Yamada is *deaf*, so his quirk won’t work at all. It should be fine. It should *feel* fine.

“Yep, Present Mic is equipped with some of the best ambient noise suppression technology we have to make sure that his hearing aids are secure while he’s working, the microphone automatically adjusts to suppress the frequencies his own quirk reaches too,” Hatsume says, nodding with her hand cupping her chin. She seems like she’s already thinking of it. “But with the speaker in your throat, *that’s* not gonna work. Even if I made a tongue-ring, there’s enough vocalizations that come through your nose, I’d have to clamp your nostrils shut-”

“*Hatsume!*” Hitoshi can tell it’s a woman yelling, and he can tell that she’s angry by the sound of the front door slamming. He can tell that she seems to stumble over something, until she comes to the doorway of this separate room. She at least doesn’t look like she’s trying to attack Hatsume, with her soft blue pajamas worn under a heavy coat. “*Hatsume*, it’s bad enough that you keep sneaking in here, but *what are you doing with Shinsou?*”

Hitoshi has *never* met this person. He would have recognized her short red hair, the piercings in her ears, she looks like she could do some *damage* in a fight. Even if she doesn’t seem obscenely muscular, she just looks like she wouldn’t back down from a brawl unless she drew *blood*. “Yuyu-sempai! I’m trying to make a *baby* for him! You know my best ideas come from 2 AM to 5 AM, so this baby’s gonna be-”

“*No*,” Yuyu growls, she seems to almost collapse against the doorframe she’s holding onto. “*No*, you *can’t* do that to Shinsou. Nejire would *kill* you, and I don’t want her to go to jail. She’s too *cute* for prison!”

This is Yuyu. The woman behind the tranquilizing darts, the woman that Hatsume would fear if she wasn’t *completely insane*. But he’s protected from her, because of Neji. Because her alliances seem to rest solely with Neji.

Neji is probably more powerful than Mirio in that regard.

“I don’t think we really need a baby, though,” Midoriya says, like he fears it. Maybe Hitoshi should fear it too, but he doesn’t. And he doesn’t want Midoriya to speak for him.

“Can you make a mask with speakers?” Hitoshi asks, before he takes off the one he’s wearing, the clunky and rubbery prototype of what he wants, but he’s sure that Hatsume can make a better one. Maybe it will electrocute him, but that’s a risk he’s willing to take. “A microphone on the inside, and speakers on both sides. Padded, like Yamada’s neck speakers.”

Hatsume hums, her fingers drumming on her chin again. “A self-contained unit, a hearing aid kinda fixed on your face. *Padded*, I wonder how those force absorption foams would work with elastic coating for suction- are we talking about long term use or short term? Under four hours? Because if we want to eliminate any partial efficacy, I still need to seal up everything and that means breath-”

“Shinsou, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Midoriya says, because he doesn’t think *any* of Hitoshi’s ideas are good, he thinks he’s *stupid*. He just looks that worried because he thinks Hitoshi really is an idiot. “You don’t have to wear a mask, no one is going to be mad at you for using your quirk. And if you wear a mask like that...”

“If it’s padded, it’s different,” Hitoshi says, even if he doesn’t know.

He doesn't know what that weight will feel like again, but he wants *control*. He wants it on his own terms, he wants to stop *worrying* about his quirk every time he speaks, and he has to feel that sting in his chest as people *talk* to him, when he feels that string and has to force it down. He just wants *silence*.

"It was fine when I wore Yamada's neck speakers. I could still breathe in that," Hitoshi says, because he *really* doesn't want to have to risk suffocating like Hatsume seems to want him to.

And Hatsume looks disappointed with that, kicking one of her feet onto its heel when she bows her head, a fist raised more in frustration and despair than triumph. "*Ugh*, that's so *simple*. Placing the microphone is the most challenging part, don't you *really* want to go wild with it?!"

"*Speaking* of wild," Yuyu says, her eyes seem narrowed at something in Hatsume's mountain, like she's done something horribly wrong before she let them get involved to take partial blame for it. "That *better not* be the Guardian Angel system that Powerloader-sensei was working on."

"It's a new shell!" Hatsume cheers, she practically *glows* with her hands curled in front of herself, leaning towards Yuyu like she's begging for praise already. "I didn't touch the internal system, but I saw this video about *magnetic origami* robotic exterior capabilities! See, after all that back and forth about making a unicorn or a cat, we could do *both* with ceramic plating-"

"*Pinching*," Yuyu says, even if her anger has cooled, she says that word like an accusation of murder. "I know you're going to say that the felt exterior would be enough protection, but when those panels shift, there will still be a risk that Eri's fingers will get caught, and that's not a risk anyone is willing to take. The expectation creep is always the *worst* with you when you're not supervised, and that's why Powerloader-sensei didn't want you to be involved. You'll equip GA with *lasers*."

"*Safe* lasers," Hatsume argues, with a finger raised like she knows she's making a good argument. "The plasma force field can only sustain itself for an hour, and lasers that are only set as a deterrent would just drain power from the maximum life to reduce the active time to 50 minutes, but if we went with a fusion cell-"

"*Hatsume*," Yuyu says, like she's said that name in that tone *a lot*. Maybe it's 'expectation creep,' whatever that means, but Hitoshi agrees with giving Eri lasers to keep her safe. "If you *touch* GA, I'm disowning you, which means that I'm taking my toolbox with me when I graduate."

"*Yuyu*," Hatsume practically wails, almost like she's crying. Hitoshi has to look to make sure she's not. "How *cruel*."

"*Very* cruel," Yuyu says, before she reaches into her coat, and pulls out what looks like a *bomb trigger*. Her steady gaze, her professional expression, betrays *no fear* about using it. "I know you routed the power to the emergency generators to get in, but *I* made a kill switch. The lights are going out in five minutes, and you're *not* coming back in until GA is done."

"*Yuyu!*" Hatsume screeches like she's being *murdered*, and this time she *is* crying. But Yuyu is a professional at this, she isn't moved at all. Her eyebrow ring hasn't so much as *twitched*. "You're *mean!*"

That tantrum ends in a stomp, before Hatsume becomes a flurry of limbs trying to gather up bits and pieces out of her mountain, apparently to take with her. Hitoshi notices the vent robot with the speakers goes along with her too, and he tries not to be too expectant about it.

"My coffee-"

“*Two minutes*,” Yuyu interrupts, again in that cold tone, and even Midoriya seems to be able to tell that their luck might run out, they might be caught in the crossfire of this. Hitoshi allows himself to be pulled away with Midoriya’s hand on his shoulder guiding him out of this dimly lit place, to the door outside that probably shouldn’t have been left open.

Hitoshi hears an oddly loud click, then a *scream*. He finds himself frozen as he waits for Midoriya to respond, hopes that the worst hasn’t happened while they weren’t there. Midoriya looks just as horrified as he feels, his lips a tight frown and his eyes too wide, focused right ahead.

They didn’t see anything, and it’s probably wise to decide they didn’t hear anything either. They were never here.

Hitoshi turns his head when he hears whimpering, and with her arms laden with *stuff*, Hatsume comes out sniffing. Yuyu just closes the door, and locks it with a key. Maybe he should take it from her pocket for Hatsume, so she can get back in. “It’s just a *day*, Hatsume. You should spend some time in your dorm room instead of living in here.”

“But *inspiration* is in *there!* My *babies!*” Hatsume turns to pretty much scream at the locked door, she looks like she’s considering just running into it, but instead she just crumbles to her knees to sob.

Yuyu looks at them, and at least the mild surprise is warmer than that coldness that was so intimidating. Especially when it seems to tilt closer to panic. “And don’t tell anyone about GA! It’s supposed to be a surprise!”

“I’m sure that Eri will be really happy with it!” Midoriya says, and *Midoriya* can have such an enthusiastic opinion. A force field is a good idea, but *lasers* would be better to protect her.

Yuyu just smiles, before she starts walking back to her dorm, it seems. Hatsume is still crying, but he’s not finished with her. Maybe, he should be.

But he digs a hand into his pocket, and crouches down beside Hatsume so that Midoriya hopefully won’t see it. “If... you can make the part that holds it in place like this, too... Whatever you want in exchange for that....”

Hatsume sniffs again, but the tears seem quick to disappear once she looks at the goggles in his hand. “Is that the color scheme you want? Bright yellow-”

“No,” Hitoshi says, less confident than he feels the more that he thinks of it. “Just the band being the same... if that’s possible.” Hatsume starts to reach out to take the goggles, slow with her arms being overburdened, but his hand tightens over them and pulls them back. She can’t take these, they’re *his*. “I’m not giving these up. They’re mine.”

“*Fine*. I know the design, it’s easy to recreate. *Easy*,” Hatsume says, before she snorts loudly, standing up with a watery glare. “*Too easy!* If you want my name on this, you’re getting a first class baby! State of the art! I don’t *care* if I’m locked out of the studio, a genius is never appreciated! I will *struggle* and *persevere*, and *you!*”

It seems to take her a bit to realize she can’t point at him, but she kicks out a foot to carry out the gesture in some way.

“*You* are getting a state of the art baby! Mark my words, this one *won’t* electrocute anybody!” With that, Hatsume seems to have said her peace, even if Midoriya tells her goodbye, and thanks her for her help. She seems too deep in thought over being banished from this place to hear him.

“Did Aizawa-sensei give you his goggles?” Midoriya asks, and Midoriya *shouldn't* have seen them. Even if it's too late, Hitoshi tucks them back into his pocket regardless.

“No, I stole them. He didn't even realize it,” Hitoshi says, and ‘idiot’ is a word that hangs on his tongue, but he doesn't say it. He doesn't feel like he needs to. “If you tell him, I'm going to-”

“‘Hurt me without hurting me intentionally physically or emotionally,’ but you can *really* just tell me not to tell, Shinsou! I don't want to betray your trust or make you feel bad,” Izuku says, smiling a bit nervously, like he still fears it. He still offers his hand to Hitoshi, to supposedly pull him to his feet, and while Hitoshi doesn't let him help, he still doesn't let go of his hand. “The mask that you want Hatsume to make would be different... because it's made with the people who are important to you.”

Hitoshi hates when Izuku looks at him like this, smiling like this, the breaking dawn catching on his hair and face. He hates his green eyes, being seen by them.

How *much* he looks like 50.

“It's just... different,” Hitoshi says, it's different if it's *padded*. If there aren't any sharp edges digging into his face, leaving scars and wounds, it's *different*. If it can't hurt him. If he can't use his quirk, he can't feel it, but he can say whatever he wants. He doesn't hurt anyone. “I had a dream that I hurt you. It's stupid but... I feel better knowing that you're not.”

“That sounds like a painful dream to have,” Izuku says, still holding his hand as they walk back to the dorm. Maybe he doesn't notice that Hitoshi's fingers twitch, beyond his control, when he remembers that Aizawa will be angry at him for leaving. “You know, Tokoyami says that if a certain part of a dream really sticks with you, even when you wake up, it might mean something. Dreaming about hurting someone might mean that you're angry or frustrated with them, or that they're standing in the way of your goals.... I... hope I'm not making you feel like that, but if I am, you can tell me.”

“It wasn't that,” Hitoshi says, his voice snapping more than he meant it to, cracking like frost in this early morning. Too hurtful. “I'm not frustrated or angry with you. All Might was the part that... stuck. It was just his face, it wasn't even scary.”

It *was*, but Izuku would probably think he's a coward if he said that. “Oh! I know that meaning! I've had dreams about All Might too!” Izuku says, and he looks too *excited* about that similarity. Probably just because he likes talking about All Might, who *might* not be his father like he claims, but everything else points towards it. “Dreaming about All Might is really lucky! Since he's been the Symbol of Peace for so long, dreaming about All Might means that you're going to do something brave and heroic!”

Heroic? That doesn't make any sense, but it definitely explains why he would have never had dreams about All Might before now. When he *definitely* wasn't going to do anything heroic in his waking life. “It fits. You dreaming about him, at least.”

Izuku laughs quietly, looking ahead with a fond look in his eye. Probably remembering all the dreams he had that came true, the promise of doing something so grand and powerful made true by his quirk, by his chosen path as a hero. Maybe he had that dream before he saved Eri, or maybe he didn't even need to at the time. “I think you're still going to do something brave today, Shinsou. With everyone at UA standing behind you, and supporting you.”

He doesn't feel brave, when it's terrifying enough to walk through the door and back into the 1-A dorm. He definitely doesn't *feel* brave.

Especially with who he sees in the kitchen, *waiting* for them, it seems.

*

Bakugo is really fucking, *fucking* done. Done, done with all of it, all this shit, he's fucking *done*.

Fucking *Deku* really had to just. Bring up that shit. Throw it in his face, out of fucking *nowhere*. Bakugo knows for a fucking fact he didn't do shit, hasn't done shit, has purposefully not *thought* about that shit because that shit? Is some shit he doesn't fucking *need*.

But *fucking Deku* had to bring that shit up.

Kacchan, do you remember... how it was before? And back in middle school, when you told me that I should jump off a roof-

Of course he did, but he doesn't *think* about that shit. He says a lot of shit, and shitty Deku knows he didn't mean it. It's not worth worrying over, it's not worth *bringing up* like that, he can be the first to say that he has *said* some messed up shit, and did some messed up shit because Deku was so fucking *obsessed* with him back then. It's over now, now that Bakugo can fucking *breathe* without Deku scribbling or muttering about how long he exhaled or some dumb shit.

I'm bringing it up because... don't you think that was wrong? Don't you think you should apologize at least?

Apologize. Deku wanted a fucking *apology* like everything else means *nothing*. He's kept the One For All secret better than Deku himself, he's set aside his own damn time to help him hone that shit, training and sparring with him, making sure the shitty nerd eats well enough, trying to *make him a damn hero* now that he can be one. Deku made him think he was going *fucking crazy* by pulling that quirk out of nowhere, for *telling* him in the vaguest and most *confusing fucking* way at the start of the year before he *actually* explained shit, *after* Bakugo pieced it out after Kamino.

And Deku wanted an *apology*. Useless *fucking* words, to *talk* about it, when talking doesn't mean *shit*, it never did, it didn't mean *shit* when he *said* that shit because he never fucking *wanted* Deku to just off himself. It was just *stupid*, and they're over it.

But Deku *dragged it up*, and now Bakugo is fucking *unsettled* as all shit. He feels everything *twitching*, he feels wrong inside his skin, he feels wrong inside his own *room* and the dorm, but he barricaded himself in there anyway because if he starts setting his fucking quirk off in training, he's going to go *apeshit*, and no one fucking needs that.

Fucking *Dinky Shit* was saying he was *scared* of training or some *stupid* shit, so now he had to prove him wrong and act like all this shit is normal under his skin, and maybe it will be. He's making everyone fucking breakfast because *no one* can fucking do it themselves, they're all too goddamn depressed to get up in the morning and think of themselves, or *do* some shit about that.

He's just.

He's not *good* at this shit, whatever Deku wants from him. If he hasn't made it *perfectly fucking clear* that he's a better fucking person than that asshole twerp of a carp who thought he was a goddamn *shark* in that small pond in middle school, then Bakugo doesn't know what to do. Words won't mean *shit*, if Bakugo is wasting his fucking time looking after shitty Deku and his incessant need to implode his own damn limbs or fling himself into any dangerous situation without even *thinking*, like a fucking *lunatic*, then Bakugo is out of fucking ideas. If that shit's *worthless*, then a fucking *apology* is just salting the wound, it's *humiliating*, Bakugo isn't going to *fucking*

apologize.

And Bakugo has taken. One *fucking* day off from watching Deku's ass. And he walks in holding hands with *Shitsou*.

Because throwing his friendly ass at Shitsou the *first* time went so fucking swell, it only fucked up his hand *horribly*. And that was with Shitsei watching Shitsou like a *hawk*, coming down on his ass *immediately*, but going outside with the violent asshole who has made it *perfectly fucking clear* he's going to fuck shit up at the first opportunity, outside where no one can hear Deku *screech*.

That's just *par for the fucking course* for Deku. The fucker looks like he's survived, but both of them look fucking *horrified* for some fucking reason.

And Bakugo doesn't feel like running away like a spineless fucking *coward*, because he's got fish to fry, *right in front of him*. Real fish, and that means Deku and Shitsou don't *fucking* exist anymore, and they can hold hands all they fucking *want*, Shitsou can have any kind of fucking issue he *wants* to and probably not tell *anyone* shit like he never fucking does.

Or he's got fucking *Deku* taking care of it, with the handholding and shit. He's sure it's only going to take a couple days before Shitsou Brainwashes the fucker into self-amputating that shit so Shitsou can add Deku's fucked up hands to his creepy fucking *collection*. Fucking Shigaraki in the making over here.

Still *staring* too damn much. "G-good... morning, Kacchan-"

"Wanna spit that shit out of your mouth instead of chewing on consonants?" Fucker always *stutters* when he's nervous as shit, and it's not like he's *got* shit to be worried about if Shitsou's not feeling like committing assault. "If you lovebirds wanna take that shit somewhere else where you can't cry for help, you're *fucking* welcome to get out of my face."

Speaking of faces, Shitsou must have cut himself shaving or some shit. Who fucking knows, maybe he tried to cut his face off like his fucked up scars are just craft paper lines, Bakugo *sure doesn't give a shit*.

But he'll *break his shit in half* if Shitsou keeps walking over to him. "Say one *fucking* word to me, asshole, and I'll-"

"I'm sorry," Shitsou says, like he doesn't *mean* that shit at all. Just all exhausted instead of some *heartfelt* shit, but it still crawls under his skin like Shitsou can use his talking quirk to do that. And since it's fucked up and evolving like no one's fucking *business*, maybe it *can* do that shit. "I shouldn't have grabbed your wrist, and I shouldn't have told you to fuck off like that. Whatever you want to do to even the score, I'm fine with that."

Fucker. Stupid *fucker*, just saying that shit with his dead *fucking* eyes, when he won't fucking *look* at Bakugo because he *knows* he was off his shit and Deku fucking inseminated him with a *conscience* or some shit. And clearly, that shit feels *awkward as shit* for Shitsou to have.

"Congratulations on your license," Shitsou says, like he *read* the fucking chat, like he *remembered* that shit and didn't *fucking* say it but the fucker *never* reads the fucking chat. And he thinks he can just *say* that shit and turn to run away, like a little corpse faced *fuck*.

He almost rips the stupid blanket off, but Shitsou's going to have to *explain* his shit, and Bakugo has a spatula and a pan full of ignitable grease just *waiting* to go. But given how Shitsou's quirk is ramping up to be *insane*, Bakugo isn't going to do something stupid like *answer* the fucker

verbally. ‘*Corpse faced shit. Want to die? Say shit, get hit. Can’t run. Fuck head.*’

Bakugo *still* doesn’t know a fuckton of sign because he’s got a *lot* of shit to do, more important shit, and the fucker just looks confused until he looks all fucking *depressed* and shit. That shouldn’t *be* fucking new, but the fucker doesn’t emote the same way he doesn’t *talk* unless he wants to make everyone feel shitty about his droopy stupid eyebrows. “I’m not going to use my quirk on you. And it’s probably against the rules to kill me, but if that makes you feel better-”

“You *fucking moron!*” Bakugo yells, and it takes every *fucking* bit of self restraint not to knock some sense *into* Shitsou instead of *out* of him, because too many fucking bastards smacked the braincells out of him. “Even if I *say* shit like that, I’m not gonna *kill* someone over that petty shit! Get your fucking *head* screwed on right for one *fucking* minute, because I’m over that shit, so don’t fucking *cry* about it. You *said* some fucked up shit, *did* some fucked up shit, but if your fucking psycho episode is over, we’re *fucking good*. You *got* that shit?”

Deku is fucking *smiling* like sunbeams are sparkling over a fucking meadow or some dumb shit, like he was *involved* with any of that shit concerning Shitsou coming to his *fucking* senses. He knows for a fact Deku rattled Shitsou’s skull pretty fucking *bad* in that sparring session, but he couldn’t have knocked *that* many braincells back in. Or pulverized all that violence *out*.

And Shitsou seems like he knows that, because he pulls back like he’s fucking *offended* that Bakugo’s touching his *blanky*.

“That’s not how it works, and I know you’re still angry, so just... do something, or make me do something,” Shitsou says, pulling his arms out like the fucking *try hard martyr* he fucking is, but Shitsou is fucked in the head and Bakugo is *not*. *As much*.

“I’m always angry, and you *fucking* know that,” Bakugo says, because he *knows* how the fucker *pouts* when he tries to treat him all civilized or some shit. *This* fucker actually *got* him, but the brain damage courtesy of Deku’s dumb ass probably fucked that up. “I don’t need you to *cry* and say you’re *sorry* and all that bullshit, just fucking put your money where your mouth is and don’t do that shit again. Alright? Because next time, *I’m ending your shit*. You get *one* free pass, and then I’m blowing your fucking skull into the drywall.”

Shitsou looks like he’s *considering* some stupid shit related to that, and if the fucker is really that far fucking gone, *someone* competent should probably have his ass locked down and away from sharp objects over Christmas break, and it won’t be Bakugo. He’s going to *wreck* his dad’s shit and make the best fucking gingerbread house ever.

“Bakugo...” And fucking *Deku* looks like he’s either wet himself or had a revelation, Bakugo has *unfortunately* known the shit long enough to notice the similarity. “Is it really that hard for you to say that you’re sorry?”

Deku *looks*. Like he fucking *pities* him.

And that shit just *doesn’t fucking fly*.

“*Saying* shit is too fucking easy, I’m not just gonna *say* shit when I can prove it, dumbass,” Bakugo says, but the fucker gets that *look*. That fucking *look* that no one else fucking sees, when Deku’s brain shifts into Shithead Mode.

“Ha, you’re right. Actions do speak louder than words, and you have been acting differently. You really have changed, Kacchan, and I know that every day, you’re striving to be better,” Deku says, and Bakugo’s dumbass almost fucking *believes* him for a second. “Not everyone can be as brave as

Shinsou and admit that they did something wrong, or apologize-”

“*I’ll fucking apologize the fuck out of you!*” Bakugo answers with gritted teeth, he *knows* the manipulative little *shit* got him, but he can *fucking apologize* better than *Shitsou*. “You need me to spell this shit out? I was a fucking *tool* back then, I said and did *fucked*. *Up. Shit*. And I’m not now, and if I did repeat that shit, you can call me the *fuck* out, so get the fuck over it. Or don’t, I don’t fucking care. Fucking *Deku*.”

Deku just fucking *grins*, like he didn’t plan that shit, like he fucking *needed* to hear it, but he just said that shit anyway like some sick revenge. Fucking *disgusting*.

“You’re supposed to say ‘I’m sorry,’” Shitsou says, and he’s got the fucking blank stare again, but Bakugo’s *pretty sure* the walking corpse made too much connection with the living, because that sounds like some half-assed Shithead Mode shit. “If that’s too hard, you can sound it out, or just use sign language-”

“This doesn’t have *shit* to do with you, and I don’t *have* to fucking say it,” Bakugo says, because he doesn’t have *shit* to prove to Shitsou, and he has fish on the stove. And he’s not burning that shit. “So, we’re fucking good. Your ass better get some sleep ‘cause you probably haven’t slept in three years or some shit.”

“Sunday,” Shitsou *finally* fucking says, and it’s not really a *fucking* surprise that the fucker hasn’t slept in nearly a *week*. “But I was drunk. And I’m supposed to get coffee-”

“*Fuck* no, you’ve got three fucking addictions and that’s one too many,” Bakugo says, turning away from the stove to count that shit down for Shitsou. “Your little sister complex, your incessant need to *fuck* with people, your fucking *phobia* of eating right or drinking something that *isn’t* coffee, and *now* you want to add alcoholism? Shit ain’t gonna fly, you’re going to fucking *bed*, asshole.”

“Shinsou, have you *really* not slept since you were... and wasn’t Aizawa-sensei with you?” Deku squeaks, because he’s too chickenshit to say that Shitsou got *attacked* and shit, and he *actually* thinks that Shitsei is competent around Shitsou. Fucker can do a lot of shit, but he couldn’t fucking control Shitsou if his life depended on it.

“Not 8 hours, because that seems important,” Shitsou says, because he’s a fucking *dumbass*. “But I’m fine with two or five-”

Terminal dumbassery. Both of them. “Your grumpy ass is getting *sleep*, and maybe you’ll stop pulling dumb shit like fucking ‘I’m fine with five hours’ *Deku* over there. Fucking *hell*, did you sleep before you decided to run away from rescue when that scaley fucker tried to end your shit?”

“No,” Shitsou says, and the shit doesn’t *click*, but Bakugo swears if he could deck him, *something* might.

“*Right*,” Bakugo says, and has to size up Deku and *trust* that he won’t fuck up this simple fucking breakfast he’s laid out. “Deku, don’t burn my shit. Shitsou, I’m choking you out in the blindspot in the stairwell.”

Shitsou looks at him all wide eyed, with that tiny fucking lip thing and *the fucker is actually excited about that*. Bakugo is *finally* fucking finding the root of Shitsou’s dumbassery. He just needs to *sleep*. “If you damage my vocal cords-”

“Shinsou, it’s going to be fine, and Recovery Girl would heal you just like she would if I punched

you in the throat,” Deku says, like that’s *fucking normal*. Like that’s a conversation he missed, and he’s *fucking* glad he did. “And you can be brave a little longer. Good luck!”

Whatever the *fuck* that means, Shitsou probably gets it. Shitsou *has* to get shoved to the stairs, because he doesn’t *fucking* want to sleep like he’s allergic to it, but this is baseline *fucking* treatment to all Shitsou’s issues. *Sleep*, he just needs to fucking *sleep* and then he’ll have enough of his shit together to start acting *somewhat* like a person.

Shitsou is still throwing his silent tantrum as Bakugo shoves him through the door to the stairwell, he’s ready to just lift the fucker and carry him up the stairs, but Shitsou turns his head to look at him and *almost* goes for Bakugo’s wrist again, like he doesn’t *know* shit about triggers or he *wants* to die.

But no, the fucker needs to *hold his hand*, because he’s fucking *five*. Actually, he’s fucking *four*, because Eri doesn’t need to do this shit as constantly. “If someone sees this shit, I’m dropkicking you down all six flights.”

Shitsou seems fine with that, and Bakugo could fucking *bet* he’s enthused by the dropkicking option. “You have a problem with stuttering.”

Shitsou won’t look him in the eye to *explain* that shit, but Bakugo just tugs him up the stairs because he’s got six flights to deal with Shitsou’s issues. “Of course I fucking don’t, Deku just *does* that shit and it’s fucking annoying. And do I *have* to remind you to fix your fucking grammar again?”

“That’s how it works. Confession. I can’t control it,” Shitsou says, and that *explains* some shit. Fucker really tried to *bluff* them into thinking that Shitsou already had those ‘deepest insecurities you don’t want to face’ already planned out, and even though he still *said* that shit to Ashido, he was pulling the trigger on a gun with no idea about what would fire out. But the fucker still owes her an *apology*. “If Izuku makes you angry-”

“Fix your fucking *names* too, don’t call him that shit. ‘Izuku,’ you know you shouldn’t get away with that shit like Eri-”

“I’m going to call him whatever I want,” Shitsou says, like Shitsou’s grown some *balls*. Shitsou looks fucking *pissed*, and Bakugo doesn’t need him to decide to throw *his* ass down the stairs. Probably telling him to do a backflip after he Brainwashes him. “You’re just....”

“Fucking say it,” Bakugo says, because if he’s got issues, he can learn to fucking *talk* about them instead of just *threatening* everyone or keeping that shit to himself. “Don’t pull that mute shit now, cat’s *way* out of the fucking bag on that one.”

“You’re an *asshole* and you can’t tell me what to do. You don’t rent me or own me, and if you try to act like you do again, I’ll...” Shitsou *tries* to go mute *again*, but that shit ain’t working for him anymore.

“Kill me or some shit? Break off our fucking *friendship*, if you’ve learned to deal with shit all healthy,” Bakugo asks, but he *knows* Shitsou didn’t read the Trauma Issues Book For Shitty Purple Haired Assholes, even if he made it for the fuckhead *personally*. “Just *fucking* say it when you have issues, and it’s a done fucking deal. I’m not going to be an asshole who triggers you with names and shit, unlike *some* people.”

“You’re still mad,” Shitsou says, because he *wants* to be flipped on his ass and Bakugo is about ready to make his Make-A-Wish dreams come *true*.

“I’m not *mad*, I’m waiting to see if you mean that shit or if you’re gonna go postal on our asses the next time you decide not to sleep for a week,” Bakugo says, because he’s going to keep bringing up the sleep issue until Shitsou stops being grumpy and starts looking like a *person*. He should probably start looking for ways to drug him consistently, because *Shitsei* doesn’t have that on his radar, per usual. “And I’m not going to *be* mad if you throw that shit back at me, as long as you’re not a raging *dick* about it. I don’t *have* feelings to hurt, I incinerated that shit years ago.”

Shitsou sighs, like he can’t fucking compute shit, and he fucking *closes his eyes* like he wants to trip himself and bring Bakugo down with him as collateral damage. Fucker’s got no chances of pulling that off, and he can throw him into a wall for trying. “I don’t want to go back to the Safe Room. I wasn’t supposed to leave without letting Aizawa know.”

“Again, no one fucking owns you, and definitely not Shitsei’s ass,” Bakugo reminds, because Shitsou might need a *reminder* about how everyone nearly got expelled to convince the dumb fuck that Shitsei was a shitty guardian but not complicit in nightmare human trafficking. “And if he tries to do something fucked up, not that he *is* because he’s not a fucking sadist to you, I’m killing him and Deku probably is too. Even if he’ll cry about it later.”

“Even though you’re still mad that I grabbed your wrist, and you’re afraid I’ll do it again,” Shitsou says, and Shitsou *shouldn’t*.

Fucking.

Go there.

“*Listen*,” Bakugo says, dropping Shitsou’s hand because Shitsou has lost handholding rights, even if he cries about it. “You *knew* that shit, you knew that shit would *set me off*, and if I fucking *literally* exploded in front of all those extras, I *really* would have fucking killed you. And probably wouldn’t even remember it.”

He’s *working* on that shit, not with a therapist or anything because he doesn’t have time for it and he doesn’t want to deal with his parents saying that they told him so, that he *needs* fucking help with this shit. But there was still a big fucking chance that he could have logged *the fuck* out of his brainstem and Shitsou was standing right there in the line of fire, probably would have looked enough like Shigaraki’s corpse-faced ass to whatever was left behind the wheel, and he could have *killed* him.

Bakugo didn’t, by the skin of his fucking teeth he stayed logged in long enough for Shitsou to let him go, and he said some messed up shit to Ashido but he made peace and all. He hasn’t felt fucking settled since, but he can’t pin all of that on Shitsou with Deku and *Invisibitch*’s antics making this dorm into a nightmare, but if someone wants to get technical about some shit, *maybe* he was fucking scared. In his lizard brain, because Bakugo brain doesn’t tolerate that shit, but lizard brain is stupid. “And I wouldn’t have fucking *meant* to, but that’s the shit that happens, and you *know* that. So if you want to talk about me being scared and mad and shit, I’d be pissed off and murdering your ass because my dumb bitch lizard brain was fucking scared. But *I’m* cool, as long as you’re not crazy. As crazy, because you’re fucking crazy on a good day.”

“You’re angry because you’re scared,” Shitsou says, like *that’s* the fucking revelation he should be having, and it’s honestly *hilarious* that he hasn’t heard that shit before.

“Oh ho, don’t you know? All the head shrinkers say ‘fear is the root of anger,’” Bakugo says, and he can’t help but *laugh* at the thought of one of those whiney ass guidance counselors seeing him now, or seeing him *like that*.

And Shitsou is probably not just grumpy, now that he thinks of it. He's just had other shit to deal with, it's not like he *forgot* that Shitsou nearly got his ass shanked on campus, *really* welcoming him to the UA experience and all.

"And that doesn't help at all, does it?" Bakugo asks, because he fucking *knows* it doesn't. He wasn't fucking *scared* when he was a twerpy little asshole getting into trouble, he just felt that shit burning in his veins from the nitroglycerin channels that were going to be used whether he wanted them to or not, because he didn't always have great quirk control. Not that anyone ever *fucking* got that, and he wasn't going to spell it out for them because that would mean everyone cheering for him to be a great *fucking* hero would have doubts when they *shouldn't*. He's gonna be a great hero, trauma shit and anger issues and all.

"Yamada told me that it's the part of you that doesn't want to be mistreated again," Shitsou says, and Micsei *would* spout off some flowery shit when he thinks the sun rises out of Shitsou's constantly tangled bedhead. "That doesn't help either."

"Then *maybe* you've gotta learn to deal with that shit. Like a quirk. Use it sometimes, but don't go apeshit. Learn some *control*, like you need to with your *actual* quirk," Bakugo says, because it's shitty, but what else is new with Shitsou? If the fucker doesn't get handed some fucked up shit to deal with, he'll start looking for it himself.

"Quirks," Shitsou says, all quiet like and it doesn't make fucking sense, but neither does the door opening up for the sixth floor and *Shitsei* standing there with his arms crossed, all intimidating and shit. Like Shitsei really wants to push Shitsou's buttons when *Bakugo's* there to twist his fingers for trying.

"*Oi*, you gonna do some fucked up shit to Shitsou because he wants to be buddy-buddy with Deku? And go for a walk like he's a *person* and he's not in prison?" Bakugo asks, and Shitsou grabs his shirt like he wants to yank him down, but he's just *holding* it. Pinching his shirt.

Like fucking *Eri* does, and holy shit are Shitsou's issues literally the *worst*. Probably no thanks to Shitsei standing there like he owns the place. "I would have appreciated the notice, but since I was aware that he left and he didn't leave alone, I'm not going to be unreasonable."

Shitsei *might* still be unreasonable, like locking Shitsou down for a few weeks in a hell version of grounding, which doesn't sound *different* from the shit he's already dealing with. But Bakugo looks over his shoulder, and even if Shitsou only looks *mildly* terrified, but he needs to either put the poker face back on and save his pride, or pull out all the stops and fucking *cry* to see if that will get him out of the shit he dug himself into. "Deal with your own shit, but the deal's not off if you need it."

Shitsou gives him a tiny fucking nod, and still walks up the last steps like he's expecting Shitsei to choke him out right there, but that's just because he's stupid. Bakugo isn't worried.

He's just worried that Deku fucked up breakfast and under seasoned everything, or worse, he's going to stick to his side like a *wart* and try to do some singalong shit just because he finally got it through his thick skull that they're *good*.

Fucking dumbasses, all of them, and the day that Bakugo stops trying to keep their asses alive, he'll probably finally find *peace*.

But fuck peace, along with Deku's dumbass smile, and the way he's just been *staring* at the fucking pan like that shit will go from raw to cooked instantaneously. Fucker should've picked this shit up from Auntie, but now that Bakugo has a choice in the matter, he needs Deku fucking

surgically removed from the stove. “Here.”

Bakugo hands him the mango sticky rice plate from the fridge, maybe the rice has gone too cold or maybe it hasn't cooled off enough, who the *fuck* cares because he doesn't, he didn't bother to get the math right on Deku's dumbass running schedule and it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

And Deku just keeps *staring* at it, holding it in his hands, *staring* at a basic fucking dessert like it's talking calculus to him. “*Oi*, it's *for you*, dumbass! Learn to say ‘thank you’ and shit!”

“Wha- thanks, but...” Deku's really just going to *stare* like that, like he's absorbed Icyhot's inability to blink or fucking *think* like his grey matter's been converted to a loading screen. “Why?”

“Do I have to spell this shit out, dumbass?” Bakugo asks, because this is *last fucking resort* territory, if he *really* has to bring that shit up, he's ending Deku's shit to leave no witnesses. “Elementary school. If you *still* don't get that shit, get the fuck out of my face, I'm not saying shit else about it.”

The old hag was still trying to *raise* him and shit to be a proper *respectable* ass adult, and since she could still scare the shit out of him back then, he had to at least *act* like he was paying attention to her. So sometimes, Auntie would blab to his mom about the shit he was pulling on Deku, or maybe *sometimes* he would get whiney and shifty and shit and she'd smell it on him. And she'd force him to do this shit.

Trotting his ass over to Deku's place just to say he was sorry wasn't *good* enough, and the hag was always right about that shit. So she'd make him really fucking mean it, by making him cook something to prove it, and it always made it less awkward when he had to puke out an apology to Deku, who always started crying first. *Always*, Bakugo never so much as sniffled.

And since he was a rotten ass little twerp with tiny hands that couldn't do shit, his mom would keep shit simple. Sticky rice, just rice and sweetened coconut milk and some kind of fucking fruit, and Deku *always* lost his shit over it. That's probably why the hag stopped making him do it, not that it was *effective* and shit about stopping him from being an asshole during school hours.

And Deku is losing his shit again, getting all fucking *sobby* because shit hasn't changed, even if he's got a quirk now. “*K-Kacchan*.”

“*Fuck off*,” Bakugo reminds, because that shit was *stupid* and it's early enough in the morning that it's just them, no witnesses, so this shit didn't fucking *happen*. Exactly like he planned.

Deku added some fucking onions to the vegetable fry up, just to be an *ass*.

*

Aizawa isn't allowed to physically or emotionally hurt him intentionally.

Hitoshi isn't allowed to leave unescorted or without permission.

But Aizawa isn't allowed to physically or emotionally hurt him intentionally, and at the very least, if he breaks that rule, he won't have to ask Yamada to break ties with his husband and choose him over Aizawa, because Ms. Joke seems likely to defend him. Take him in, possibly.

Kicking him out of UA might be a ‘natural consequence’ to leaving without permission, and he can only hope that Ms. Joke would truly take pity on him, because the argument that expelling him like that would be intentionally emotionally hurtful probably wouldn't work.

Hitoshi stands close to the end of the cot, while Aizawa sits down in his chair, fingers threaded in his lap, and Hitoshi tries not to look at the coffee maker. Full of water, ready to make coffee with the coffee grounds he didn't even *get*, because he realized he was thirsty after he got them. And then broke the mug, which Aizawa should also be angry about, even if it was an accident. "It seems like you made amends with Bakugo and Midoriya. But you also left without letting me know, and I want to know why you decided to do that."

Izuku wanted him to. Izuku asked if it was fine, but he didn't want to say no, he didn't want Izuku to be angry with him. He wanted to know Izuku's solution to his problem, and he wanted to go outside. But he doesn't want the blame to fall on Izuku. "I felt like I would feel better outside, and I wasn't unescorted. I'm sorry."

Aizawa nods, humming in agreement like he already predicted that, like he's just been sitting here thinking about how to make Hitoshi suffer ever since he saw on the surveillance cameras that he left, because Hitoshi was stupid enough to give him that forwarning. "I am proud of you for recognizing that taking a walk might have helped clear your mind, and taking Midoriya with you, even though I didn't approve of him as an escort option. The consequences for not letting me know are already on your phone, on the LNE app."

Aizawa is staring at him, waiting for him to discover what he's done, and Hitoshi pulls his phone out and tries not to feel sick to his stomach that he's just destroyed the app permanently somehow. But everything looks normal, except for a new chat request at the bottom. From *Aizawa*.

"The next time a situation like this comes up, I expect you to ask for permission to leave through this chat. And since that option wasn't available to you before, your punishment will be more lenient this time," Aizawa says, but when Hitoshi opens the chat to accept the request he sees that it's *not* lenient.

This is just *cruel*.

Aizawa: *Tap to download 22kB*

Aizawa: *Tap to download 22kB*

Aizawa: Pick which cat is cuter.

Hitoshi has to look up, to make sure that Aizawa means this. *This* is emotionally cruel, this *has* to be against the rules. Aizawa's face divulges *nothing*, like it always does.

Hitoshi: No. They're both cute, equally.

Hitoshi: *Tap to download 22kB*

Hitoshi: *Tap to download 22kB*

Hitoshi: Pick which picture of Eri is cuter.

Aizawa frowns at his phone, before scratching the side of his face, and Hitoshi is unnerved at how *loud* the bristly hairs on his face sound. "You picked the right option."

Because *both* cats are cute, just like any picture of Eri is cute. And if Aizawa claimed any differently, he'd be *wrong*.

Aizawa sends him a cat video, this time of a yawning white kitten with pink toe beans stretched out

beside its face. This one is so powerfully cute that he has to sit down, he doesn't think he can appreciate it properly if he's standing. "And I'm not angry with you for leaving. I forgive you, and trust that you'll let me know next time."

Hitoshi just hums, as another video is sent to him. A tabby kitten on its back, kneading its paws in the air while it sleeps. He has to stifle a yawn himself.

Aizawa is closer to him now, sitting farther away from his desk than he usually does. Hitoshi glances up, until a video with sound betrays how quickly he's tapping everything Aizawa sends, a loudly purring mother cat stretches out and pulls a kitten into her arms while it squeaks, before it settles. Aizawa is probably doing this on purpose.

He should face some punishment for it, Hitoshi realizes, before he rests his head on Aizawa's shoulder. If Aizawa is going to be cruel enough to make him tired, then he'll have to deal with his head making it harder for him to move his arm. Pinning him in place. Making him suffer.

He deserves to suffer, because when Hitoshi lets all of his weight rest against Aizawa's shoulder or his own legs, it gets harder to move his thumb to tap these things, or keep his eyes open. He taps, and hears purring, it's especially raspy. He doesn't know what the cat looks like.

It probably looks like Aizawa, but a cat. Aizawa's raspy voice coming through, black fur. White stripes around its neck for his scarf. Sleeping all the time.

Aizawa doesn't even sleep that much, he's not a cat. He's just.

An asshole.

Maybe.

*

Aizawa stretches his free arm above his head, once Hitoshi starts snoring, a sure sign that the teenager is completely dead to the world. Aizawa hasn't had much time to confirm it definitively, but he's starting to think that Hitoshi is becoming a heavier sleeper than he was when he first arrived to UA. Whether it's the persistent lack of sleep exacerbating that issue, or something else, he doesn't know.

But Aizawa takes Hitoshi's phone before it can fall out of his hands, and carefully uses his capture scarf to wind around Hitoshi's legs and back, creating a makeshift sling with his own shoulders as an anchor for support. It's difficult to carry Hitoshi like this, when his forehead is pressed to the back of his shoulder, but more logical methods risk waking him.

Aizawa lays Hitoshi on his back on the cot, one of the blankets still wound around his shoulders, but another is available to cover him properly. The teenager doesn't stir, but for a snore when he turns onto his side, reaching out towards nothing. Aizawa puts the phone next to him before he puts the blanket down, almost considering tucking the end under the mattress to make sure the goggles that fell out of Hitoshi's pocket wouldn't be out in the open when he woke up.

His own goggles, that apparently, Hitoshi wouldn't give up for anything.

Kiddo, We Gotta Talk

Chapter Summary

The wards are visited by quirk specialists to evaluate the mysteries in their quirks, and Shinsou must attempt to use his quirk on Yamada, to prove the validity of his wardship. Even after testing whether his quirk could work on Yamada through various means, Shinsou still hasn't been able to speak to Yamada since his quirk changed. But now, he has no choice.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: 50 mention,

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou and Aizawa went to the 1-A dorm without Eri in the previous chapter, after Shinsou used Confession and Brainwashing to test whether Aizawa truly cared about him, and Aizawa patted Shinsou's head. Shinsou had a nightmare and went with Midoriya to the Support Department to ask for a mask that would nullify his quirk, specifically requesting padding similar to Yamada's neck speakers and a band similar to Aizawa's goggles. Shinsou had worried that Eri wouldn't feel as special to him if he talked to other people, after overcoming his selective mutism that only allowed him to talk to Eri. Shinsou had been wearing Yamada's hero costume jacket, which Eri likes because he 'matches with Yama.' Ashido and Shinsou had been friends before Shinsou turned 4 and was sold by his mother. Shinsou had been fused with Chisaki and Nemoto at the end of the 8 Precepts raid, and though Eri Rewinded all three of them to undo the fusion, Shinsou had Nemoto's tattoo under his arm, indicating that the Rewind wasn't perfectly effective. In the two times that Monoma tried to Copy Shinsou's quirk without accomplishing it, Monoma said that it felt painful, then was not able to Copy it when Shinsou was sick. While Shinsou had taken control of Eri in quirk slips, the first time that he ordered someone under his control to do something after the raid was when he took control of Midoriya the night he tried to escape, which happened the day of the second interview when Shinsou was compelled by a Truth Serum quirk to talk about The Miasma. When Shinsou Brainwashed Midoriya after Midoriya asked him to, Shinsou felt unnerved by how similar the sensation was to Brainwashing Eri, which Midoriya hypothesized was due to Shinsou being able to feel the difference between a willing Brainwashing target and an unwilling one. Monoma has said before that his father thinks he's wasting his time as a hero student, and that he should focus on following his father's footsteps as a quirk specialist. Ms. Saito, the Wardship Commission representative in charge of Shinsou's case, is quirkless with an older brother who has a quirk, and has been trying to see Shinsou as a child instead of a violent ward after talking to Mirio. There have been moments where Shinsou tried to speak to Yamada after he returned to UA, and was not able to, in a way more similar to selective mutism borne from fear than the 'mask being locked' incapability of speaking he had before. Shinsou had previously used Confession on Ms. Saito. Shinsou threw away his stash, including a purple haired Troll doll that Bakugo painted white to match Shinsou's pale skin.

Yamada finds that welcoming his husband and ward back to the dorm in time for a late brunch is an exercise in self-restraint. He knows today is the big day, a quirk specialist will be in the building and some representative from The Commission of Wardship Affairs will be there too, and it *better* not be *the* representative for Hitoshi's case, because he already has vengeful plans for her email address.

He had to welcome the missing duo back home, and not squeeze either of them to death in a hug, even if he *truly* wants to. He would have slept better himself if he knew for a fact how Hitoshi was sleeping, in his own bed, but from the looks of it no one slept nearly enough last night, and Shouta has *that* look.

Shouta can go several days on little to no sleep, but there's a big red E for Empty at some point, and he sees a husband who's going to crash into that wall any minute now.

But Yamada got Shouta settled at the kitchen table while Eri kept him in his place, describing the *slightly* too many cupcakes that were devoured last night and resulting tummy ache, thankfully *not* the sugar-coated tantrum about not being invited to go to the dorm when *Twenny* was.

Speaking of said teenager who's picked up a predilection for Shouta's company recently, it takes all of Yamada's effort to keep him in the kitchen if not at arm's length, but the kid will barely sign a word to him and won't look him in the eye. He's *worried*, and although Yamada knows this little wardship test is already the final exam from hell for his little listener, he still has the worst case of test jitters. He's outright *skittish*.

As soon as breakfast-for-some-and-snack-for-others has been eaten as a family, the little bean is thankfully in high spirits knowing that her 'one meal eaten together every day' rule requirement has already been fulfilled, and maybe sniffs out a little listener's pensive mood when she demands some coloring in her room needs to take place. That unfortunately means she'll be missing out with her favorite quality time with Shouta - napping on top of him - but Yamada thinks he might take an hour or so to snuggle and possibly nap in her place. He's *decently* sure that no chaos can erupt during that time.

Shouta can only drag himself to the couch, but he flops on the armrest to stare at the ceiling like he's forgotten how to close his eyes. He left his coffee mug at the table, which means he's absolutely going to take a nap.

Yamada honestly didn't have many intentions of talking when he took the liberty of flopping himself onto his husband's chest, wrapping Shouta's arms around him because he knows the poor soul has burned through his wick and can't find the strength to do that himself. But instead of snores, a sleepy drawl comes out. "Your ward is a cat. And a magpie. And incredibly reckless. That's apparently the secret to understanding him."

Yamada tilts his head to confirm those sleepy eyes are *closed*, and Shouta has made an adorable conversation partner while completely dead to the world on some occasions. He's only recorded half of them though, and it's wholly unfortunate that he can't reach his phone right now. "What took you so long to figure that one out, Shou? Don't tell me you two stole Todoroki's secret cat and stayed up all night cooing over him."

He gets a particularly airy sigh in return, which might be a sign his sweet prince is drifting off into dreamland before he fesses up, but not *quite* yet. "He didn't think I cared about him. Used his quirk to prove it. The *wrong* way. Snuck out to ask the Support Department to put speakers in his throat

so he can't use his quirk."

"*Shou*," Yamada says, and it is a *struggle* not to yell when he knows Shouta is bordering on incoherent as it is, and he *doesn't* want to draw Eri's attention to him using some words he knows she knows, but doesn't want to reinforce. "What the *fuck*?"

"He wants a mask. And headpats," Shouta says, and Yamada. *Struggles* with that. Those two things, horror and something he can't even define right now, not in any language he knows, and even if he *knows* Shouta needs some sleep, Yamada *won't* be able to think until he gets a better explanation.

Yamada leans up, flicks Shouta's nose at just the right angle to get those beautiful eyes blinking and nose wrinkling, and he *just* needs Shouta to answer him properly this time. "What the *fuck* do you mean, 'he wants a mask?' From the *Support Department*? Did he seriously get someone that would-"

"Padded, with speakers. To nullify his quirk. And *yes*," Shouta says, and that sorts out *some* of the issues Yamada has, even if the dread sinks deeper and seems to get denser because if Hitoshi wants to stop worrying about his quirk when he talks, he can *understand* that. *Too* well. But a mask is still something he *doesn't* like, especially knowing why Hitoshi would insist that it has to be padded. "With the same band as my goggles. And padding from your speakers."

Oh no. It's worse than Yamada thought. It's even harder to fight, when there's still a part of him that wants to fight it with his bare teeth before Hitoshi puts a mask like *that* on his face.

Because that's also absolutely *adorable* and Yamada can feel his insides turning to goop at the thought. His *speakers*.

"He told you that?" Yamada asks, but as soon as the words come out of his mouth, he sees Shouta glance away and he *really* didn't need to ask. "You *spied* on him-"

"He left without telling me. With Midoriya. They're two of the greatest risks under my care," Shouta says, and since there was no injury report, Yamada takes that as a sign that this 'no friends' thing might have started to seem less cool to his little listener. And despite Shouta's grief and persistent superstitions about Midoriya, Yamada *approves* of that little friendship blossoming. "It's his decision. We should probably act surprised. Supportive."

Yamada hums, even if he doesn't feel particularly supportive right now. He'll have to see it for himself, if Hitoshi is *really* okay with that or if that's a quirk issue that needs better methods of coping. Instead of what could be a bad one, a bad reminder. *Speaking* of, "*Headpats?*"

Shouta *thought* he could close his eyes again, and isn't that cute? Not until *that* word is explained, in detail, so Yamada can possibly shake the green out of his eyes by shaking his husband. "He used his quirk to make me do it. I used cat introduction the second time. Seemed to go fine."

Yamada's not *totally* on board with Hitoshi using his quirk to make people do things like that, it's purely innocent now because he's sure Shouta has no qualms about dispersing headpats on that fluffy purple head, but there might be a little book about healthy boundaries that Eri got recently and Hitoshi might need to take a look at. "It went 'fine' as in 'not cataclysmic' or 'fine' as in you don't want to brag to me about how great it went?"

"He nearly fell asleep standing up," Shouta confesses, which *does* make sense with the one and only time Yamada got close to a headpat, when Hitoshi was pretty out of it on the last day of his big sick and insisted on cuddling up with him and getting his hair stroked under penalty of grumpy

whines. Playing with his hair was the only way to coax the kid to sleep, it seemed, and Yamada *might* need to weaponize that in due time. Definitely deserves future testing.

“Did he smell your hand?” Yamada asks, because he *has* to ask. Shouta at least cracks an eye open to assuage his worst worries, because that would be a *little* weird. “So, you held out your hand-forehead height or nose height? Did you wait for a love blink before you went in-”

“Forehead, he looked, leaned forward. *Goodnight*,” Shouta says, because he doesn’t want to call it what it is. A *cat* head bop.

Something that Hitoshi *also* might have absorbed by proximity to his husband, who *does* have some sleep to catch up with. While Yamada has some snuggles to catch up on.

And some dreams that might become reality, once this test is over and Hitoshi’s nerves are less shot, and the kid *definitely* deserves some headpats for the trouble, which Yamada is happy to provide.

*

Eri has to sigh, and it’s such a big sigh that she’s gotta go around her drawing table so she can sigh and land on Twenny’s legs, because he’s not paying attention again. When Twenny and Zawa got back from sleeping at the hero dorm, *without* asking if she wanted to go, Twenny said he was sorry, and he was gonna make it up to her. And she told him after they ate breakfast together, he had to color with her as a punishment.

But Twenny’s not *coloring*, he’s just staring at his paper, and it’s probably ‘cause Twenny is a really bad listener. Probably ‘cause Yama calls him a ‘little’ listener a lot, so he only listens a little. “What’s wrong, Eri?”

“*Twenny*, you gotta stop worrying about your doctor appointment if you’re not gonna cry and make Zawa not take you!” Eri says, because she already told Twenny what to do, and he said he’s not gonna do it.

Last night, when she was sad and kinda mad about Zawa and Twenny not inviting her, Yama told her that Twenny was acting kinda funny because he’s worried about his doctor appointment. It’s a quirk doctor appointment, just like the ones that Zawa was supposed to take her to, but she cried until he stopped asking her about them, because she was really scared of her quirk. Now that she wants to use her quirk, she wants to see if the doctor can make it less difficult, and Yama said that he can see if she can see that doctor too. And she wasn’t supposed to, but she heard Mr. Nezu say that Eri seeing the quirk doctor for that ‘makes things easier’ when Yama talked to him on the phone this morning.

She doesn’t know what that means, but it should make Twenny less scared ‘cause she can be there to protect him, just like Yama and Zawa.

“I’m not worried, Eri,” Twenny says, but he’s lying ‘cause he hasn’t colored any more of his pony in almost forever, and Eri is almost done coloring hers. “I know it’s going to be fine. And you’re going to be fine. Aizawa and Yamada are going to be there to make sure nothing bad happens.”

Twenny says that, but he’s still frowny, and he’s still looking at the floor like he’s tired. But he’s not tired, ‘cause he said he didn’t want to take a nap with her.

Eri sighs, and rolls over on her back so she can hold Twenny’s hand, since he’s not using it to color with her. Twenny’s hands are bigger than hers, and he’s got a bunch of scars, even the secret little

ones on his palm where he got hurt when he was little, when he was learning to use a knife. They don't have big grooves like his other ones, but when she stretches out his hand, she can still see them. They're kinda like secrets.

"Twenny, I wanna play the Secret Game," Eri says, and Twenny looks down at her kinda surprised, 'cause he probably doesn't know how to play it. Mizzy said that she made it up all on her own, but it's a lot of fun. "I'm gonna tell you a secret in your ear, and you gotta tell me a secret too. And then we gotta promise not to tell anyone our secrets, okay?"

"Okay," Twenny says, and he has a tiny smile on his face, but he's been so frowny all day that it makes her smile too when she gets up, and she has to stand up to reach his ear to whisper to him.

"I wanna fix Mirio's quirk for my birthday," Eri whispers, really tiny so only Twenny can hear it. But when she looks at Twenny's face, he's frowny again, and he's still not listening good. "I wanna do it by myself, so you don't gotta help! That's why I wanna go see the quirk doctor, 'cause they can help me learn about my quirk, and I can train better. So don't be worried, and don't tell Mirio!"

"I know, and I hope that you can. It might not work the first time, or on your birthday," Twenny says, and he puts his hand on her head next to her horn, kind of like he's measuring it, because it *did* get a little bigger, but she knows it's gonna get really big on her birthday, 'cause she's gonna be so happy. "But, you know you don't have to fix Mirio's quirk to stay here, right? You don't have to worry about that, because Aizawa and Yamada are going to take care of you no matter what."

"I know, Twenny," Eri says, 'cause it's not like it was before they were rescued. Yama and Zawa don't ever make her use her quirk, and Zawa only ever makes sure she doesn't hurt anyone on accident. And they just want to help her get better with her quirk 'cause everyone's gotta do that. "I just *really really really* wanna fix Mirio's quirk, so he can be a hero again! I was kinda scared at first, but now I'm not, 'cause I know I can do it!"

"I know you will," Twenny says, and he smiles and makes her toes kinda curly, just like when Zawa says he's proud of her. Twenny cups his hands together to whisper in her ear with his secret, but the air tickles her at first and she has to giggle. But she tries to puff up her cheeks the next time, and Twenny doesn't tickle her ear this time. "I... can talk to other people now. But I won't if you tell me not to."

Eri has to look at Twenny, to make sure he's not lying. Twenny just looks really worried, and kind of like he's sick again, but Eri throws her arms around him to hug that bad feeling out of him. "Twenny, I *want* you to talk to other people! I was really happy when you were talking to your friends, 'cause you gotta talk to do a lot of stuff!"

Twenny is really kinda slow when he hugs her back, but he hugs her right and really tight, like he was really worried about it, which is kinda dumb. "I just want you to know that you're always going to be special to me, even if I talk to other people. I'll only sing to you, if that makes you feel better."

"Twenny," Eri says, and she wants to stomp her feet, but she might stomp on Twenny's leg if she does it. "You sing *really really* pretty, and I want you to sing with your friends too! I want you to be happy, and I know I'm special because I'm Eri, and you're Twenny. And Toshi sometimes, and that makes you special to me, 'cause I only give two special names to the people that are special-est to me."

Twenny hugs her even tighter, and she knows that makes him happy. And she wants to make him even happier, so he can stop being so frowny and worried all the time.

“And you can use my special names for Zawa and Yama,” Eri says, and Twenny looks at her kind of like he’s surprised Zawa and Yama get special names too.

“What’s their special names?” Twenny asks, and his eyebrow goes up and makes her want to poke it, but even when she does his eyebrow doesn’t go down. But he should really know Yama and Zawa’s secret names already.

“Dad,” Eri says, because they are her dads, but she only has to call them that sometimes, ‘cause she doesn’t want them to forget the names she gave them first.

Sometimes, Zawa gets a little weird when she calls him his special name, but he’s getting better at it. He even smiled when he made her cereal yesterday and she called him that. But Twenny makes a face kind of like Zawa used to when she says that, ‘cause he already said he didn’t want to call Yama ‘Dad,’ even if he’s wrong. Or just scared to. “That’s okay, it’s different for me. It’s fine for you to do that, though. I know they like it.”

Eri tilts her head, ‘cause that doesn’t make a lot of sense. She knows she’s different from Twenny in a lot of ways, like him being big and older and he’s got different parts like her book said, and he can’t be the kind of mom that grows babies because he doesn’t have a uterus, even though some dads do have uteruses. Yama said he doesn’t have a uterus, and Zawa doesn’t either, but that still doesn’t make sense why they can’t be Twenny’s dads too. “Why’s it different? Yama and Zawa do a whole lot of dad stuff for you too, just like they do for me, and they’re okay with me calling them ‘Dad.’”

Twenny’s lips get kinda scrunchy, and he gets an itch on the back of his head. “It’s just different. Because I’m older.”

“Oh,” Eri says, even if it doesn’t make sense. Mirio’s even older than Twenny, and he still called Yama ‘Dad’ that one time. “But I still think you should try it, Twenny! Yama got really happy when Mirio called him ‘Dad!’ And you wanna make Yama happy!”

Eri hears a knock on her door, and Twenny looks at her before his face gets kinda red, and his lips get *really* scrunchy, but she remembers the rules that Yama told her about her room.

“Come in!” Eri says, Yama opens the door and he’s smiling kinda weird, really big on one side and kinda tiny on the other. Twenny is getting kinda shrinky, and it’s weird that he’s acting scared of Yama.

“Hey, little listeners! It’s time to get ready and get a snack before we get to meet some quirk doctors! And I think that we should start thinking about something real fun to do after that, maybe playing around in the snow then warming up with some homemade apple cider!” Yama says, and that’s such a good idea that Eri has to hold both of her hands up really high, ‘cause getting cold then getting Yama’s cider is the *best* idea ever!

“Yeah! Come on, Toshi, we gotta get ready so we can play!” Eri says, and she grabs Twenny’s shirt and pulls so he can stand up and stop being so shrinky. They’re already dressed, and Twenny’s hair is combed, but Eri wants Yama to put her hair in pigtails like Sailor Moon, just in case she gets scared of the doctor, so she can remember that she can still be brave even if she feels scared. Twenny’s just gotta pick a jacket to wear outside, and maybe he can match with Yama again.

But Twenny stops close to Yama, and kind of hugs him, even if it looks like he forgot how to hug people with his arms. Yama smiles kinda squinty, but hugs Twenny back to remind him, and Twenny kinda gets shrinky against Yama when he remembers to use his arms. “It’s gonna be

alright kiddo, nothing to worry about. And it's not going to change a thing."

Twenny's face is kinda smushed on Yama, but he makes a noise like he's kinda not happy about that, or he's still worried, even everyone's gonna be there to make sure he can't be scared. And Yama just squeezes him tighter after he makes it.

But Twenny's smushy-noise also kinda sounded like he was saying 'thank you,' but in a kinda sad way. But that's just 'cause Twenny's scared, and forgetting that it's gonna be okay, and they're gonna have fun with apple cider and playing in the snow together after that.

And no matter how scary the quirk doctor is, he can't be as scary as the apple cider will taste good, so it's all gonna work out fine.

*

Hitoshi knows that Aizawa is only dragging himself along because Eri wants to see this doctor too. He knows that Aizawa really can't do anything to affect his quirk, to make sure he can't use it on Yamada, it's *pointless*.

He's not really mad about it, or at least he tells himself so. He's just tired. He's just jittery, like the first time he drank Aizawa's coffee.

He's just scared, and he can't get over it.

Rat Boss said that the quirk doctor was going to use Recovery Girl's office, and that they set up a bunch of equipment already. Hitoshi doesn't know what equipment they need, but he's not sure if he should be scared of it. If being scared of being tied down and tortured horribly in the name of getting answers could be a relieving fear, instead of the thought of being forced to leave UA if this quirk test doesn't work.

Even if he knows it will, he's proven it in every way he can. Everyone says it's going to be fine.

He can't believe it for himself until it's over.

Yamada opens the door, and Recovery Girl isn't there. There is a lot of white equipment, things he can't hope to name or know what it will do to him, but there's also *two* men in white coats holding clipboards who look like doctors, and they both look at them like opening the door was interrupting them. One of them has a scruffy face like Aizawa, circles under his eyes too, and black hair that's shorter than Aizawa's, but too much else is similar. And Aizawa seems to know him, when he takes it upon himself to name him. "Dr. Tenma."

But Dr. Tenma doesn't have time to talk, before the other doctor cuts him off. "Pleasure to meet you! I've heard we have a very interesting case--"

"Dr. Monoma," says the tired looking guy who looks *way* too much like Aizawa, in a way that Hitoshi *really* doesn't like, and he's definitely talking to Dr. *Monoma*.

He's older, a bit fatter, but they have the same hair and eyes. He's balding a bit, the gap where his hair is parted is bigger than it should be, and it's at least amusing to think that Quirk Thief will go bald too. He's even staring at Hitoshi and Eri with the same disturbing, slack jawed *fascination* that Quirk Thief does. "Of course, I don't want to rush myself. But I'm pleased to make your acquaintance! My colleague Dr. Tenma doesn't usually ask for my expertise, but rest assured, you're in good hands between the two of us."

Hitoshi doesn't look, but Aizawa must have given Dr. Tenma *a* look. Aizawa doesn't tend to like

surprises, and he usually gets grumpy about it. Dr. Tenma sighs, and looks up from his clipboard to look back at Aizawa. Probably just as grumpily. “Given that I have a focus on adult patients in a variety of practices, I wanted to consult with someone more experienced in adolescent and prepubescent quirk morphology, and Dr. Monoma eagerly agreed. I’ll be evaluating from a neurological focus, among other things, while Dr. Monoma-”

“I’ll be doing what I do best,” Dr. Monoma says with a too fake chuckle, and Hitoshi wonders if Quirk Thief’s mother is just this annoying. She must not be, otherwise Hitoshi would have had to kill Quirk Thief by this point. He can’t even *imagine* how much more annoying he would be if both of his parents were this annoying. “I do have to admit, I did hear a *bit* about you before now. Neito hardly calls, hardly asks for my help for anything, but he’s *certainly* been interested in you for a while. I’d be delighted to tell him the details, but of course, that might be bragging. And breaking patient confidentiality, of course. Unless you’d be interested in being featured in one of my studies? I must admit that my previous articles about mental quirks have been absolutely groundbreaking-”

“*Dr. Monoma*, if you *could*,” Dr. Tenma says, with an exceptionally tired edge to his voice. It’s weird, but Hitoshi thinks he meant to say ‘if you would,’ like people tend to do when they’ve planned something and want the other person to act their part. But he might be right in wondering if Dr. Quirk Thief *could* do whatever he was supposed to do, when he’s just that stupidly distracted.

“Ah, yes, let’s not waste any more time, we certainly have a lot of ground to cover today,” Dr. Quirk Thief says, and he *grins*, a bit too much like Bug would when she *knew* she could do her worst to him.

He has to sit on the bed, and Yamada offers to stay with him, but Dr. Quirk Thief says something about contaminated testing, and Hitoshi tells him that he’ll be okay. Not that he’ll be fine, and not that he can bring himself to do more than sign it.

The more they fiddle with the equipment, the more they pull things over him and poke and prod, and make him give them *blood* on top of all the things they’re poking and sticking on him, he just hopes that he’ll be safe at the end of this.

*

Aizawa would have rather been able to stay in the same room as Hitoshi, to be able to reassure him in any way and help with the clear nerves that were getting worse as more monitoring equipment was set up, especially with how he *flinched* when his blood was drawn. Being able to see Hitoshi on one of many monitors set up in a slightly disorganized ‘observation room’ in the next office over, only heightens his own worries rather than soothes them. It makes the distance seem further.

Hizashi isn’t with him, only because after Eri and himself had each been pulled into the room for live demonstrations, Eri seemed to get fidgety, likely more restless with her own anticipation for being seen by Dr. Tenma, and Hizashi volunteered to take her on a walk around the abandoned classrooms and hallways. Hizashi asked if that was fine, in a way that *might* have meant that he wanted Aizawa to take the offer, but even if Hitoshi is Hizashi’s ward, he knows Dr. Tenma better. He’s just as equipped to do this, to be available for questions and to learn first hand what’s discovered.

But he would have *truly* rather this be conducted by Dr. Tenma, his own doctor, than this Dr. Monoma who seems horrifyingly similar to his son. “Tenma, you *are* seeing this, right? My god, what I would *give* to evaluate this young man before the secondary event, two astounding breakthroughs- it’s such a pity that neither sample is clean-”

“Dr. Monoma,” Dr. Tenma drones, looking up from a microscope where Hitoshi’s quirk factor cells had been isolated from the blood sample, back to Dr. Tenma who has been watching how the brain imaging changes each time Dr. Monoma changes the stimulus. Aizawa would rather be in another room, especially with Eri taking all of this in, unfortunately with Dr. Monoma’s excited observations, but he’s had to give Hitoshi’s ‘medical history’ while both doctors were looking at their separate evaluations. “*Well*. That is surprising.”

Dr. Tenma, as a rule, doesn’t break his usual tired monotone. It was honestly a relief after USJ, to see the man who dedicated his life to various medical practices to make efficient use of his passive No Sleep quirk, who broke the news that Aizawa’s vision would likely worsen more rapidly and his quirk had been weakened with the same tone he would to diagnose a cold. And that’s why Aizawa wants to know what’s so *surprising*.

He’s only too relieved to see Dr. Tenma turn around in his chair to explain it, instead of Dr. Monoma. “Shinsou’s quirk is a mental emitter, vocal type, according to the partial quirk registration report we received. Supposedly question-activated, but those registration reports filed at the age of development always have room for changes. Especially with his family history taken into account, and corrected now with his father’s quirk, Dr. Monoma is evaluating how the primary event may have affected it.”

The ‘primary event’ is the driest, politest, and almost insultingly vague way of describing how Hitoshi had a metal mask trapping his jaw shut so that he could barely speak for eight years.

“When pre-response, the part of Shinsou’s brain that processes communication doesn’t react as it should. There’s a marked decrease in the difference between the placebo white noise, Dr. Monoma’s test responses, foreign languages that shouldn’t be known to him, and videos of sign language than we would expect to see,” Dr. Tenma says, as though it’s not at all *terrifying* that on a neurological level, Hitoshi’s communication skills are stunted that drastically. “But, post-response-”

“The *quirk factor* enters the fray!” Dr. Monoma interrupts, beaming too wide at that. “This is classic nurture and environmental stunting, and I’m sure that Dr. Tenma could go on about-”

“I *will*, if you don’t mind, *given* that this is primarily neurological,” Dr. Tenma interrupts, clearing his throat. “The reason that Shinsou reacts differently after giving a response probably lent itself to the initial diagnosis that his quirk relies on questions being asked. I don’t have that analysis of Shinsou’s language skills at the time, but I would assume they were stunted. To think of it another way, Shinsou doesn’t recognize that he’s having a conversation with someone unless he responds, but earlier in his development, on a neurological level, he wouldn’t expect a response unless he was asking a question. This means that due to the primary event, Shinsou’s language skills are buffered by the pre-existing quirk structure in his brain, otherwise we would see far worse results from this. Given that Shinsou’s quirk was primarily used in instances of increased stress, when he was forced to use it, his quirk structure is also markedly present with other stress responses, to the degree that it’s unique from the usual baseline we would see in the average population. This may also explain the ‘quirk slips’ that were reported, as Shinsou’s quirk seems to ‘latch on’ to some degree after control is established once, but again, the secondary event muddies the results.”

Trades. It almost sickens Aizawa, to think that it truly ran that deep, it was hardwired into Hitoshi’s brain in a different way, that he didn’t expect to get something without offering something in return. The way Hitoshi would ‘trade questions,’ the way he would offer up something in exchange for what he wanted, to convince himself that he deserved it. How convinced he always was that he had to do something in order to remain at UA, be it controlling Eri or helping with the investigation. And how his quirk had been trained, on a *neurological* level,

to activate alongside a fight or flight response.

“In the second phase of the primary event, which occurred three years ago, we’re going off the assumption that while Shinsou was able to speak more freely, it was still primarily for quirk usage.”

When Hitoshi was sold to the 8 Precepts of Death, he was able to talk to Eri, but he still wore that mask, presumably for it to be locked at certain intervals. And as Aizawa doesn’t know how frequently Hitoshi was forced to be mute, but does know that he was forced to use his quirk on Eri frequently. He imagines that he was still only supposed to speak in order to use it. But clearly, for Eri’s sake, he didn’t.

“During the month of October, he was diagnosed as mute, corrected to selectively mute at the end of October, and overlooking the influence of the secondary event, he was able to speak more freely with those he had used his quirk on,” Dr. Tenma says, and Aizawa would *like* to overlook the ‘secondary event’ altogether, but he knows that’s impossible. “This could be due to any manner of factors, as we don’t have definitive evidence either way. Quirk Rejection, traumatic response, the secondary event’s influence, but it may be due to how Shinsou’s quirk may not recognize that the ‘conversation,’ we’ll say, had ended. Even after 12 years.”

Hitoshi had been able to speak to Ashido, because he used his quirk on her when they were both so young that they didn’t even remember each other. Yet his brain still thought that they were still having a *conversation*, so he was able to speak.

“In terms of how this has affected Shinsou’s quirk development and where it will go from here-”

“Allow me to explain, this is *my* area of expertise, after all,” Dr. Monoma cuts in, clearing his own throat twice, to earn a *particularly* dry look from Dr. Tenma. “I do commend you for falling right into the treatment plan I would have recommended from the start! Strengthening Shinsou’s language skills in various means, both verbal and in sign language, introducing foreign languages as well, not only will this tackle the root of the issue in the ‘underused muscle’ so we say, but the most *interesting* facet of a call and response activation quirk is that the quirk can be trained to recognize different calls and responses! *This* may already be taking form, as Shinsou reacted the same way *regardless* of whether he responded with a statement, *or* a question!”

Aizawa had already wondered if that was the case. While he wasn’t a Quirk Specialist, he had to be educated well enough on quirk development strategies to oversee his students’ development and training, and evolving past questions and even into nonverbal cues seemed to be possible. It had happened with Eri, at least.

“And *with* the questions- well, that leads into the secondary event, which- I should mention I have consulted for-”

“*Confidentiality*, Dr. Monoma. And I’m still waiting for what we can gather of the history throughout the secondary event, in Shinsou’s quirk factor isolated solution,” Dr. Tenma interrupts, because it does seem like that’s *his* area of expertise, given that Dr. Monoma has been toying with Shinsou’s live responses and CAT scans. “The sample from the DNA filed in his missing child report is damaged, but pulling together the sample obtained at the hospital directly after the secondary event, and the one collected now, there are marked differences-”

“I do *need* to see that,” Dr. Monoma says, pushing his chair into Dr. Tenma’s space, which Dr. Tenma takes as an excuse to trade spaces. Dr. Tenma only pauses for a moment before he decides to change whatever stimulus is affecting Hitoshi right now.

“Dr. Monoma, if you could keep an eye on the stress responses-”

“What threshold did he hit before you- oh, nevermind,” Dr. Monoma grumbles, waving a hand before he turns back to the microscope, switching between samples.

“As I said before, Shinsou’s selective mutism may have been explained by the secondary event,” Dr. Tenma explains, in what might be a sneaky way to keep Dr. Monoma distracted from the conversation. “We have reports from the hospital that he was feverish, unresponsive but for bouts of delirium, and though most tests came back inconclusive, the quirk factor solution indicates that there were-”

“*Three!*” Dr. Monoma shouts, turning around to look at Dr. Tenma, nauseatingly giddy with that. “*Two* foreign quirk factors, do we have a sample to evaluate how the immune system could have- I’ve honestly never seen evidence of someone surviving this level of quirk factor injection in those human experimentation projects-”

“*Dr. Monoma,*” Dr. Tenma interrupts sharply, and it’s deserved. Aizawa has heard about possibly the worst thing that happened early in the age of quirks, how some countries had tried to see how quirks could be privately weaponized to the limit with a barely understood science. He honestly doesn’t have to wonder if whoever was creating Nomus had been taking notes from those projects, given that Nomus seemed to be the success those scientists over a hundred years ago had been dreaming of.

“Of course, Shinsou is quite lucky in this regard,” Dr. Monoma says with a handwave, before he tilts his head, his hand cupping his chin. “Were I to theorize what may have happened, I would say that the third quirk factor that was expelled was a type too dissimilar to what Shinsou’s body recognized as his own. You said it was possibly a touch-activated emitter, Overhaul, but the other foreign quirk was a vocal type emitter. The violent fevers in the hospital could be evidence of his body expelling the touch-activated emitter, but with comorbidity in the chemical pneumonia, the poor state of his body at the time due to chronic malnutrition - it’s *truly* a wonder he didn’t-”

“His body couldn’t fight off the more similar quirk factor,” Dr. Tenma says, rather than let Dr. Monoma describe yet another time that Hitoshi should have lost his life. Aizawa truly doubts Hitoshi was only born with only nine to lose, and he doesn’t want to know how many he’s lost so far. “The fevers were present throughout the majority of November, I would assume, but only when his body could manage it. The selective mutism may have been another symptom, with both quirk factors attempting to reach homeostasis, competing for space to settle in his body-”

“*Painful*, my boy said at first,” Dr. Monoma interrupts, pulling away from the microscope again to sigh, looking up at the ceiling. “Then *nothing*. I’m truly glad he’s not wasting away his talent at this school, I was truly worried he was becoming numb to the nuances of his quirk, how it could be used properly if he would just-”

“Taking into account outside observation,” Dr. Tenma interrupts. Thankfully, as Aizawa wasn’t sure if he should risk poking a bear if he clarified whether Dr. Monoma thinks that his son was *wasting* his potential to pursue heroics. “Shinsou’s quirk factor would have been unstable, possibly targeted as an infection he couldn’t fight off, and the immune response to that could have been aggravated when he attempted to use his quirk, as seen when he developed a migraine, when he suffered a strain and became feverishly unresponsive, but in those instances he hadn’t fully utilized or demonstrated control over the person he used his quirk on, not until the event that preceded the worst bout of illness-”

“Ah, you’re forgetting something, I’m afraid!” Dr. Monoma interrupts, raising a finger with a smug look that’s all too eager to lecture the admittedly younger physician, even if that physician has five

more medical specialties than he does. “The introduction of *another* foreign quirk factor. *Truth Serum*, which according to our files, seems to be quite a marriage of the two competing quirks that were inside Shinsou at the time. Bodily fluids introduced into the target, to force them to tell the truth, a command from Brainwash and honesty from Confession, which now had a perfect DNA sample to blueprint how to align themselves-”

“We can’t evaluate how possible that is without examining Truth Serum,” Dr. Tenma argues. “But following that, Shinsou used his quirk and was able to speak in order to do so, to two new targets, and commanded one of them for an extended amount of time. The day following that, Dr. Monoma’s son did observe that he wasn’t able to Copy Shinsou’s quirk, indicating that the quirk factors were either strained to that point, or beginning to realign into this ‘fusion,’ or both.”

“And then he was sick. Extremely feverish, and it seemed to get worse when someone he had Brainwashed before was talking to him,” Aizawa adds, because he’ll never forget those harrowing days. Knowing that for all they could do to bring down Hitoshi’s fever, they couldn’t do what they *should* have done, and it all seemed to crash down when Hitoshi was deathly-pale, screaming and shaking in that bathtub.

“And after that point, he was able to use his quirk with no repercussions,” Dr. Tenma says, describing the incident that Aizawa was asleep for, when Hitoshi took control of Eri and even used her quirk to Rewind their pet fish back to life. “Shinsou also said, though it wasn’t evidenced, that he could speak freely without being selectively mute after that incident. This would suggest that the final bout of illness was a result of the quirk factors completing the fusion-”

“Though, I would argue the point for that,” Dr. Monoma says, raising his hand. “This isn’t entirely a true ‘fusion.’ I have seen... well, there are better ones to be observed. My Analysis quirk indicates the same, that there is still some fraying and fragmentation between Confession and Brainwashing, and to the point of that post-illness quirk usage, there was no demonstrable evidence of Confession until last week-”

“Which, is why I would like to propose some different models of testing, in the future,” Dr. Tenma says, and Aizawa breathes easier knowing that it’s ‘in the future.’ “In our exam with Eri as the subject, we saw that Shinsou did not use Confession, but instead used Brainwash, entirely under his own volition. This might be due to how Shinsou’s quirk reacts differently to her specifically, it may be that Confession is only linked to a stress-threshold, as that was observed with Dr. Monoma as the subject-”

“Asking such *horrible* questions about my son, it must be uncontrollable at this-”

“And it may be due to Confession still being treated as a semi-foreign quirk factor,” Dr. Tenma explains, checking the screens again before he continues. “Once Shinsou’s quirk factor has fully settled, and Shinsou develops a keener sense to the differences in his quirk, it should be possible to utilize the fragmentation still present. Over time, we may be able to create a plan where Brainwash is for all appearances Shinsou’s quirk-”

“Which, is admittedly-”

“*What* was specified in the goals of treatment, *Dr. Monoma*,” Dr. Tenma reminds, with a tone that Aizawa has heard a few times before.

Aizawa trusts Dr. Tenma, and appreciates all of his specialties that allow him to *only* see Dr. Tenma when he has a need for a doctor, because the man has an unwavering focus on the ‘goals of treatment.’ He’ll never argue that Aizawa should pursue treatments that prevent the eventual degradation of his eyesight at risk of limiting his quirk, because Aizawa has made it clear that his

quirk is more important. Dr. Tenma will only ever get frustrated when Aizawa fails the metrics that Aizawa himself sets, and Dr. Tenma is the *only* quirk specialist he has ever seen that didn't practically *drool* on themselves over examining Erasure.

Which is why Aizawa would like Dr. Monoma to leave so that Dr. Tenma is the only one involved in examining Eri. "I believe that we have enough evidence to work with for now, and a more conclusive report will be made for you, along with suggestions for those treatment-focused appointments."

"Will the report cover whether his quirk is at risk for causing Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome?" Aizawa asks, because he knows if he could hand that definitive proof to Hitoshi, written down and verified by experts in the field of quirk science, he would *believe* it. As much as Hitoshi might avoid using that word, as much as he seems to be getting closer to accepting his quirk, the nightmare last night may only prove further that he still worries about that beneath the surface.

And the way that Dr. Tenma and Dr. Monoma glance at each other before Dr. Tenma answers isn't promising. "It would, but the risk factor can't be definitively determined right now. But evidence seems to suggest that before the secondary event, and likely quirk usage that isn't under the influence of Confession, that risk was non-existent."

Aizawa straightens where he's sitting, because that means that the risk is *not* non-existent now.

"It requires rigorous testing to determine exactly where Shinsou's quirk would fall on the MQAS 10 point scale, but at the initial evaluation for mental quirks, we are able to determine a softer rating of mild, moderate, or severe risk," Dr. Monoma says, less enthusiastic to explain this than he has been to explain anything since the appointment began. "Like Dr. Tenma said, the evidence to suggest that Brainwashing would be rated mildly is right in front of our eyes, Eri being a young child in the greatest risk category. *But*, we were given access to view Confession's risk factor, specifically with the- the *donor*, I suppose, which had a determined risk factor of 7. Borderline severe. And while I would expect borderline moderate risk with Shinsou's quirk due to that, it actually falls into the mild category. While it's possible that Confession hasn't fully settled in yet, it's also possible, though rather improbable, that Brainwashing prior to these events had that specific reactive component that can actually be used as *treatment* for MQAS, though that's... that's *highly* unlikely."

"What Dr. Monoma means by that is, the nature of Brainwashing would be by itself at high risk for MQAS," Dr. Tenma explains, what Aizawa has honestly thought before, and what drove him to ask for that testing before Eri was discharged. "Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome is the result of the human brain struggling to adjust to the changes that the active mental quirk subjects it to. A full cognitive dissociative state with loss of motor control is exactly the type of case I would expect to see a severe rating. But, I believe that with the quirk being a call and response quirk, primarily targeting the communication centers in the target's brain before overtaking motor control and memory retention, this reduces the effect. Instead of a bullet, it's a soft mallet willing to negotiate. And if it's true that there is a somewhat... empathetic link between Shinsou and Eri, and that Shinsou can feel a difference between an unwilling and willing target, that implies an even softer impact, so to speak. It's still a shared communication link, but probably far more diverse than Shinsou realizes or utilizes now."

"*And* the bullet," Dr. Monoma says, seemingly laughing under his breath at Dr. Tenma's analogy. "Is Confession. That quirk targets the communication centers in the brain aggressively, and I believe the terminology in the quirk registration report was that it more specifically targeted a 'perception of reality.' To put forth my own comparison, Brainwashing is akin to professional hypnosis at its core, there *should be* a greater risk of disorientation after its effect fades, an effect

that would take its toll long-term, but demonstrably hasn't. Confession is holding the mind at gunpoint and forcing oneself to question the very meaning of reality, 'existential crisis' I believe was an *actual* symptom post-use. And while we would expect to see arsenic diluted in milk as the byproduct of those two quirks fusing, instead we see... I suppose--"

"It's not at a high enough risk for prohibition, but I wouldn't suggest prolific repeated usage on the same person. Anything less than 1,000 uses of Confession would be safe," Dr. Tenma says, and while Aizawa imagines he's still the person who has been subject to Confession from Hitoshi *the most*, it's far less than 1,000 times. "And if you're ready, we'd like to create a quirk registration file for Miss Eri."

Aizawa knows that Dr. Tenma has already received instructions about that, as fruitless as those previous attempts were, but he's not sure if he remembers, or if Dr. Monoma can be entirely trusted to comply. As brave as Eri is, she doesn't need to be tested further. "Can we go over what will happen in that exam first? And if you could take off your gloves--"

"Of course! I won't need them, they get in the way for me," Dr. Monoma says, too eagerly stripping out of his latex gloves. Dr. Tenma instead gives a wary look, folding his hands in his lap.

Dr. Tenma looks at Aizawa, there's almost an accusation there that he's being too overprotective, but thankfully that accusation is silent. "Eri has had previous traumatic experiences concerning her quirk, in a way that could be perceived as 'medical.' With that in mind, I've already discussed with Dr. Monoma the actions we should take to distance this visit from those experiences. Dr. Monoma sees more children than I do, and he's more adept at a painless and distracted blood draw, from a finger stick. I'd like to take an X-ray of Eri's skull to determine if there's any issue with her horn growth, given that there were some symptoms of her horn aching initially. Then we'll test the efficacy and range of emotional responses affecting her horn growth. Dr. Monoma already has some methods of quirk activation he'd like to test, sensory techniques that can help with visualization. And of course, I still have the cat patterned bandaids for her to choose from."

Aizawa would *like* to believe that Dr. Tenma forgot about that minor detail that Aizawa might have insisted on before he gave up on the quirk specialist visit, but apparently he hadn't. Dr. Tenma also remembered that a finger-stick would be better than asking Eri to roll up her sleeves, showing her scars so that blood could be collected from her once again, but all these measures to make this examination less like Chisaki's 'examinations' could still be too much for her now. "I'll ask if she's still willing to do this."

Dr. Tenma nods, though Dr. Monoma frowns as if a small child's opinion *shouldn't* matter, when in fact Eri's opinion is the only one that does. Aizawa walks outside the room, but finds it's easy enough to find Eri, given that exploring the empty classrooms must have gotten boring.

Given that she and Hizashi had already found a *phantom* to entertain their interest. Phantom Thief, who had probably earned his name in how he was able to get into this building, apparently undeterred by *every door being locked* with his mission of carrying out the advent calendar for Eri and Hitoshi. Monoma is kneeling on the floor at Eri's level, smiling as she recounts the *entirely* too many cupcakes she's eaten recently. "And I already picked my favorite, so you should come to my house and pick your favorite too, Mono!"

"Well, I'm not terribly enthused about taking sweets from a child, but I appreciate the offer," Monoma says, skirting around the issue of Hitoshi's issues with him quite impressively for Eri's sake. Hizashi looks at Aizawa with his arms folded across his chest, a look that seems equally impressed, but that only makes Aizawa want to close the door behind him before Dr. Monoma sees his son, even if he doesn't know the entirety of the issues there.

He's a bit too late, as he hears that voice he's starting to find *absolutely irritating* behind him. "Is that my Neito I hear, once again pestering my next patient?"

Aizawa has seen the way that his students change around their parents. It's sometimes uncomfortable to see how the teenagers he molds into heroes and better versions of themselves revert in some way to be more childlike in subtle ways, how often they look to their parents begging for praise, or just subtly moving closer to them throughout the conversation. He's even seen Bakugo become halfway docile with his parents and Mrs. Midoriya, quieter with his usual rough edges sanded away to show more of his responsible and helpful tendencies.

Monoma doesn't react that way at all. It's still subtle, but the smile he had been wearing for Eri dies in his eyes first, his mouth opening before he speaks in the barest indication of the fear he shouldn't hold towards his father. But when he stands, his eyes almost close too much, as though he doesn't want to see his father to that degree. "Ah, you actually *are* here on campus."

While Dr. Monoma wasn't invited to UA to visit his son, Aizawa doesn't think that either Principal Nezu nor Kan would have had an issue if he did so afterwards or before these examinations. But Monoma honestly didn't seem aware that he *was* here, a distance between parent and child that's *almost* unfathomable.

Almost, but Aizawa has seen that plenty of times as well.

"Of course, UA would only ask for the best, you know," Dr. Monoma says, standing behind Aizawa, and he isn't tall enough to reach his shoulder. Aizawa tries to keep the image of raising his arm just enough to block his sight out of his mind, knowing that would be petty and not at all useful here. "And of course, I shouldn't have to remind you that playing with an accumulation type quirk would be pointless. Though I'm *sure* you'll insist that you were just making friendly conversation, as usual."

Monoma has a convincing laugh at least to play that off, but Aizawa sees a tightness that hardly exists in this student that betrays how uncomfortable he is. It's enough to pry Aizawa's jaw open, to inform Dr. Monoma what *exactly* his son is to Eri, but Hizashi beats him to it.

"Oh, you didn't know? Your son has been hard at work on his own time and own dime, really making the holidays special to our kids," Hizashi says, *our kids* is a habit that Aizawa can overlook for simplicity's sake, but Monoma seems to jolt when he hears it, looking at Hizashi with an expression bordering on shock. "I hope you don't mind me bragging a bit, it's not totally my place since I'm just Monoma's English teacher, but you should be proud to know that Monoma here is more than just a great student, he's really working hard to reflect the best attributes of being a hero, and it means the world to Eri right here."

Eri seems to sense the stricken way Monoma stares at Hizashi, more honest in his expression because he's clearly trying to hide what he feels rather than mask it with grandiosity. Eri tugging on his hand seems to shake him out of it, it seems, smiling up at him as a means of honest comfort. "Mono is one of my best friends! And he's a really great hero! And since he's a great hero, you're probably a great doctor too!"

Monoma snorts as he turns his head, using his free hand to cover his grin, which Aizawa admits looks a bit *menacing*. "I'm happy to help bolster your reputation with my own, *Father*. I trust that you'll do well for Eri, given that *I've* given her reason to trust in your so *very* prestigious practice."

There's certainly a conversation that Aizawa is missing out on between father and son, but even Aizawa has to *unfortunately* admit that the smarmy look suits Monoma better than what he wore to first address his father. "A great hero who isn't in an A class--"

“Which *literally* makes no difference,” Aizawa has to cut in, because that’s *his* area of expertise. “As the homeroom teacher for the first year Class A, I can tell you that there is no difference between hero courses. Unlike some high schools, UA doesn’t accept anyone that falls below the cut, and only the best in the country can enroll, and fall into either Class A or B, depending on which instructor would best suit their needs. Not whether that student is better suited to heroics or not. As diversified as heroics is, it’s pointless to try to weigh that at all.”

Dr. Monoma only clears his throat, as though he doesn’t want to argue or insult an adult when his own son is clearly his preferred target. Something that Aizawa won’t forget easily. “I’m pleased to hear that. And if it’s alright to proceed with Eri’s quirk registration exam?”

Aizawa looks at Eri, to make sure that she’s still ready for this. Her hand still holds onto Monoma’s, but he can see the nervous shuffle beginning in her feet, before she asks. “Is Dr. Monoma gonna get my horn too?”

“Ah, so Neito wasn’t telling another tall tale,” Dr. Monoma chuckles, before he tries to slip past Aizawa, something that Aizawa doesn’t yet feel like he’ll allow. “No, my quirk is not ‘Copy’ like my son’s, I’ll simply be examining how your quirk factor feels, how elastic or-”

“He’s not allowed to have a horn,” Dr. Tenma interrupts, from the other side of the room, apparently still monitoring Hitoshi’s test results and overhearing the entire conversation. “Other than the two he already has on his head when he gets a bit too *excited* about certain things.”

“Hitoshi, Hizashi and I can stay in the room with you,” Aizawa adds, because he’s not leaving Eri alone with this, and he knows she will need all the reassurance she can get to be brave.

But he’s still awed by that very brave nod that he sees, before she turns to Dr. Monoma. “It works with a high-five, still?”

“Of course, of course,” Dr. Monoma says, before shaking his head, laughing under his breath. “*Thank you* for that, Neito. It’s good to know that you haven’t forgotten everything you’ve picked up.”

Honestly, Aizawa trusted Monoma to examine his wards more than his father, but he hopes that Dr. Tenma can continue to keep him contained a bit. But while Monoma stoops down to wish Eri luck, he doesn’t overlook the fact that there’s still two new gifts that he’s left with them. The wand in Eri’s hand, and what looks like a white envelope tucked under Hizashi’s arm.

Aizawa can still hold out hope that Monoma isn’t outright trying to bribe Hitoshi with cash to find his way into his ward’s good graces, but at the very least, he can tell that Monoma is a far cry from his father. A clearly superior man in the making, in every way.

Even if both could stand to tone everything down a little, which he knows is rich coming from him, a man that willingly married *Hizashi*.

*

Hitoshi was all too eager to help get those sticky things off of him, and get away from that weird dome. He was getting a bit of a headache after watching that TV screen, listening to all those sounds, *seeing* all those weird pictures.

Why did he have to look at a picture of Quirk Thief that long anyway? What the hell was Dr. Quirk Thief playing at, when they must have been able to read his mind somehow in that weird machine, knowing how *irritating* it was to look at him?

But Hitoshi makes sure not to show his irritation when he looks at Eri, because he knows she needs to do this. They haven't told him anything about his quirk, but the way that Aizawa looks a bit more frown-y than usual, they must have discovered something. He can't bring himself to look at Yamada to confirm it, he knows that he'd be able to tell, but he doesn't know if he can stand to know for certain. But if they found out something wrong about his quirk, they might be able to help Eri learn to use hers. "It wasn't that bad at all."

"Pick one," the scruffy younger Aizawa doctor says, while he holds out a bunch of bandaids. Hitoshi doesn't know if this is some kind of secret test that Aizawa will have to tell him the answers to, but he picks the purple one that has a cat on it. The doctor takes it back from him to put around his finger.

Which... wasn't where he was hurt in the first place.

"Miss Eri, if you could sit where Shinsou is right now," Dr. Quirk Thief says, and when Eri sits down beside him on the bed, he frowns like he wants to say something.

"Good. Now, let's pick a bandaid," Dr. Quirk Thief says, while Aizawa hovers at the foot of the bed with his arms crossed, and watches while Eri picks a pink cat. "Then pick a finger, and hold it out. And we'll be quick, it'll be over in one, two, three-"

Eri flinches when something snaps with that tiny thing the doctor was holding on her finger, and Hitoshi holds her closer to his side as he gets a little vial from the rolling tray beside him. At least Eri doesn't have to get stabbed in the elbow to fill up those vials, like Hitoshi did. But she still shouldn't watch them fill up. "Hey, Eri."

Eri looks at him, and he knows she's worried. He knows she probably knows that she's bleeding into that little vial, but as long as she looks at him, she won't see it.

"I saw some cool animals with Aizawa, while we were gone. Foxes, and deer, called a serow. It's really weird and hairy-"

"Scary too," Aizawa chimes in, because he's an *asshole* who never learned how to let things go.

"It *didn't*-"

"Did you have fun with Zawa?" Eri asks, kicking out one of her legs. She doesn't like some part of this, and Hitoshi knows it could be the part that's happening right now, with those vials of blood that she thankfully hasn't looked at. And it could be the answer to that question.

"Not..." Hitoshi doesn't really know what Eri wants to hear. If she'll be angry that it honestly wasn't as bad as he expected it to be, that it was kind of a nice break. That it seems like Aizawa has somehow changed in the way he sees him, how annoying he is and yet how much Hitoshi doesn't hate it. "It wasn't the worst thing."

Hitoshi finds himself rubbing the back of his neck, knowing that it's more awkward to describe how he feels about that weird trip with Aizawa standing *right there*. Maybe Aizawa had a great time, maybe he's insulted that Hitoshi won't say that he enjoyed it.

The doctor moves away and takes the vials out of sight quickly enough, handing Aizawa the bandaid to wrap Eri's finger up. It makes Aizawa too close to him, which Hitoshi doesn't like. Especially when he can't tell what Aizawa means by that, or if he's lying.

"So, we had that concern about the sinus cavity," Dr. Scruffy says, after putting those vials in a machine that Hitoshi recognizes from the room The Chair was in, but he hopes Eri doesn't. "If you

could lay down like Shinsou did, we'll be able to use that machine that's overhead to take some pictures of what your horn looks like on the inside."

Hitoshi has to stand up for Eri to do that, has to stand too close to Aizawa, and feel too useless when she looks so small on that white bed, especially under that white domed machine. Dr. Scruffy hits some buttons on a remote that's on the side, while Dr. Quirk Thief hums annoyingly as he starts writing things down on a clipboard. Hopefully, this will be over soon.

"Very good," Dr. Scruffy says, pulling the machine away from Eri so that she can sit up, and drawing her attention when he taps on a screen mounted on the wall, with white images of her *skull* showing up, her horn definitely marking it as hers.

But the *rows of teeth* she has above and below the others is really weird to see.

"So, this is your horn, and we can see that it's hollow on the inside, along with this part right here at the bottom, with what looks to be cartilage, which is a fancy word for 'softer bone' that doctors like to use," Dr. Scruffy says, pointing at the screen, and talking to Eri like she's *stupid*.

"Like in my nose, or my ear! Momo told me that, and Yama talks about his carty-lage when he gets sore ears," Eri says, because she's far smarter than this scruffy doctor seems to have assumed. He should learn not to make those assumptions.

"The opening for the cartilage right here explains the uncomfortable feeling that led to 'Horn Tricks,'" Dr. Scruffy says, and somehow *he's* allowed to talk about that when Eri gets mad at him for even trying to say the word. "When your horn would grow rapidly, it would cause fluctuations in sinus pressure, but I would recommend using warm compresses rather than forcing expulsions, as that can exacerbate the issue."

Oh.

He's been hurting Eri. For years. Making her feel worse. *For years*.

Eri looks up at him, and it barely even looks like she blames him. She should. She should know what that means. He's the *worst* person in the entire world.

"I can also see that we may be losing some teeth soon," Dr. Scruffy says, drawing Eri's attention eagerly back to him while he points them out. "We can see the permanent teeth drawing closer to these milk teeth, ready to push them out-"

"Like with the yogurt and the apple! Momo showed me!" Eri says, and that's good. It's good that she has heroes. Who don't hurt her. Who just make her smarter, and tell her not to believe the things that Chisaki told her. Who stop her from clapping or thinking that she's cursed, who make her smile and be normal. Who will never let her leave the place that she's happiest, or make her go to an institution, ever.

It's great. That she has that. "Right. This one will probably be the first, but these two are also close, along with this one. There might be a great deal of yogurt in your future, along with some tooth fairy money."

Eri is going to lose all of her teeth now. This is great. "Those are incisors, and that's a canine!"

Eri's so smart, Dr. Scruffy is smiling at her now. He's impressed. Eri's doing so well. She's so healthy, and happy.

"Yep, that is a gold mine for the Tooth Fairy right there!" Yamada says, and just his voice is

almost painful, knowing that he's here. Knowing what's going to happen next, and Hitoshi doesn't know if he *wants* this test to pass anymore.

He hurt Eri. He hurt her for years, when he thought he was helping, and even after they were rescued, he kept *doing it*. He *enjoyed* it, because he's literally the worst person alive, he would smile and wipe Eri's nose and she'd *cry* but he wouldn't fucking realize what he was doing to her-

There's a knock on the door, and Aizawa moves to answer it. Aizawa seemed to expect someone else, but Hitoshi already had a feeling that he knew who it was.

The Commission lady. For the test.

"We're not done yet," Aizawa says, politer than Hitoshi would like, but he can't expect Aizawa to really threaten her when Eri is right there. Aizawa can't tarnish himself with threats in front of her eyes.

"*Right*, because it's so *convenient* that there's a quirk registration exam to be had on UA's campus today, completely explains why two quirk specialists were scheduled to come here last week," the Commission lady says, and she shouldn't say it like that. She shouldn't sound so bitterly angry when Eri can hear it, when Eri is already scared enough.

"I'm sorry," Eri says, pinching at the end of her dress as she looks down, and it's fine to kill that Commission lady now, right? She made Eri sad, she wants to take him away and put him in an institution, but more than that she made Eri feel bad and she *shouldn't*.

"No! It's-" The Commission lady tries to look around Aizawa, to look at how she's making Eri feel bad, but Aizawa purposefully doesn't move to let her, so she just sighs. "It's fine, sweetheart, you're not doing anything wrong. But I'd *like* to get this over with, because *some* of us have to justify what they do on the job."

Yamada's hand on his shoulder makes him jump at first, but he's glad that Yamada doesn't pull away at that. "You wanna get this over with kiddo? Totally up to you, we can stick around here and *Ms. Saito* can *hang* tight for a bit."

Yamada has a way with words and inflection that Hitoshi truly envies right now, with the threat that Eri can't catch hanging on that one word - *hang*.

But he looks at Eri, and she tilts her head at him. She doesn't seem bothered about him leaving, because she knows that Aizawa is better equipped to protect her. She knows that she's going to be okay, and he almost envies that. '*Over with.*'

Yamada claps his shoulder gently, a nod with his hand almost, but Aizawa looks at him like he wants to say something threatening. But he doesn't, he just moves away from the door just enough. "We'll be right here."

"Oh, don't worry, Shou! Just a little chat, nothing to worry about, and I sure am a *professional* talker," Yamada says, and that's *another* silent threat that Ms. Saito is probably too stupid to catch.

Because when Yamada talks, he can choose to be loud, and louder than Ms. Saito can handle because of it. "Good luck, Toshi!"

Hitoshi doesn't know if that name or if Eri's voice is enough to let the relief wash over him for a moment, before it goes numb. Before it all sinks into dread, when he looks at that Commission representative again, and he knows what it all means. What he deserves, really.

He doesn't deserve to stay at UA after hurting Eri for so long, but he probably won't get what he deserves. And Yamada doesn't even see it.

*

Yamada *could* kill her. Just open his mouth, hit just the right decibel, cover Hitoshi's ears, and *kill her*. He knows it would just be the first shot in a one man war, given that he doesn't want to rope Shouta into it, Shouta would need to be there for the kids but Yamada is fine with going to jail to make sure Hitoshi stays put. To make sure he keeps his promises to a kid who has suffered from too many broken ones.

Yamada sighs, and tries to remember what he knows, what he hasn't seen for himself, but what he knows. Hitoshi's quirk doesn't work with hearing aids - that's why the owner of the bookstore that he was shoplifting from when he was held at the 8 Precepts reported him, that's why it didn't work when Hitoshi tried to use the HAM radio to talk to Eri, it didn't work with his speakers either. He knows how his hearing aids work, and he knows it's going to be *fine*.

He can feel how *not fine* it is to his ward, Hitoshi's shoulder might as well be sculpted from marble under his hand, because this is the part where the test jitters *really* set off. Ms. Saito tries a door that isn't unlocked, because she doesn't have *permission* to use it, and Yamada opens up the nice little observation room that the quirk doctors set up just to throw it in her face, not that they really *need* privacy or to drag this out.

The woman huffs when she crosses the threshold, but Yamada has bigger worries when his kid stops in his tracks, staring at a monitor showing Eri kicking her feet, jabbering away. He doesn't try to read her lips, but it kind of looks like she's singing. "We'll be back there in no time, kiddo, and looks like she's over the nerves already!"

Yamada is standing behind Hitoshi, so he can be that hand on his shoulder that he needs, so he can block that huffy Commission rep from seeing him right now, but he feels Hitoshi's shoulders jump before he hears that sharp intake of breath.

Yep, Yamada's back to thinking about murder, even as he pulls his kid into a hug, because all those nerves are crashing down hard enough to make the poor kid *cry*, to make him doubt that this is going to work even with the evidence, to make him think that Yamada would *ever* let him go or let him get carted off to some place else. "Hey, hey, it's alright. It's just a little bullshit test, it doesn't even matter-"

"*Bullshit?*" The neurotic bureaucratic upstart with Mom Bun squeaks, like she has the *right* to criticize the most *pleasant* things he thinks about this. "This is part of the wardship procedure, and I would say we've been *extraordinarily* lenient to allow postponing it thus far, *not* to mention the quirk specialist visit you've just been treated to."

Three fucking months too late, Yamada would *love* to add, because if someone in that hospital could have caught that his kid has extra *quirks* or if Naomasa's many requests for a quirk specialist could have been seen to in a timely fashion, a *whole* lot of bullshit could have been avoided. "It doesn't change a thing, you know? We've got plans for snow and apple cider on the other side of this, and whatever else happens, it's up to you. Totally up to you, little listener."

If anything, Yamada's attempt at reassurance just stirs the tears up deeper, Hitoshi pushing his face against Yamada's chest before his shaky hands come up to sign '*Horn.*' *Horn*, which doesn't make sense, until the sense smacks Yamada right in the face and almost makes *him* join in on the tears. Not that he was doing too great trying to fight them off earlier, mostly distracting himself with thoughts of homicide to do that.

“Hey, hey, you didn’t know that. You were just trying to take care of her, you weren’t trying to hurt her-”

“Hurt *who*? Is this an unreported incident?” The rep cuts in, when she *shouldn’t*, and Yamada can’t turn his head to look because he knows that would be *far* too tempting with his greatest weapon pointed at her face, but he hears her damn *clipboard* flipping pages. “Did he hurt the little girl-”

“*Eri’s* horn would hurt when the crazy bastard who was holding *both* of them captive for years would force her quirk to build up, and *Hitoshi* would tap her horn to make her feel better,” Yamada says, and if it wasn’t for the poor kid almost sobbing on his chest, he’d have *quite* a bit more to say about it. *Max volume*. “And the doctor said that there’s better ways to take care of that, but you didn’t have those better ways, kiddo. You didn’t know, you were just trying to help her out, and *Eri’s* out on the other side, singing her little heart out in that room, because of *you*. Because you took care of her, and the next time that little horn starts aching, I know she’ll want her ‘Toshi’ getting a warm compress to make it better. Alright?”

Hitoshi does another one of those ‘half nods,’ something he hasn’t seen in a while, since the beginning of this wardship. That chin going down but not up, his breath catching for longer but not settling, the kid is *trying* his best to be convinced but the blame is just too big for his shoulders. He knows it has to be for Hitoshi, especially with *Eri*, especially with that dark time.

“You know,” Ms. Saito *starts*, and if she’d like to *stop*, Yamada would appreciate it. “I convinced my brother that I was going to have a flying quirk when I was a kid. And he used to help me get on top of tall things, like trees and playgrounds, because I thought I just had to jump to activate it. And the last time we did that, I jumped off of a shed, and broke my arm in two places, but I didn’t want to tell him I got hurt because he was crying so much. So it’s... really not a bad thing, tapping her horn and all. It’s not like you *broke* it.”

Yamada hates her, because as goofy as that attempt to imitate a human was, it actually seems to *work* with Hitoshi. The kid’s next sob sounds more like a laugh, and he pulls a hand to wipe at his face. Yamada reaches over and has to reach pretty far, but he grabs a couple of tissues off the nearest desk. “You see? Not a single person in the world will fault you for trying to take care of *Eri*, so don’t change that by blaming yourself. Because I’m *pretty* sure those horn tricks came to an end because *someone* got too old to be snotty, and it’s worth mentioning that certain *someone* would never let anyone else do it either. Not Shou, not me, not *Mirio*, it’s gotta be her ‘Toshi,’ which is exactly why I’d bet a million yen that it’s gotta be ‘Toshi’ with the compress, because no one else will do.”

Hitoshi takes the tissues with still watering eyes, and has to do an awkward squeeze instead of blowing his nose, as though Yamada has polite sensibilities or Ms. Saito’s should matter.

“Ready?” Yamada asks, and tries to keep in mind all the ways the worries don’t have a place here. Hitoshi has talked to him before, even when he was mute but out of it from sickness or from stress, and he got that muffled ‘thank you’ earlier, just to prove that this test doesn’t mean anything, whether Hitoshi *wants* to talk or not, it will always be his decision after this. They both know it’s going to work, and if Hitoshi *doesn’t* know that Yamada will absolutely go rogue if it doesn’t, then that’s probably better for his claim to innocence after the fact.

Hitoshi nods, a solid nod, a good one, and wipes the corner of his eyes one more time before he takes a step back. Yamada looks at Ms. Saito, because he knows that clipboard has some regulations and requirements, and he wants to get through them *quickly*.

“It is December 19th, 2:25 in the afternoon, on UA’s campus,” Ms. Saito says, holding up her phone to face Yamada and his ward, probably recording for The Commission of Wardship Affairs

records and all, and Yamada *has* to look and verify that the glare is still potent with watery eyes, because he knows how Hitoshi *feels* about pictures and now video. “I, Saito Hikaru, will be witnessing the demonstration of Shinsou Hitoshi using or attempting to use his quirk, Brainwashing, on Present Mic, legally known as Yamada Hizashi-”

“Legally, ‘Present Mic’ is my name too, y’know? Trademarked and everything,” Yamada says, just to get a little bristle that he feels he deserves for his restraint so far, and he *gets it*.

“*The parameters* of the test, as agreed by the Commissioners who serve the Commission of Wardship Affairs, will include two portions, the first of which being with Present Mic’s hearing aids on his person, and the second with his hearing aids out. The requirements of the test for each portion will be a question in Japanese, and a statement in Japanese,” Ms. Saito reads off her clipboard, a whole lot of legalese for a whole lot of *bullshit*.

But Yamada takes a look at his kid, and sees by the bottom lip getting smaller the more he chews on it, that the test jitters aren’t solved yet, and decides on which portion to start with when he raises his hands to his ears. “How about we start with the deaf portion first? I won’t even lip read to spy on ya.”

“That is the *second* portion of the test, as I’ve already said-” And Ms. Saito can keep saying, because Hitoshi finally looks at him with a little nod, the *tiniest* bit of relief, and Yamada doesn’t hear what she says afterwards.

It’s always a relief to pop his hearing ability out of his poor abused ears, but sometimes it’s a bit of a hassle to keep track of what he’s missing out on. He can see that Ms. Saito is rattling on about something, but when Hitoshi looks at her and says ‘it doesn’t matter,’ he can see quite *vengefully* that her lips seal shut.

That’s the wrong vocal quirk to fear, but Yamada has to stop himself from smirking when Ms. Saito looks over at him, flapping her hand like he’s supposed to talk. ‘Doesn’t matter at all,’ Yamada says, or at least knows he mouths, probably badly. He’s mostly over the embarrassment that comes when he knows that his words probably slur a bit when he’s not able to hear them, but he still looks at Hitoshi to see if there’s pity, or maybe some shock.

Instead, he sees Hitoshi glancing away, a bit of a pout in the making when he points out ‘*No lip reading.*’

Yamada nods, and signs ‘*Sorry,*’ but can’t beat the grin off his face because he knows there’s four portions, but the first one went over smooth enough to knock those nerves flat on their butt and get a bit of sass out for it.

But when he pointedly turns to look at Ms. Saito for his cue, he can’t help but feel a bit of pride, for a kid that was offered some control over this pretty horrible test, and actually *took* it. *Enforcing* what he wanted, even to Yamada.

Instead of a cue, Ms. Saito just looks at him like she smelled something unpleasant, then pointed to her own ears before she made a little check on her clipboard. A question with no answer, a question he didn’t see at all either, but whatever it was must have peeved the Commission rep off.

And as Yamada comes back into the full audio experience, he can see that Hitoshi looks a little miffed about something too. Just at the corner of his mouth where it turns down, but when he looks at Yamada, his mouth opens and the words.

Don’t drop out.

“A *statement* and a *question*,” Ms. Saito says, like Hitoshi doesn’t know, like she has any *right* to butt into this.

Like she has *any* idea how it feels to have the weight of one’s future hinging on talking, just saying two things, when it never should come down to that. “You know how hearing aids work, right? Hitoshi’s quirk can’t work through electronics, this bit really doesn’t matter.”

“It’s for the record, it’s procedure,” Ms. Saito argues, ‘procedure’ and ‘record’ and ‘bullshit,’ quite frankly, and Hitoshi calls it like it is.

“It’s bullshit,” says one surly teenager, and Yamada feels his own adolescent self nearly burn with envy for the fact that this is now on *record* as required by *procedure*, Hitoshi’s words will forever be kept in the Commission of Wardship Affair’s archives.

“Ah-greed,” Yamada says, beaming at Ms. Saito who probably hates to check that off, but, *procedure* and all.

“A *question*,” she all but hisses, and the last leg of this should be a breeze, Hitoshi has said two statements and one question to him already, broken the ice with the second statement. He’s got this, Yamada knows it, and he tries to smile encouragingly at Hitoshi, even when the teenager’s eyebrows are doing some interesting twitches and that corner of his lip is getting *very* frowny.

“Why did you tell me I would stay when Aizawa said that I won’t?” Hitoshi asks, and there’s absolutely no worries about Confession affecting him. Absolutely none at all.

Because Yamada can’t say a goddamn word to that in response, any more than he can look away from Hitoshi’s frigid stare. Hitoshi’s words came out calm, or seemed calm on the surface, but Yamada married *Shouta* and he knows what a deadpan sounds like when it’s honestly a scream.

And Yamada honestly feels a little like screaming at his husband right now.

“That concludes the test, don’t bother walking me to the gate,” Ms. Saito says, tucking her phone and clipboard away and definitely ready to leave as much as Yamada almost wants to grab her by the shoulders and *make* her face the music, that all of this is bullshit.

“Didn’t you say I was going to an institution after all this is over?” Hitoshi asks, turning his head to glare at Ms. Saito as she leaves, that deadpan-that-just-wants-you-dead breaking into a full demand for answers, and *Yamada* would like them too.

But Ms. Saito just clears her throat, tapping on something inside her ear canal as she takes the doorknob in hand. An *earpiece*, to make sure she would be immune to that Confession quirk too. “Congratulations on your wardship placement.”

The door slams, loud enough to kick the words that were fighting to come out from the back of Yamada’s throat, and that *glare* is all directed at him because this clearly is *not* over. “Hitoshi, you have every right to be upset about this-”

“*Oh*, that’s great to know. I can be *upset*, but I still have to do this, I still have to find The Miasma and whittle down my time here, because *you’re* a goddamn liar,” Hitoshi says, and Shouta was *not* kidding about the escalation here, how his kid swings *hot* when his blood gets heated. He’s known all week that Hitoshi was not happy about this whole thing but to know how much deeper it was for him, Yamada is *also* not happy. “I’m going to *stay*, I’ll get to *stay*, ‘you don’t have to do anything to stay here, kiddo,’ that’s *bullshit*, and you knew it then, and you lied to my face, but now you’re stuck with me for what, three months? *Congratu-fucking-lations* on that.”

“Yep, I feel like throwing a party. The worry’s over, you *are* sticking around,” Yamada says, because he *is* relieved to have everything in order, no risk of taking his favorite little listener out of his comfort zone, and even if the venom is dripping pretty heavily off those words, those are *voluntary* words being said in his direction. And Hitoshi is *telling* him how he really feels, something that Yamada has usually had to pry out of the kid with no less than three crowbars.

But that’s *probably* not what Hitoshi wanted to hear, as Yamada earns that ever-deadly “*Oh yeah?*”

Oh no.

*

That *Commission rat* scurries off because she knows how his quirk works, how it doesn’t, she gets to run away but Yamada is *stuck here*, with him, and he wants to keep *lying* because his quirk won’t force him to tell the truth. He’s not mute, not muzzled, Yamada thinks that *he’s* stuck here for those few months, but that’s *not* how this is going to play out.

Now they both know, and they can stop lying. “You *really* think I’m that stupid.”

“I don’t,” Yamada says, and that’s probably the most hilarious thing he’s ever said, Hitoshi laughs under his breath, almost numb to everything as the world almost tilts under his feet, like he’s bleeding out of his own body and every pulse under his skin is bleeding *red*. Yamada *said* he didn’t have to do anything to stay here, and Hitoshi was stupid enough to *believe it*. “Hitoshi, I don’t think you’re stupid, I think you have plenty of reasons to be angry when I’m saying one thing and *apparently* Shou said another, but that’s something between us that you shouldn’t worry about-”

“I *shouldn’t* worry about my life?!” Hitoshi yells, raising a hand and he doesn’t know what to do with it, he just feels *cold*, he doesn’t know whether he wants to stop talking or never stop, he doesn’t know what to do with everything he’s bleeding, if he can ever *stop*. “That’s right, I’m not in charge, you get to do whatever you want to me. I was rescued but I’m not like *Eri*, this is how it’s always been and I’m a *fucking idiot* for thinking you were different.”

“You’re not an idiot for believing me,” Yamada says, quiet. It should feel like he’s won, like he’s beaten Yamada down, but those words just cramp in his stomach as it twists and it feels like every meal that Yamada has ever given him was *poisoned*, he just hadn’t realized it yet. “I know it’s confusing-”

“And I’m too stupid to know it, so why don’t you spell it out? Everyone *but* you has said that I have to find The Miasma, you *heroes* raid them, and *save the day*, and then two months after that I’m *gone*, to an institution, whatever the *fuck* that means, but it definitely means I can’t see Eri anymore, and that’s what you’re *really* worried about,” Hitoshi says, but after he says it, he has to laugh. He almost doubles over with it, he can’t believe he didn’t see it before. He really is *stupid*. “And that’s why you told me I would stay, that’s just your *game*, so I’ll do whatever you want and I won’t hurt *Eri* because you don’t *fucking* believe that I wouldn’t, and why would you when I’m a *monster*-”

“You’re *not*,” Yamada says, and it’s *cold*. His voice snaps like frost and it’s not funny, this isn’t fun, he was really that *fucking stupid*, he can’t *move* like Yamada is using his own quirk on him, Brainwashing him, but he can’t escape and it’s *cold*. “Hitoshi, you’re *not* dumb, you’re *not* a monster, and I know you’d never hurt a single hair on Eri’s head. And I know you’re upset, *I’m* honestly upset for you too, and by all means, you have every right to call me every name in the book for not keeping you out of this like I promised, but every time that you call yourself a bad name, I just want to... I don’t know, squeeze it right out of you with a hug and tell you how

amazing you are until you believe it.”

“That’s stupid,” Hitoshi says, or at least feels himself say, but he immediately regrets it. He regrets ever opening his mouth, if he had just said *nothing*, the Commission rat probably would have taken him away right there and he wouldn’t have to look at Yamada anymore. He wouldn’t have to hear these things.

He wouldn’t have to feel this numbness start to shatter like ice, into a deep river he can’t fight, drowning as his breath chokes up and he has to bite his lip to keep from *crying*. It’s *stupid*. “It’s true! You’re a pretty amazing kid, and you *deserve* to be angry about having to go through this, having to go through a bunch of other bullshit, and *definitely* deserve to call me out for adding to it. But you don’t deserve to be called a monster, or stupid, or anything like that by anyone, especially yourself. Because you’re *not* that, you’re the opposite of that, you’re still one of the kindest and smartest kiddos I’ve ever met. Even when you’re calling me out on my bullshit.”

This is just playing *dirty*, Yamada just wanted to shut him up so he said the perfect thing to make him cry. Now he can’t even breathe because he knows if he does, it will come out with a sob, the blurry floor he’s staring at will spill over. It’s just *humiliating*. “I’m *not*.”

Yamada just has to make it *worse*. “Hug?”

Hitoshi can’t answer him, not after that broken, *humiliating* word came out wrong, he doesn’t *want* to make Yamada hug him. But he just feels so *cold*.

He forces his face against Yamada’s chest before he can even wrap his arms around him, after he nods. He could have shook his head, but he messed up, this doesn’t mean anything. He’s only holding Yamada so tight because he might be able to strangle him from his ribs if he humiliates him further. “We’re good, you know? You can tell me how you really feel, any way that comes out. And *trust me*, you can’t get loud enough to hurt me. And as your number one fan, I’ll probably agree that what’s going on is bullshit.”

Yamada is only smiling like that, so much that Hitoshi can hear it in his voice, because he’s *enjoying* how he’s forced to sob with every word. Yamada is the *worst*.

“You deserve to know what the future’s gonna look like for you, what your life is going to be like, and I can tell you that as long as you’re on board with it, it’s gonna look just like this. You, me, Eri, and Shou, at UA. And Shou isn’t the best communicator, but that’s between me and him, and trust me, we’ll be having words about it,” Yamada says, and Hitoshi shifts his arms to hold him tighter, just wants to suffocate himself into unconsciousness at this point, because he *shouldn’t have said anything*. Especially like *that*, *yelling* at Yamada. “Is that why you’ve been helping out with the investigation? Trying to rip the bandaid off of it?”

Yamada should sound angrier than he does when he says that, and it’s because he doesn’t sound angry like Hitoshi knows he *is*, he’s just angry enough to hide it. He knows Yamada is going to yell, if he’s lucky, but he nods.

He just wanted to get it over with. “And maybe ditching some friends, or getting rid of the stash?” Hitoshi nods, because Yamada just *really* wants to make him admit everything, absolutely everything he’s done that’s stupid before he starts yelling about it. “Maybe... being a little distant from a little bean’s birthday bash plans too?”

“I’m *g-going to ruin i-it*,” Hitoshi forces out between sobs, it sounds so *stupid and pathetically weak* to his own ears, he has no idea how Yamada hasn’t shoved him to the floor and started beating him for it yet. “I *ca-can’t... do anyth-thing*.”

“Buddy,” Yamada says, so softly that it forces Hitoshi to hold his breath, he knows if he doesn’t he’s just going to sound *worse*. “You’re not going to ruin it. You being there is going to *make* the little bean’s big day, any way that you are. Because we love you, and we want you to be there, and next time we can talk about these things so they don’t hurt so long. Any way you say it, I’m always listening for my favorite listener.”

“*Ok-kay*,” Hitoshi says, and he can’t stop nodding, can’t stop smearing the snot and tears and *mess* all over Yamada’s shirt because he’s *so fucking done* with crying, but he can’t stop. It just *hurts*.

It hurts that he believed that for so long, and it was all just *stupid*. “And I’m sorry you had to do this, kiddo. But as much as I can put your life in your hands, I’m gonna do that. Whether you talk to me or Shou or anyone, that’s always up to you, you know. I’m fine either way this plays out.”

“Toshi!” Eri yells as soon as the door opens, and Hitoshi tries to pull away but Yamada’s arms trap him. “Toshi, why are you crying? Dad-”

“It’s alright! This test thing was just pretty nerve wracking, it all went over swell but it’s still a lot,” Yamada says, *lying* in a way, but not entirely. He shouldn’t cry, he shouldn’t worry Eri.

“*M’ fine*,” Hitoshi argues, but his words are proven wrong by the way he sounds, and he knows Eri can see right through it. He’s not surprised at all when her small arms wrap around his leg, trying to comfort him.

“Twenny, it’s okay! Yama says it’s good to cry, just like blowing your nose, and you always sleep real good after getting all that yucky stuff out!” Eri encourages, and Hitoshi almost blows his nose on Yamada’s shirt on accident when he starts to laugh, because Yamada *would* say it like that. Eri lets go of him for a moment, but he feels her small hand tugging on his pants for his attention before he looks down, and sees that she’s holding another tissue up to him. “Blow!”

It’s stupid, but he nearly has to hide his face against Yamada again, instead of taking the tissue and blowing his nose as ordered. Whenever he tapped Eri’s horn for a Horn Trick, he had to press that tissue against her nose, and tell her to blow, exactly like that.

And Yamada thought that *he* would be the one taking care of her. “Better?” Eri asks, and he nods, even if he can still feel unsettled by the way that Aizawa’s eyes fall on him from the doorway, from everyone, including *Eri*, staring at him with concern. “Now, you need to take a nap, so you can feel better!”

Hitoshi frowns, the disappointment that Eri is hiding well behind her stern look still sinks like tar inside him. “We’re supposed to play in the snow. I’m not tired.”

Yamada gives him a weird look, like he knows he *is* tired, and Eri puts her hands on her hips like she’s angry that he wants to do what he *knows* she wants to do. “*Twenny*, the snow’s not going anywhere, and *I’m* tired, ‘cause I got to use my quirk, and I wanna take a nap, *right now*. So we’re taking a nap together!”

Hitoshi sniffs and wipes his eyes, he has to crouch down to Eri’s level to see, and even if it’s small, her horn is a bit *smaller*. “You used your quirk on your own?”

“Yep!” Eri says, grinning as her excitement boils over, the nub of her barely-grown-in tooth on full display as she does. “I’m a flower too! I just gotta feel warm and think about being outside, and being happy, and singing! And if I practice real good, I can sing to know when to stop so I don’t make Mirio get too small, like the flower!”

“I’m so proud of you,” Hitoshi says, and even if he knows that Eri is still probably a bit upset with him beneath her pride, he has to hold her close in a bid not to start crying *again*. He’s *so proud*.

“I think we have several accomplishments to celebrate,” Aizawa says, smiling at Eri, because Hitoshi knows he’s proud of what she did too. Even if that means that Eri doesn’t need him, or Hitoshi, she’s learning control on her own. She’s honing her own power. “But it would be illogical to do that regardless of whether everyone feels like celebrating. And a nap is always a perfectly good method of celebrating.”

“*Agreed*, and it’ll give me enough time to boil up some apple cider!” Yamada says, and even though he offers his hand to Eri to hold, Eri holds her arms up for Hitoshi to carry her.

The test is over, and he’s staying. He’s still able to carry Eri in his arms, to take care of her.

And he doesn’t know why, but he still feels like crying.

*

Out of all the times that Aizawa has had to reason with himself to be there for his students, this training exercise seems to be the most difficult.

Despite the *many* opinions he has concerning Dr. Monoma, it’s evident that he is a brilliant quirk specialist. He listened while Eri explained her feelings about her quirk, how it felt for her to use it, how it felt when her horn built up, and asked for a demonstration of the ‘Quirk Song,’ and those efforts paid off well. Experimenting with sensory feedback along with Eri’s quirk, just reflecting on how sunlight from the window made her feel *warm* to connect to her feeling of happiness, allowed her to manifest part of her quirk to Rewind that practice plant, completely on her own with no need for him to step in, to do more than encourage her growing smile.

Admittedly, Eri’s mood didn’t seem entirely unaffected by this. But rather than a screaming tantrum, Eri being *slightly* more bossy than usual seemed to indicate an improvement on that end as well. The more power that Eri obtains over her quirk, the less it frightens her, the less of an emotional outburst that follows.

He can never put to words how proud he is to see such grand accomplishments in the matter of *months*.

And with Hitoshi, he knew this was difficult. He knew that Hitoshi was going to be forced into the measure, once again forced to speak by The Commission, and he knew that Hitoshi was afraid of both success and failure in that regard. If he failed, there was a risk that Hizashi and himself wouldn’t have suffered to pass, that Hitoshi could be removed, but even with success, he would see that as being forced to change his relationship to Hizashi, taking away one method of control that he *needed* at this time.

But Hitoshi did it, he spoke to Hizashi, and Aizawa is *proud* to see that bravery, after seeing how much the fear had affected him. More than that, he was proud that he had seemed to open up to Hizashi afterwards, finally communicating his wounds instead of hiding them. Even if Hitoshi was able to stifle that *eerily* quickly when Eri walked into the room, something that still worries Aizawa, though he can’t blame Hitoshi for not wanting to worry the child that he practically raised. But allowing Eri to take care of him too, in some small way, was progress.

While Aizawa will most likely miss the fun activities that his husband promised the wards, and he’ll *definitely* miss the opportunity to get more sleep than the small nap he took this morning, he does need to supervise his students’ training exercises, to make sure that Toshinori doesn’t allow

them to slack off too much.

As soon as Aizawa closes the front door, Hizashi opens it just to close it behind himself, and Aizawa can tell from the look on his face that this is not a demonstrative scolding for leaving without letting him know. “*So*, you told Hitoshi that he’s gonna be gone by Valentine’s day, huh?”

That is probably the explanation behind Hitoshi sobbing in Hizashi’s arms, Aizawa realizes.

And the guilt sinks like a stone when he realizes how *badly* he communicated Hitoshi’s situation to him, when he was *trying* to reassure him. Aizawa had placed the blame for Hitoshi’s emotional volatility on this impending test, on the continued stress from the attack that nearly took him back into Miasma’s clutches, but to know that Hitoshi thought his time at UA was so short and he was *grieving* that this entire time. He *knows* it’s his fault.

“At *worst*. But Miasma is tied with the League, it’s logical that they’re also a threat to him, so we have no definitive timeline for when this will end. I just wanted to reassure him that he would have that time at least,” Aizawa explains, and he *knows* that Hizashi doesn’t want to hear that explanation. He *knows* Hizashi’s opinions on Hitoshi’s future, that they should ignore logic and rationality and allow their own emotional impulses dictate a child’s future, without *thinking* of the responsibility that entails.

“Cool, yeah, he was *super* reassured and definitely not worried at all that he’s going to be kicked out on his face and into an institution in a couple months,” Hizashi says, and Aizawa knows the sarcasm does *not* bode well for him. And he *thought* he made his opinion known to Hitoshi about the institution that Ms. Saito planned on *multiple times*. “So, the idea about ‘clean slate’ and ‘it’s better for him’ for this whole thing to be temporary? *Isn’t*, because the kid has been torn up about this for a while, and apparently all the help he’s been giving the investigation is because he’s sick of having the sword of Damocles dangling over his head. We need to *talk*.”

“We’re talking,” Aizawa says, as he folds his arms and wonders if he could feel any worse if he was just outright *stabbed*. Hitoshi said he wanted to help the investigation for his own interests, his own protection, possibly to earn his way back into Aizawa’s good graces or perhaps revenge, but Aizawa should have known *better*. To think that he wrote that night off as Hitoshi trying to make amends for a petty fight with Midoriya. “You’re right that he deserves to have a deadline, but we don’t have one yet. Especially when we have no idea whether this operation will effectively end the League of Villains or not.”

“That’s not what we’re talking about,” Hizashi says, folding his own arms in turn, and Aizawa *knows* that’s not what his husband wanted to hear, but that’s what the situation has to *be*. “Hitoshi wants to stay here, I want him to stay here, *Eri* absolutely wants Hitoshi here. We can’t separate these kids, and Hitoshi would do well here-”

“We have no way of knowing that,” Aizawa interrupts, because he knows the basis of his husband’s argument, he knows what he believes about this, but he isn’t considering the *whole* of Hitoshi’s future. Neither child can realize that what they want in the moment isn’t equal to the foresight and responsibility that both their caretakers should have. “*Nothing* about this wardship should be something for him to look back fondly on, and he needs more care than we can provide. Hitoshi needs *normalcy*, for the first time in his life, and he won’t find it here. He will always take *Eri*’s feelings into consideration, more than his own, and he needs to adapt beyond that to recognize his own needs.”

“*Eri* won’t find normal here either, but she’ll be *happy*, and I can’t see Hitoshi ever being happy without knowing that *Eri* is okay,” Hizashi says, as though that’s the sum of what they should hope for in Hitoshi’s future. As though Hitoshi should *always* see himself as a caretaker and guardian for

Eri, despite how much childhood he's already missed due to his circumstances, and due to his responsibility to her. Eri will outgrow that need, Aizawa knows, but Hitoshi deserves to have independence for himself. "He's getting to be more open when she's not around. Trust me, there were *plenty* of waterworks and fireworks before the little bean came in and shut that down, and he can learn to--"

"He can learn the things he needs to learn with therapy, support, stability," Aizawa says, three things that they can't provide now with the constraints of the wardship, things that Hitoshi still *needs*, and promises that they can't keep, despite any desire to fulfill them. "Those are things that he *needs* and we won't be able to provide. You *know* what our schedules look like, I will be going back to my patrols and so will you, and we shouldn't commit to taking responsibility for Eri until we know we can provide for her."

Hizashi looks stricken, as though Aizawa had just spit in his face, before he says, "That's why you wanted to wait a year.... To make sure we can take care of Eri, *after* Hitoshi leaves."

That wasn't... *entirely* what he meant. To say, at least.

That's what he felt would be appropriate at the time.

Hizashi is continuing to ignore that the needs of the two children under their care are meant to be their highest priority, they shouldn't take responsibility for these children's futures unless they can meet the task to guide them to the height of their potential and happiness. He knows that Eri is happy at UA, he can see a future where she easily thrives, but he still knows he hasn't fully seen what that future will look like. Hizashi still worked nearly full time during the first month of her wardship, he cut down a few of his patrol hours, but they both relied heavily on Mirio to fill in the gap and be there for her. Mirio will be graduating in a matter of months, and if they cannot be there to adequately *supervise* a child at night, they shouldn't commit to guiding her future. They can't willfully neglect her.

Neither Hitoshi nor Eri have been neglected thus far, but Hizashi barely works as a hero and Aizawa hasn't been able to go on patrol since Hitoshi's wardship *began*. He can see the argument that Hizashi wants to make, that if things work well now, it is only the barest reflection of what it could be after the pressure of the investigation is over with, but Aizawa still intends to be a hero and he doesn't think that his husband will give that up easily either. And they can't rely on others to fill in that gap for two children who need care and attention, from their *parents*.

But if Aizawa were to put that logic aside, and devolve into the irresponsible thinking that his husband holds. If it were just a question as to whether he *wants* to keep Hitoshi and Eri in his life, he *does*.

He doesn't want to worry about either of their safety, their happiness. He wants to provide for them both, he wants to feel that pride swelling at every achievement. He wants to see that unguarded smile that Hitoshi had when he surprised them both with maneuvering the capture scarf, and despite his own *frustrations* about Hitoshi's reckless nature, he wants to see him grow, to boldly put forth his own desires, to open up to others even when it apparently *embarrasses* the teenager to the point of running away.

But this isn't about what Aizawa wants. This is about what's best for Hitoshi. "This was always meant to be temporary, and it was irresponsible to tell him otherwise. There is a better placement waiting for him, to give him what we can't provide. It's for his best interests."

"You don't really get it, do you Shou?" Hizashi says, his green eyes burning behind his glasses, and Aizawa can *hear* the slightest catch in his breath that restrains his husband's Voice quirk with

great effort. “I get it, because I’ve been kicked around homes like a soda can down the street, and it is *torture* to wait around for that boot to drop, to know you *are* temporary. I know what Hitoshi’s chances look like, he’s *not* going to find that good home with his age and his quirk and his needs-”

“We would have control of that, I’m not *letting* him go to an institution,” Aizawa says, because he will do *anything* for Hitoshi’s best interests, and he does mean *anything*. If they find a placement that should have been permanent, Aizawa will still keep watch to make sure it is, that there are no issues, that Hitoshi will be happy and *free* and *supported* like he needs to be. “We will have two months, in the worst case scenario, to fully vet his next placement and make sure that it will be permanent. And I’m not in agreement with severing communication after that, especially with Eri, but we cannot give Hitoshi what he deserves. And arguing that he’s happier here doesn’t mean that he will thrive later on, this is a bigger commitment than you can recognize because you’re not thinking of his best interests, you’re thinking of *your own*.”

The heat in Hizashi’s eyes cools, *too much* when it almost hurts to look at him. Hizashi said what Aizawa has known for a while, that his husband wants that permanent home for Hitoshi like *he* wanted that permanent home when he was in foster care, but he has to realize that it’s *different*. *Hitoshi* is different, he’s not the child that Hizashi once was, and further to the point, they are *not* Hizashi’s mothers. They aren’t qualified, or experienced, they didn’t *plan* to adopt for several years if not a decade, when they can’t promise that they won’t be killed responding to a villain incident before next year.

If Aizawa were looking at themselves objectively, as a future placement for Hitoshi, he would reject them without a second thought. That’s the same logic they should apply, *for* Hitoshi’s sake. Not for their own, not for their own desires. For *Hitoshi*.

“A year,” Hizashi says, nodding to himself as he glances at the ground. “A *year* to decide whether we adopt Eri, to see whether she thrives or not. And you’re not going to consider Hitoshi at all, you’ve already written him off-”

“I’m not *favoring* Eri, it’s logical that with how far she’s come, she could continue to thrive here. It’s not the same for Hitoshi, and that’s the only consideration we should take towards his future,” Aizawa argues. He hasn’t *written* Hitoshi off, he just knows that he will never feel safe in the home of a man that he thought *owned* him.

“But, that’s the thing, Shou,” Hizashi says, raising a finger before he points it at him, before he looks up with a smile that’s anything *but*. “*Hitoshi* has thrived, he’s just had the worst starting point imaginable. Can you even- we *call him Hitoshi*. Because *that’s* what he wants to be called, we have a kid who has gone from accepting that his name is *Dog* or *27*, and now he knows he can call himself his own name, and get people to respect that. The kid was terrified of us, terrified of this whole place, thought he was a *criminal*, and now he wants to stay here and he’s not afraid to tell us off for it! When’s the last time he had a panic attack, or a nightmare-”

“Last night,” Aizawa says, but he catches the demand for explanation in his husband’s eyes, even if he knows *exactly* what he’ll say if he admits it. “A nightmare.”

“Which *definitely* doesn’t exclude anyone from being here, but you have to admit, is an *improvement*. ‘*Thriving*,’ you might call it,” Hizashi says, and he doesn’t have to say it so *smugly*. “Hitoshi has come this far, in just a few months, with *all* the investigation bullshit hanging over him. But you don’t want to see how far he’ll come with that weight off his shoulders, and even if you *say* it’s in his best interests... you’ve never asked me what I’m willing to change to be there for him. Because I *am* ready to be there for these kids, I love being a teacher, a hero, and a DJ, but I love being a dad more. I can cut down to on-call for my hero work instead of patrols-”

“Can you promise him you won’t die? You won’t be killed in the line of duty?” Aizawa asks, because he remembers Hitoshi’s worst fears. *Don’t be 50, please don’t be 50*, this child has suffered enough loss, and they can’t add to it. “That’s what ‘normal’ looks like for us, and bringing a child into that risk is irresponsible.”

“I can’t promise that, Shou,” Hizashi admits, but he’s clearly not taking it seriously if he still wants to argue the point. “But *no one* can promise Hitoshi that. On the day that I married you, I promised that I’d live for you, and you still took me on that promise, and I took yours, that we’d live for each other before we did our part for the greater good. I don’t see why we can’t include our kids in that promise, because the fact of the matter is, Hitoshi could go to this perfect home and family you have in mind, and still have to deal with someone getting hit by a car and not coming home that day. We can’t say we’ll be perfect-”

“We’re a risky placement, looking at it objectively,” Aizawa argues, because while Hitoshi’s biological father was killed in a car accident and any civilian family could be touched by death, they are *far* more at risk when they put their lives in the line of fire, they step in the gap and risk their lives every day. They can’t promise that they’ll come home at the end of a patrol, and Hizashi *knows it*.

“But we can’t promise that we *will* die because of that risk, and if both kids are doing well here, it’s in their best interest to consider the facts all *objective-like*,” Hizashi says, waving a hand in the air as though he really *has* any objective argument to offer. “Hitoshi leaving here will *hurt* him, because he needs *stability and safety*, like you said. And we have two months after the raid in the worst case scenario, *like* you said, two months where we can see if we would be a good fit. So, I’m not asking you to sign the paperwork now, but I’m asking you to look at things *objectively* and with an open mind.”

Two months, but Aizawa wouldn’t be surprised if it’s far longer than that. The League of Villains is a slippery organization, they’ve evaded capture with very few casualties on their side plenty of times, and while he’s sure that Miasma will be taken down, he’s also sure that Hitoshi will still be at risk if The League sacrificed their greatest chess piece in Shiori and Hagakure’s information leaking to obtain him. “I’m asking you to look at this objectively as well. Even if Hitoshi says he wants to stay here, we have to be the responsible adults in his life who will act in his best interests, not necessarily his desires.”

“Agreed,” Hizashi says, before he puts his hands on Aizawa’s shoulders, fingers tangling with the capture scarf. “*But*, I think I’m gonna out-logic you, Shouta. I think that’s *really* gonna sting, and I *think* you’re gonna owe me when I win.”

Aizawa sighs, because this was the *opposite* of a responsible adult's demeanor. “You are not going to *bet* that we agree to adopt Hitoshi-”

“*Bet*,” his husband says, leaning closer to whisper something in his ear that’s entirely *tempting*. *Quite* adult in nature. But not *quite* tempting enough to sacrifice a child’s future, especially Hitoshi’s.

Especially when Aizawa knows that it would be even more *difficult* to fulfill those promises with 4.5 jobs and two children between them.

That’s not *why* he would decide against or decide to become a permanent fixture in either child’s life, to take on that responsibility. He will only decide to do what is right for each child’s best interest, *logically*. Rationally.

And it is completely irrational to consider skipping training entirely to make Hizashi make good on

some of those promises, but as they agreed in a different matter, it deserves to be revisited later.

*

When Hitoshi wakes up, he's alone. Eri isn't there, her side of the bed is cold, but he can smell the faintest traces of cinnamon in the air from the apple cider.

When they woke up, he felt hollow, and he tried to fill that void by making that apple cider with Yamada, building snow bunnies with Eri. She tried to start a snowball fight between the three of them, but any snowball he threw at Yamada was meant to miss, and he couldn't bring himself to even do that to Eri.

When they drank that warm apple cider at the kotatsu, he felt warm there too. Warm enough, but still hollow, half-asleep almost when Aizawa came back just to get ready to go to the 1-A dorm. Eri wanted to go. He didn't. He was tired enough not to care that he said so.

He's still tired, but it's not a weariness he can mend with sleep. When he looks around his room.

It's empty.

There's no box underneath his bed for the pieces of other people, people that he abandoned thoughtlessly. Even if Bakugo said that he's forgiven him, he hasn't, and he'll never make another doll that mockingly looks like him with its jaggedly white body or purple hair standing on end.

There isn't a pile of things that Monoma gave him under his mattress, and he's *been* a coward, but the image of Monoma that he had to stare at under that weird dome still haunts him.

His room haunts him. Everything that he severed, because he didn't want to lose it in a worse way, in a way he can't control. Yamada said that it's 'something between' himself and Aizawa, but he promised that he'd stay.

And three months....

Is still too long to live in fear, if this is all he has. If this is the closest to freedom he ever finds, if this is the kindest cage, he wants to have better memories than the ones he's made. He doesn't want to condemn himself to this lonely place.

Hitoshi can still see those empty spaces with his eyes closed, and sighs as he takes the purple mochi plushie in his arms, to the kotatsu. Mirio said the smell would help him sleep, and while Eri's bed might be more comfortable, more full of things he thinks fondly of, he just wants to feel *warm*. He wants to feel *enough*.

But when he passes by the office door, he hears music quietly playing. He knows Yamada is in there, and he might be working on his radio playlist. He might be working on a playlist for Eri's birthday for all he knows, and he should know more than he does about it.

He probably shouldn't bother him.

But he does.

And as soon as he opens the door, he sees Yamada taking his headphones off and putting his hearing aids in, smiling at him fondly like he expected this, and Hitoshi is just late, instead of unwanted. "Hey kiddo, having some trouble sleeping?"

Hitoshi shrugs, his mind can't find the proper words and his tongue feels too thick to say them. If

he's invited this far, he'll invite himself to Aizawa's chair, pulling it in front of the edge of Yamada's desk. He puts the mochi pillow there, keeping his arms wrapped around it, and he can't deny that the 'squish' and the smell is pleasant when he buries his face in it.

"Pretty rough day, I definitely feel ya on that. I couldn't sleep too great myself, so I decided to get some work done on my playlist, do a little research while I'm at it. I can pull the headphones out if you want to listen too, kind of get our usual radio station visit this week if you feel like skipping, so you can be the first to tell Eri 'Happy birthday' at the stroke of midnight. I'll wait thirty whole seconds before I put it on the air, and you can Brainwash Shou to make sure you beat him to it," Yamada says, and just the sound of his voice in the silence that the late night brings is enough to soothe and rattle him all at the same time. He feels like his body is shattering again beneath the surface, but somehow the edges feel softer this time.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," Hitoshi says, even if he can't bring his head up enough to say it so it isn't muffled. He feels the plushie catch the edge of his words, but they still don't seem to come out soft enough to be meaningful.

"It's alright, kiddo," Yamada says, his hand falling on Hitoshi's shoulder and he closes his eyes when he doesn't flinch, when his body remembers this time. If he closes his eyes, he can practically feel 50 saying those words. "The rules that we all live by don't include volume control, and even though there are some people who might not like getting yelled at, *I'm* not one of them. Can't hurt these ears, they are *literally* bulletproof. I've never had to test that, luckily, but if they're built to handle my decibels, I can take yours pretty easy."

"It's still wrong, even if it's not against the rules," Hitoshi says, because even if he's broken those rules, they're too *easy* to keep. He *should* be able to keep himself from hurting others, including with his words, to not intentionally break things, to let people know where he's going. To not say swear words in front of children, and at least that's the *only* one he hasn't broken. But he's still broken too many, he's done too many horrible things, and he can't trust himself to *stop*. "I hate this."

"Hm, what color are we feeling?" Yamada asks, like that makes *any* sense, but when Hitoshi tilts his head to look at him, his green eyes are almost laughing at him. "It seems to me like you're feeling a little gray, kind of tired but not really tired, maybe worried about something. Maybe a *little* lonely. But you're the one seeing it in hi-def, so maybe if you tell me what you're seeing, we can sort it out so you don't hate it."

"Gray," Hitoshi agrees, but the way Yamada puts it sounds better. "Red, I don't... I wasn't *like* this before, and I hate it. I never... *yelled*, I wouldn't have said those things. I cry too much, and I don't... *like* being crazy. *Er*."

"*Well*, funny thing about that," Yamada says, tilting his head to the side to look at the ceiling, still laughing with the crooked smile on his face. "You probably didn't let yourself feel those things, because you couldn't feel them. That really wouldn't have helped you get through the day back then, but now that you're here, and you kinda know it's safe, the floodgates probably seem *way* too open to those annoying things called 'emotions.' I know Shou would like to convince you he got those things surgically removed, but it's pretty clear to see he's got a lot of feelings, he just thinks he keeps them secret. But, crying, yelling, being mad, those are part of the human condition and all, and if the little bean gets to tell all of us how she feels, I don't see why we can't all join in on the communication there. And *if* a little bean happened to destroy my favorite pair of glasses in a fit of fury, that'd be out of line, but I'd never be mad that she got mad, I'd just want to figure out that failure to communicate to save my fashion sense."

Hitoshi *didn't* break anything. He broke the mug at the 1-A dorm, but that was on accident. Eri *does* get to yell, and pout, and cry, but he shouldn't be like that. He's older, and he has more to lose. "I still don't want to do that. I want to *stop*. I don't... know what to do. About that."

Yamada just smiles, his fingertips stroking along his shoulderblade in a way that is almost distracting with how much it's soothing. "Well, *stop* is a great word, that's what we'd call a 'time out.' I'd do it all the time, I'd realize when I'm getting worked up and then I'd say, or sometimes *not* say, that I've got to take a break, and I'd take a breather from it. That way I could come back to the situation and say my peace on it with a clearer head, and lower volume. And I probably could have pointed out before that you should take that time to peace out of the conversation, but I guess I didn't know that 'letting it all out' like that would be more trouble than it's worth, because I don't want you to feel bad afterwards. Which brings us to... The tantrum planning board!"

Hitoshi huffs, and wants to bury his face in the plushie, because he *doesn't* want to call it that, even if he's sure that's the proper name for it. He's having *tantrums*, like Eri.

"So, we can have some trial and error, to figure this thing out, but the options off the top of my head include - screaming with headphones when you're alone, that's something very Eri approved. We've got ripping up paper, screaming into a pillow, going on a run- oh, we could get a treadmill in here, or a stationary bike! I just need to make a new rule that Shou can't use it as a coat rack, like every other little home gym I've tried to invest in. Let's see here," Yamada hums, rubbing his mustache as he looks at the laptop, in a way that's so like Izuku that Hitoshi can't forget the association.

"The music you showed me. When we were making cupcakes," Hitoshi prods, and Yamada snaps his fingers at the idea, shaking his finger too.

"That is a *great* way to do that. Let the greats do the yelling for you, paired up with some rocking riffs- did we ever get your Spotify account set up?" Yamada asks, and Hitoshi nods, he has the app downloaded on his phone but there's only a few songs he's added to it, after listening to them on the radio show. He told Yamada he didn't follow his playlist, but he did. "Well, if you ever want to poke around on my profile, you can see some playlist that I *haven't* really shared to the public. I can start whipping up a playlist between us, I'll drop the music in and you can veto it, just delete it right off until we've got a perfect collaboration between us."

Hitoshi nods, but he feels that small excitement drain when he remembers there's an entire *section* about dealing with this in the binder that Bakugo had made him. He could have dealt with this earlier, he never would have *yelled* at Yamada, but he threw it away.

And now it's gone. "If there's something wrong with that plan, we can iron it out, put a new spin on it or dump the whole idea-"

"I want to, it's just," Hitoshi turns to bury his face this time, because he really *is* an idiot. And he misses all those things, but he threw them away, his suffering is his own fault. "Bakugo... gave me that book. And it mentioned an app. But I threw it out, and that was *stupid*."

"*That* was something you regret now, but it wasn't stupid in the moment, and you're still allowed to do what you want to your own things, Bakugo-books included. Stash included," Yamada says, but his hand starts pulling away, and Hitoshi turns to look at him, seeing that Yamada is looking away from him. Because he *knows* he's stupid. "And I'm *maybe* allowed to pick some things out of the trash if no one wants them, just in case there are regrets later on."

But, Hitoshi threw them away. *Everything*, everything he kept or packed into that stash box. Yamada said it was fine to throw them away, if he really *wanted* to, and he put it back in the trash

the second time.

But Yamada glances at him, and shrugs. “And if you *do* want that back-”

“Yes,” Hitoshi says, and maybe he should be embarrassed by how eager he is, how insistent he is to have those things back, but he *wants* them, and he was an idiot to let them go in the first place.

But when Yamada leaves, only to come back with the stash box in his hands, the key tucked between two fingers like he never thought of opening it, Hitoshi puts it on his lap just to make sure that everything is there. Untouched. Monoma’s gifts are on top, crushed to fit, but the books, the doll, the notes, the things other people think are trash but just *remind* him of other people and better times, they’re all still *there*.

It’s his again.

“I know it might be a little wrong to second-guess you with what you wanted to do with your stuff, but if you never said a word about the box, I wouldn’t have brought it up to you. It was kind of a ‘just in case’ thing,” Yamada says, like he’s done anything wrong here, when he’s probably the reason that his room could feel like his home again. “But, that binder right there look like what we’re looking for-”

Hitoshi starts closing the box before he has the chance to *think*, to realize how stupid that was. Even if it made him angry that Yamada would try to take that binder, it’s basically *Yamada’s* anyway, after Hitoshi threw it away.

But Yamada raises his hands up, and he looks guilty, even if he *shouldn’t* look like that. It’s stupid. “Yep, *probably* not a great idea to invade your space and stuff and all, just chock that up to a dumb blonde moment-”

“It’s fine, it’s.... It’s just stupid,” Hitoshi says, opening the box and turning it so Yamada could take anything he wants. It’s not *his* if he threw it away, he’s just being stupid.

“It’s not stupid if it makes you upset, Hitoshi,” Yamada says, like *that* makes any sense, before he sits down and pulls out a pen and a sticky note pad. “How about we make that into a rule, ‘No touching Hitoshi’s stuff without invitation.’ That way, no one can make you feel upset, because it’s *pretty easy* to avoid touching your stuff, but a lot harder for you to deal with being upset by it. Because that’s kind of the purpose of the rules, making sure that people aren’t hurt or upset if we can avoid it.”

Hitoshi looks at the sticky note, and imagines that if Yamada tried to write down a rule to make sure he would never be upset with anything, he’d probably need more sticky notes than the collection he already has. But Hitoshi finds the binder, and flips to the section that he remembered skimming over. The app that Bakugo recommended ‘to put your bitchass in timeout for a while’ is one that he downloads to his phone.

There’s a slot in the app to pull up a playlist to listen to, but it also asks for physical activities to help too. He should ask what Bakugo does, even if he imagines he already knows the answer. Probably cooking, probably using his quirk, or sparring.

Maybe, having a ‘home gym’ like Yamada said would be a good thing, but he can’t ask for it now. It seems expensive. And Aizawa said that Santa was going to get him a laptop that isn’t bugged.

Even if Hitoshi doesn’t deserve that.

“Anything new on the chat?” Yamada asks, like he used to ask when he noticed Hitoshi was on his

phone, and he actually had a response to it. But Hitoshi frowns, because he *doesn't*, because maybe he can talk to Izuku or Bakugo now, but he can't hope to make amends to the others.

'*Still angry with me. Can't apologize,*' Hitoshi signs, tucking the binder back in the box before he locks it. He knows he *should* apologize, it worked well enough with Izuku and Bakugo, but he can't hope that it would be that easy with everyone. He can only message Ashi or Monoma, but a message isn't *enough*. Asui will probably never forgive him for what he said, she only knows him as the idiot who needed to be rescued from the 8 Precepts and the guy who threatened her with a knife, *on top of* actually hurting her when she was trying to save him from 127.

"Maybe, you could write them a little note, old school style? If you're not comfortable with saying it and all, and speaking of that," Yamada says, before he opens a drawer and pulls out a white envelope. There's flowery calligraphy with purple ink, addressed to 'Shinsou.' "I haven't looked at it, but I think Monoma might be trying to apologize for that little mess up yesterday."

Hitoshi takes the envelope, tearing carefully and slowly on the top edge, as he tries to figure out what *exactly* Monoma has to apologize for. He stole his quirk and used it on him, but Hitoshi told him to. He bothered him again, but Hitoshi let him into the dorm anyway. But *Hitoshi* threatened him, used his quirk on him, made him drink pickle juice and talk about his deepest insecurities. *Hitoshi* should apologize.

But Monoma is an *idiot*. 'Dearest Shinsou, I will be keeping my visits out of sight and out of mind for the time being, due diligence perhaps too late after the events of yesterday. I apologize for overstepping your boundaries, for ignoring your wishes, and will be ready if you ever wish to speak to me again. But until that time, I will keep a respectful distance, and hope that you can forgive me.'

Like the last time when Monoma sent him that weird pain-relief-threat, he crosses out several ways to say 'Sincerely, Monoma Neito' before he picks that. *Dearest Shinsou* still sounds weird, he's *not* his *dearest*.

"Well, that's nice that he's respecting your space and all, saying he's not going to bother you," Yamada says, almost like he can hear the strain of guilt that Hitoshi *hates* thinking about the most. "Maybe we can see how long he sticks to it, or maybe give him a chance. Totally up to you, but you do have a little preference to your friend group, and maybe I'm a little biased."

"Preference?" Hitoshi asks, even if the question still stings like ice in his throat, even if he crinkles the edge of the letter slightly after he does.

But he breathes easier when he sees that Yamada doesn't answer him immediately, he's not *forced* to, and maybe that makes his words a little easier to hear. "Well, I've noticed that you tend to gravitate towards people like me, Mirio, Bakugo, Kaminari a little bit but that's iffy. Basically, loud blonde guys who are *not* Monoma, since Aoyama's a little shy, and Ojiro too, but if Ashido didn't have the mutant type color scheme, I'm *pretty* sure she would be blonde too."

"That's not-" Hitoshi starts to say, before he realizes that Yamada is *right*. There's always been something about Monoma that's wrong, probably how he made such a mess of his life for the first few days and how every attempt to steal his quirk is just *irritating*. But when he said he *didn't* want to steal his quirk, when he was acting more like a person that day, Hitoshi... *kind of tolerated him*.

"I'm *not* saying all your friends have to be loud blondes, or that you should give Monoma another chance because of that," Yamada says, his hands raised up like he expects Hitoshi to be angry with that. "I'm just stating my theories, that you like people with blonde hair and you *don't* like people

with black hair. And this is a little out there for a theory, but just based on how Sero seems to get a sadistic little smile sometimes with the group chat, and Amajiki tends to get a colder shoulder, and Shou gets a cold shoulder that I think is good dose of medicine for him, *I think* you might have preferences in your social group based on hair color.”

He might be right. One of his favorite things to do is scare Sero, and Iida sometimes, but his hair is so blue that it’s almost black. He doesn’t *hate* Tama, *at all*, but he just doesn’t feel the same way about him that he does to Neji or Mirio. And Aizawa.

It’s honestly unfair to treat Aizawa like that. It’s completely stupid. He *knows* that Aizawa is nice, he’s kind, he’s confusing sometimes but Hitoshi *likes* Aizawa. When Aizawa saw what he could do with the capture scarf, when he smiled at him like he was proud, like he was Eri, he felt.

Like he was the biggest asshole in the world for treating him like he did. For yelling at him so much, for trying to punish him at any chance, for things that weren’t his fault. He was angry at Aizawa for forcing him to go to that cabin in the mountains after he was attacked, but he knows Aizawa had to in order to keep him safe. He’s sure that Aizawa wants to keep him safe, even if he doesn’t want to keep him. He knows Aizawa cares.

He knows Aizawa shouldn’t care, when all Hitoshi has ever done is ignore him or try to hurt him out of spite. He tried to *choke* him as a warning, and Aizawa just followed him into the tree, and talked to him like that didn’t happen at all. *Understanding*, when Hitoshi really just should have been left there, when he made it clear that no one would blame Aizawa if he did.

“When...” Hitoshi says, but the rest of it catches in his throat, when it’s just too *much* to ask Yamada. Yamada just looks at him with that same intolerable understanding, that patience he doesn’t *deserve*. He folds the letter back and puts it in his stash box, and he turns to wrap his arms around the mochi plushie, he’s not sure if he wants to breathe in the lavender scent or if he just wants to smother the question out of himself. “When is Aizawa going to give up on me?”

He knows that he can’t control Yamada if he asks, but the fear just worsens when he doesn’t get an answer. He doesn’t want to look, doesn’t want to see what Yamada looks like. He honestly might want to hear that Aizawa already has, that he’s only putting up with him because it’s temporary, even if that doesn’t explain why he would be so *kind*.

“I’ve been an *asshole* to him. I yelled, I didn’t get the coffee grounds, I *Brainwashed* him just because I didn’t want to hear him talk, just because he couldn’t stop it, I called *him* an asshole when he was just trying to make up for the laptop-”

“Hitoshi,” Yamada says, before he sighs, and that sigh could mean anything. He’s sure he’s going to tell him that Aizawa already has given up, he doesn’t care, but he just puts on such a *great* act, and he’s stupid for believing it. “Shou *doesn’t* give up on people, definitely not kids that need it. Definitely not *you*. And trust me when I say that even if getting yelled at or getting cursed at isn’t *fun*, it’s honestly something to be a little proud of. Because even if that’s not the perfect way to express yourself, it’s *way* better than letting those things build up inside. And we both know you’re still a sweet kid, you just deserve your moments. And that doesn’t mean you deserve to get ‘given up on’ when we know you’re just trying to say that you’re not cool with something.”

“But the others gave up on me,” Hitoshi says, shifting to hold the mochi tighter. “They get to decide that, and that’s *fine*, but Aizawa can decide to do that too. You could, Eri could, I can’t just be an *asshole* to everyone.”

“It’s... a *little* different with us, though,” Yamada says, the unsure whine in his voice probably means it’s a little ‘complicated’ too. “Me and Shou are adults, and we’re high school teachers so

we're basically experts at getting yelled at by teenagers. We've also been through those teenage years, *unfortunately*, so we've got a little bit of a thicker skin going into it. I don't think you'd *ever* yell at Eri, but I think she'd still forgive you after that, because she'd understand that you didn't want to at the time. But, with our little herolets, they do have the right to veto, but they also have the right to forgive. And I'm *probably* biased, but I think those herolets are quite the forgiving bunch, if you want to take a crack at it."

Hitoshi frowns, because maybe they *would* be stupid enough to risk it. He still doesn't know if he can ever grovel low enough, enough to convince himself. It would just be easier if forgiveness was like punishment, if he could prove his intentions past words and time passed, if he could just *do* something to convince them that he feels regretful enough. And he can't promise that he won't do it again, despite how much he doesn't want to. "*Did you hear what I said at the test?*"

Hitoshi can feel how the English words hesitate on his tongue, how it's harder to say them than just know them. He just wanted to see if Yamada would be impressed by his attempt, as much as he wants to guard these words, as much as he wants to stop worrying about whether he heard, or saw, what he asked when Yamada's hearing aids were out and he had to make sure Confession wouldn't affect him. If Yamada *really* knew that he asked such a stupid question, asking him if it would be okay to call him 'Dad.' If Yamada has just ignored it, like Hitoshi wants him to now. It was *stupid*, and he doesn't know what he was thinking at the time.

But Yamada doesn't answer, and when Hitoshi looks up at him, he can see how *confused* he is by how his eyebrows are drawn together, it's almost *pitying*.

No, it's better to just smother himself and forget he ever said anything. "Wait, wait! I just, uh, had to switch gears on that, that was English right? French?"

Hitoshi just lets the 'squish' from the mochi envelop his face, his suffering can end now. He *wanted* this for so long, to say something in English to prove to Yamada that he knew it, in a way that just translating in writing or sign *can't* convey. But he *fucked* it up.

Because he knows *Eri* can speak English clearer than he can. He remembers how irritated she would get when he tried to teach her, because everytime he repeated it for her, she *probably* repeated it the same way he did, and it came out *wrong*, and he *knew it*. "*No*, Hitoshi, don't give up on me yet! Maybe, just say it a little slower? Sound it out? I can help you with those tricky syllables- it's *okay*, 'cause I know we've *never* practiced with it!"

Hitoshi shakes his head, half refusal and half to bury his burning face deeper into this plushie, squeezing it tighter around his face. He's never speaking English again around Yamada, *ever*.

"Alright," Yamada says, like he doesn't believe Hitoshi's conviction. But at least that's easier to hear instead of disappointment, because he doesn't know if he could weather that much. His hand rests on Hitoshi's shoulder, and he relaxes his hold just enough to breathe. "Feeling a little better now, now that that's out of the way?"

Hitoshi nods, even if he feels like rolling his eyes, because Yamada is *predictable*. He wants him to sleep, everyone seems offended by the dark circles under his eyes. He's sure he'll always have them.

"Feeling a little sleepy?" He *knew* it. Hitoshi shakes his head, because he's tired, he feels better, but he doesn't *want* to sleep. He doesn't want to sleep in his bed alone, he'd rather be here with Yamada. "Feeling like... you want me to play with your hair?"

Hitoshi has to look up at him with that, even if he still feels like his face is too hot. *Aizawa* told

him.

“Just if you want me to, I know it’s pretty relaxing, pretty nice. Or we can just chill to the music, just vibe to it,” Yamada says, leaning back in his chair, and Hitoshi *knows* he’s keeping him from whatever research he was doing. He knows Yamada probably just wants him to leave so he can get back to it.

But Hitoshi wants him to play with his hair, so he nods, and as soon as the hand on his shoulder starts stroking his scalp, his eyes fall shut and his body relaxes almost outside of his control. It’s almost scary, but he doesn’t think he can feel enough fear when it just feels like *light*. Like warmth. Like happiness, maybe.

Like being loved, almost. The only way 50 could ever say it to him. “Falling asleep like that *might* hurt a bit in the morning, and I can sit with you ‘til you fall asleep-”

Yamada probably says something else, but his voice just sounds like music, and with the smell of lavender in his lungs, he falls asleep.

Thinking about apologies.

Apple-Vanilla-Cinnamon Challenge

Chapter Summary

Hatsume returns with a baby in tow, a present that Shinsou and Yamada both are eager to play around with. With Eri's sixth birthday taking place tomorrow, many last-minute preparations are underway, and the cake that Shinsou has been worrying about will have to be baked, with an unlikely hero team up to help him.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to a chapter that I've been EXCITED to post. I might be delaying next week's update as I've fallen a bit behind my writing schedule, so if there's no update next week, don't be alarmed, I'm just catching up on my lead before I post the next chapter.

Trigger Warnings: References to human trafficking, vague mention of Bug, reference to a previous bout of self-harm

Previously on Wards of UA: Yamada gave Shinsou his stash box, which he secretly kept after Shinsou tried to throw it away. In the last two times that a visitor has come to the EraserMic dorm, Shinsou left with Mirio and threatened Monoma with pickled radish juice. Shinsou and Midoriya met with Hatsume, and Shinsou asked for a mask that would have a microphone and speakers built in to nullify his quirk, with padding from Yamada's neck speakers and the band from Aizawa's goggles, to make it different from the locked masks that Shinsou has been forced to wear before. When Shinsou was attacked by 127, one of those locking masks was forced on Shinsou's face, and Yamada saw him wearing it. Shinsou is more confident asking Yamada questions, after knowing that Yamada's hearing aids prevent Shinsou's quirk from being effective on him. Monoma's father was one of the quirk specialists evaluating Shinsou, and earned a bit of Shinsou's ire towards him, complimented by Monoma responding to the influence of Shinsou's Confession quirk that his father doesn't believe Monoma will ever be a successful hero and should follow in his footsteps to be a quirk specialist. Monoma also wrote a letter of apology to Shinsou, addressing him as 'Dearest Shinsou.' Midoriya made a groupchat with himself, Iida, Uraraka, and Shinsou early on, but Shinsou never used it. Iida was cut by 127 when he tried to intervene in the attack on campus to rescue Shinsou, while Asui's tongue was cut by Shinsou trying to continue fighting 127. Shinsou used Confession and Brainwashing to see whether Aizawa cared about him, making him raise his hand if he did, but Shinsou also knows that while Yamada has promised that Shinsou will stay after the investigation is over, Aizawa has said that Shinsou will have two months afterwards. Aizawa once asked Shinsou to identify a picture of Bug, before he knew what Bug did to Shinsou, which caused Shinsou to dissociate, and felt guilty once Shinsou did identify that picture when he stayed up most of the night to give up all the information he had about The Miasma. Toshinori made red velvet cupcakes for Aizawa's birthday, which Shinsou knows is Aizawa's favorite cake.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Yamada hears a knock at the door, he counts himself lucky that he's already in the kitchen, and Hitoshi is still putting his room to rights after the light breakfast they made together, where he tried to water down his ward's coffee with a *bit* of creamer to maybe encourage some better sleeping habits, and earned that soft glare he's honestly been missing out on.

But, with Yamada closest to the door, that means *he* can answer to any uninvited intruder, rather than risk his ward running off with them or threatening them with pickle juice, and when he opens the door, he honestly feels a little threatened himself. "*Hatsume*, isn't it? I remember you from the Sports Festival, *great* showing by the way, but what brings you to my door this lovely morning?"

It's sleep. This kid *needs* sleep. Hitoshi's under eye circles can be *bad*, but these are worse, and this poor girl is *twitching*. "I'm delivering a *precious baby*, after being forced to *suffer*, after being *exiled* from the place that I belong! And as promised, this baby will *not* electrocute anyone!"

Yamada does not believe that at all. "Right, that little bundle of joy must be in that box! Under all those papers! Who's it for?"

"The... guy," Hatsume sputters, before she cocks her head, clearly wracking her math-y, crazy engineer-y brain for the name of his ward, who has very *apparently* made a deal with the devil right here. "Uh, kinda cute? Purple hair, his cheek to jawline length is about 8.37 centimeters?"

Things he didn't previously know about his ward right there, since he's still guestimating his waistband size. "*Right*, Shinsou Hitoshi! This is his address, and I'm his doorman, but if you wanted to talk to him about the baby--"

Hatsume sighs, doubling over before she shakes her pink haired head. "*No*, this works better, I guess. Yuyu-sempai said she might have to create an electro-shock avoidance treatment if I go near him again. *Apparently*, Yuyu-sempai and Hadou have adopted him before they even admit that they like each other. Out loud."

Maybe Yamada should be concerned, or a little worried that the Big Three plus one *are* so involved with his kids' protection and care, but he honestly can't look a gift horse in the mouth. "Well, hopefully they get that sorted out in time. Valentine's Day is coming up and all, the last year and last chance and last dance to put it out there--"

Hatsume's head snaps up *audibly*, Yamada can *hear* at least two vertebrae crack when she looks at him. And she doesn't look *sane*. "Less than two months, if I *scramble*, I might- tell Shinko to tell Middy if there's any problems with it! And read the manual! Bye!"

And with that, a chaotic sprite disappears into the midmorning with a mission on her mind, an idea that Yamada *maybe* shouldn't have given her.

But now Yamada is holding a box, underneath a *huge* user manual, and he knows what's inside. A *mask*. A mask that his kid asked for, went out of his way for, and *wants* to wear. But he's not sure if he can keep the image of that mask that was locked on his face that night out of his mind, he doesn't know if he'll feel it like an old muzzle around his own face just seeing it again.

But, when he kicks the door closed, he sees that the moment of truth is impending. Hitoshi is standing in the doorway to the hall, close to the wall, and a little concerned about all of this. *Definitely* has his eyes locked on the box, because he probably knows what's inside too. "Well, it's

not the usual Monoma delivery, but it looks like we've got another little gift from Hatsume to try out!"

Yamada sets the box on the kotatsu, before he sits on the couch, unable to keep himself from flipping through the manual. Speakers and microphone set up, chargeable through USB-C, same as Hitoshi's phone. *Ceramic plating?*

Yamada hears Hitoshi sit down on the other side of the kotatsu, but Yamada looks at the cover to read this 'baby's name for the first time. 'Artificial Vocal Cords: Persona Cords,' AVC for short. And maybe Hitoshi just asked for some digital conversion to get in the way of his quirk.

But Hatsume makes *hero support* equipment after all, and this is definitely the product of that kind of vision. "Are... you mad?"

Yamada glances up to look at a guilty teen, still staring at the box he probably wants to open, and Shouta did say they should *act* surprised. "No way! Hatsume made it for you, and within reason, I'm totally cool with you having pretty much anything you want. Nothing *too* dangerous, no drugs and alcohol of course, but this 'baby' doesn't look like that at all."

Yamada slides the box and manual a little closer to Hitoshi before he tucks his hands in his lap, because once Hitoshi touches it, it's *his*, and there's no touching Hitoshi's things without permission. Hitoshi just glances at the manual before he slides it off, pulling the lid off that little shoebox to find a black mask laying right in the middle, mismatched bits of foam underneath it to give it the barest protection from rattling around.

Yamada can't see it very well, but it doesn't look like there's an opening in the middle like the other mask. It is *bulkier* though, made up of so many interlocking pieces that would travel right under his throat, a pretty big piece in front that Yamada first thinks looks like a muzzle, but he tries to argue with himself that it will allow more air inside the mask, more room to breathe. There's also two big gray squares that look like they'll go over his ears, little dials right in front of them.

He can't see the band underneath, or the padding from how it's laying in the box, but knowing that it's supposed to be inspired by *Shouta's goggles* and *his neck speakers*, he feels like a kid on Christmas wanting to try it out.

"Want to take it to your room to try it out? Or maybe just ask me to stop staring so much--"

"It's fine," Hitoshi grumbles, and while Yamada doesn't really *like* that signed out, it's easier to see a bit of frustration underneath those words, especially when Hitoshi ducks his head and curls a hand around the back of his neck. "Is it really fine with you? To have this?"

"Yep! It's like I said," Yamada says, and he can tell by the glare that's so soft it's almost *confused* that Hitoshi remembers that, but he's still unsure. "And as long as it's okay with you, it's okay with me. Whatever you want to do here, kiddo, you're in control, and I'm just sitting pretty on this couch for the ride."

He'd honestly still *like* to make sure this is a 'non-electrocution-baby' before Hitoshi tries it out, but when the teenager sighs and picks it up, he can see the thick padding. The band is *definitely* the same as Shouta's, even if it's black, and maybe Yamada was a little too hopeful for a little *yellow* to work its way into this piece. But, stealth and all, that *wouldn't* work, and Hatsume probably wasn't argued into it like Shouta managed to do with too many support equipment developers.

Hitoshi looks at it first, his thumbs squeezing the padding to test it, before he slides it over his face, holding it there. And it slides right off, down to his chest. "Ah, the band for Shou's goggles is a

little tricky if you haven't tried them on before--"

"They're *not*!" Oh no, he's *blushing*.

He's caught, and Yamada probably shouldn't have let that slip, but he just has to bite his lip to keep from grinning too much, just adding salt to the wound.

Hitoshi just sighs, head tipping down in all the adolescent angst and embarrassment this has caused him, probably nigh-lethal amounts, before he starts twisting the pieces of the rubber guard for that fancy hidden zip-pulley to tighten up, the top part of the mask hitting his chin before he pulls it back on his face. And that glare is *so* put upon. "Don't tell him."

Yamada smiles a little lopsided, because that secret is *very* out, but it's probably best not to mortify the poor kid right now. "Nah, I just recognized the band, I'm not *accusing* you of anything. Fits nice? Breathable and all?"

"Yeah," Hitoshi says, glancing to the side where one hand is touching the dial, not playing with it yet. "I don't think it's turned on."

"Well, I guess we can take a look at the instruction manual," Yamada says, and maybe his grin turns a little devious at the thought. "Because I think a certain engineer went *wild* with this baby, and there's a whole lot of fun to be had in this small package."

'Switching to digital mode' might be Hitoshi's first order of business, but 'How to adjust tonal pressure plating' and 'How to save a Persona Cord setting' are *definitely* going to be worth reading up in Yamada's opinion.

Because that little Shouta impersonation he hasn't heard for a while could get *quite* a boost in performance with a little *support equipment*.

*

Aizawa couldn't help but feel an almost irrational sense of dread as he and Eri made their way back to the staff dorm for the day. Possibly due to the antics his students had pulled last night for Eri's 'birthday eve,' practically stealing her away for most of the night to spoil her with movie marathons, sweets, and games in *anticipation* of the deserved spoiling she would receive tomorrow. Perhaps that worry was mounting because he now knew what his students had prepared as gifts, he had an idea how *Plus Ultra* his coworkers planned to be, and the package that he and Hizashi had been waiting for still hadn't arrived.

Aizawa knows that Hizashi ordered several things for Eri's birthday. He would estimate that it would be enough to necessitate one of Principal Nezu's robots to deliver them to their doorstep rather than receiving a notification to pick up a smaller package from the administration building.

Aizawa sees an overburdened robot carrying such packages through the door that the animal principal is holding open for it. Followed by five robots carrying what look to be *carousel* horses.

Aizawa glances down at Eri, and knows it *might* spoil some of the surprise, but given that this seems to be a surprise to *him*, Principal Nezu probably deserves it. And instead of seeming flustered at all, the principal blinks and brightens when he spots them approaching. "Ah, Miss Eri and Eraserhead! We were just putting the finishing touches on our makeshift 'birthday ballroom,' so to speak!"

"A ballroom?" Eri asks, leaning forward to take a peek at what looks like *chaos* in soft pastels that has exploded over the common room of the staff dorm. At least with the birthday party that was

insisted upon for his own birthday, there weren't *quite* so many streamers.

There *is* a carousel. That is not the only carnival piece present. "Is that a ferris wheel?"

Principal Nezu nods, looking at how nearly every wall and chair was currently decorated with pink and purple satin ribbons, how there was a carousel with ponies *matching* that color scheme, and a *ferris wheel* currently folded and disassembled, pulled by a semi truck that is *very clearly* getting closer to the staff dorm. It is *full sized*, and Aizawa can only hope that it's repurposed from the Cultural Festival. That Principal Nezu didn't order a *ferris wheel* just to match the pink and purple color scheme. "Indeed! While it may have been possible to create a 'bouncy house' that would endure the cold weather with more time to engineer it, I hope that the ferris wheel will be an adequate substitute."

Aizawa looks inside to count the chairs again. There's too many of them. They had a *plan*, a nice, sedate birthday party where Eri wouldn't be overwhelmed, even if there was no chance to keep the gift-giving from being *absurd*. He knows how his students are, but he didn't want them to feel obligated to attend her party.

"Lunch Rush was unavailable for catering, but he did design the menu and consultation for whom to contract with. And I was told that this event would be Sailor Moon themed?" Principal Nezu asks, pointedly *not* asking him, but looking at the little girl at his eye level who is still *enraptured* by the sight of the carousel ponies.

"Yes! Sailor Moon is my favorite!" Eri says, distracted from her spell of awe just long enough to answer Principal Nezu, her small fists in front of her chest as though she struggles to hold back from how much she *loves* that cartoon.

Principal Nezu just chuckles. "Well, I suppose I may still have a surprise in store that will be well-received. Do take care not to peek into those packages being delivered to your door just yet, even if it's tempting."

"Okay!" Eri concedes, still *clearly* overwhelmed by all of this. Understandably.

Aizawa might be *more* overwhelmed, the more that he looks at it. "Plus Ultra, then."

Principal Nezu looks him dead in the eye, even from his much smaller height, and Aizawa feels the source of that unnameable dread looking back at him. "*Plus Ultra*. Nothing less for a ward in UA's care would suffice."

The plan for Eri to have a nice breakfast at the 1-A dorm, already offered by his students to the point of near-insistence, and receive the presents that he *knows* he couldn't keep them from buying has currently been thrown out the window, because they *will* show up to this. The plan for Eri, Kota, Asui Satsuki and Shoji Mizuno to play musical chairs and other simple party games has been replaced by a full size *ferris wheel*. And the plan for he and his husband and both wards to celebrate with a nice dinner and cake to wind the day down is *wholly* overshadowed, because Aizawa knows he might only have a chance of peeling Eri off that carousel when she passes out from sugar overdose and *exhaustion*.

Aizawa finds himself following the robot to his dorm, Eri still following in a bit of fugue that he honestly feels as well. He knows that everyone involved in Eri's life would want to not only celebrate the benchmark of another year of it, but to go *completely* Plus Ultra with the justification that this first birthday since being rescued should outweigh every birthday before it. That on the surface means extravagant gifts, though Aizawa can also see they're thoughtful ones, with her preferences in mind.

But he can only be *hopeful*, to the point of ignorance, that they don't find their footing to do this again on Christmas in a matter of days.

The robot doesn't seem to have enough artificial intelligence to realize that it's *blocking the door*, and Aizawa watches with a sense of horror and intrusion he knows shouldn't be *new* to him when a small mechanical arm descends from its torso to start unlocking his door. Right in front of him. But from what little he can see with the boxes and robot in the way, it seems like Hizashi answers the door first. "Ah! There's the party decorations we were waiting on!"

"That's just decorations?" *Hizashi* asks, his husband's voice is unmistakable, and given that Hizashi hasn't been on patrol and thus wouldn't have been affected by any bizarre quirk to explain why there's *two* of him, Aizawa fights the urge to kick the robot on its face and out of his way.

"Yama?" Eri asks tentatively, more confused than horrified at least, and the boxes are pulled out of the robot's arms and quickly dropped by his husband. Who isn't accompanied by a quirk-induced doppelganger, but by *Hitoshi*.

Who is wearing a mask, the mask that Hatsume presumably crafted for him. A mask that he pulls down to his chin quickly, staring at Eri as he does with clear worry.

A mask that can mimic voices would be an ingenious device if Hitoshi were a hero student trying to compliment his quirk's abilities. But Hitoshi is *not* a hero student, and Aizawa is not blind to the *possibilities* of that mask *complimenting* his quirk. Aizawa has *worries*.

He's sure that Hizashi would take him up on that bet as to whether it would take one day or two before their ward uses that mask to Brainwash Aizawa. And he'll lose with his insistence that Hitoshi will wait two entire days before he does it.

But as the robot backs away to retreat, pranks are clearly the last thing on Hitoshi's mind, his hand still cupped around the face of the mask like he wants to take it off fully, to hide it from Eri, but can't summon the will to.

"Hey guys, welcome back! Hitoshi got a neat little toy we've been playing around with while you were gone, the *Artificial Vocal Cord* voice changer!" Hizashi says, sweeping his hands in the direction that Hitoshi *clearly* doesn't want, when the teenager likely hadn't considered whether Eri would see this mask. A black mask, that is *reminiscent* in ways the young child is clearly familiar with, even though cloth facemasks went over with no altercation. "When Hitoshi wears it, he can change his voice to match anyone's, even mine! Or Shou's!"

Hizashi must be oblivious to the obvious tension when he winks at Aizawa, promising something he's already *certain* of, or at least was. Before he considered Eri's feelings on the matter of this mask, which he knows are likely to rule whether Hitoshi ever wears it again.

"You can change your voice to be like *anything*?" Eri asks, timid at first, before excitement wins out with her hands curling in front of her chest again, dragging Aizawa's hand with her. "Even a cat? Even Sushi?"

"I... haven't tried it," Hitoshi admits, glancing down at the mask still riddled with guilt, still unwilling to see that Eri seems to accept this. The black mask is similar in ways that Aizawa can clearly see, but to Eri, who was more familiar with *another* mask, it may look completely different. "I need your help before I try it, though."

"Okay!" Eri agrees, abandoning her hold on Aizawa's hand only to take hold of Hitoshi's. "But Yama and Zawa are gonna open some boxes and I can't see them, Nezzu said so! So I can help you

in my room!”

“That works,” Hitoshi mumbles, glancing over his shoulder at Aizawa, as though his opinion on the matter counted at all. Or that he was *surprised*, which he imagines he acts as though he is, given that Hitoshi doesn’t know he happened to eavesdrop on the planning session for that mask that seems to have taken a very *different* turn than expected.

And Hizashi doesn’t look worried at all, when both wards are out of sight, resting a hand on the boxes and the other on his hip. “Now *that* is a nifty little baby Hatsume cooked up. Just *chock full* of possibilities-”

“Our wards will *not* be missing out on childish pranks, *without* that help,” Aizawa sighs, rubbing his eyes and once again reminding himself that he *can’t* expel Ashido or Kaminari. They have *potential*. “I’ve been ‘down low, too slow’d five times in the last twelve hours, and Eri will *not* be distracted for long. And Nezu is getting her a ferris wheel.”

Aizawa knows very well that he failed to mention critical specifics when Hizashi starts looking around the living room, but he waits for the pressure to mount just enough that it’s enjoyable. “*Where* are we going to put it?”

“A ferris wheel, *for her birthday*. He’s taken over, the common room downstairs has been redecorated, and there is *too much*,” Aizawa argues, for the sake of his child, who cannot be expected to withstand *all* of that on her birthday, despite what Principal Nezu thinks is appropriate.

And despite what Hizashi clearly thinks too, when he grins. “Nothing but the best for our little bean! Which means, we better dig out the goods before she comes out and sees them.”

Aizawa unsheathes his tanto knife to start cutting through the tape, Hizashi is the only one who knows what he ordered and when, enough to see that most of these boxes are for streamers, decorations, party favors. *Entirely* too many party favors, and some that look a bit more expensive than the usual fare, in Aizawa’s opinion.

But when he opens a box that *seems* like the right one, he notices the color isn’t quite right, and Hizashi picks it up to see that it’s entirely different. It’s not what they ordered, it’s not the right size.

What Principal Nezu said earlier, haunts him. *Well, I suppose I may still have a surprise in store that will be well-received.*

Cosplay like *this* cannot be what he *meant*. Hizashi looks at *him* suspiciously, before it dawns on Aizawa that he’s evaluating whether it’s the right size. Aizawa knows it would only be the perfect fit, he knows Hizashi’s shoulders aren’t broad enough for that shirt.

Hizashi sets it down, and pulls out *another* one. And while Aizawa sees the last piece is in fact a Tuxedo Mask cosplay, he sees there’s only *one*. And when Hizashi pulls it out of the box, he can see that it’s in *Hizashi’s* size. Not Hitoshi’s.

That’s a conversation that has not come up with Hitoshi, and he knows it wouldn’t be an honest one if this option were presented before him with the connection to Eri’s birthday. Even if Hitoshi would be comfortable wearing a Chibi Usa cosplay, skirt and all in this situation, given that Hitoshi might not understand the societal ramifications of wearing it at an increasingly public birthday party, he thinks that the option should be taken out of the teenager’s hands.

Hizashi nods at him when he tucks that cosplay into the bottom of the box, before he picks up the

other one. The one presumably meant for *Aizawa*, and he seems to have a *question* he should already know the answer to.

“No,” Aizawa says, because he might *appreciate* Sailor Pluto’s character, *he* understands the ramifications of *any* of his teenage idiots seeing him dressed like that, and he’d *much* rather coordinate with his husband fashion-wise.

Hizashi folds up the cosplay with the Tuxedo Mask outfit on top, even if he raises his eyebrows with promises that the other won’t *exactly* waste away in their closet. Aizawa doesn’t have much time to consider the ramifications of that.

“You had it delivered here, right?” Aizawa asks, because they *need* this gift to arrive today, and if Hizashi hadn’t noticed a delayed shipping notification, it might undo all of Principal Nezu’s unexpected coordination with them.

But Hizashi does check his phone, *wincing* in a way that isn’t promising while he folds back the box flaps with one hand. “*Shit*, it went to the old P.O. box. You’ve got training with the herolets?”

Aizawa nearly rolls his eyes, given that it was *requested* by his students for *nearly* insulting reasons. “As part of a punishment game they set up, not that I’m supposed to know the real reason why only the male students requested ‘additional time to hone their hand-to-hand combat skills.’”

He’s *almost* offended, but knowing that he’s meant to be a strict teacher, which comes with a bit of fear, makes it more humorous that they *asked* for this and clearly planned it beforehand. “And I don’t suppose you’d *like* to have the little bean watching you dole out that punishment on her favorite heroes, so I guess that means I can take Eri out for a little pre-birthday day on the town. And *inconspicuously* make a trip to a cosplay shop.”

Aizawa narrows his eyes, because there’s *no way* he could pull it off. “*Inconspicuous?*”

Hizashi just grins. “I mean, I don’t *think* that tiara was the right size, and it’s best to be sure. Pretty tricky fit with the horn and all.”

Aizawa would be surprised if that was the *only* shop that Hizashi wanted to visit on that outing, but given that Eri has been remiss on excursions off-campus, and with the restrictions on Hitoshi, they can’t accomodate for it tomorrow, he nods his agreement and hopes that they’ll have fun. “Maybe Hitoshi would like to spend time with Mirio, or work on his studies if you’re not back in time.”

“*Might* be surprised about a certain someone’s feelings about those herolets,” Hizashi teases, what he thinks is promising but what is in fact almost more dangerous than Hitoshi ignoring his students with ill-placed spite. If Hitoshi *tries* to ask for forgiveness and renewed friendship with a group of students gathered with the purpose of training *in his specialty* with quirkless combat, *with* that mask so new, Aizawa can only see this going *poorly*.

But when Eri and Hitoshi leave her room, he notices that the mask looks a bit *different* now, and he imagines it’s not the picture of stealth that Hatsume had in mind. But it has been *fixed* with Eri’s necessary influence. “Yama! Zawa! Toshi’s mask is pretty now!”

“Yep,” Hitoshi says, with *Eri’s* voice which only sends a few shivers down Aizawa’s spine with the eeriness of it. He knows he’ll have to get used to that, though, as well as being unable to read Hitoshi’s expression when the majority of his face is covered in black.

And cat stickers. He can see a few unicorns too.

“I think it’s perfect now,” Hizashi says, a wide grin and sincerity that’s almost too much for this

situation. *Almost.*

But if Hitoshi wanted to create this mask with Hizashi and himself in mind, to make it different from the mask he wore before, then Eri's influence was certainly missing until the stickers were added.

"But! It looks like there's a little shopping adventure I need to take, and a little bean is absolutely essential on this mission! And I do believe there might be some crepe flavors that can only be found during the holiday season that are *also* essential for us to try out," Hizashi says, as though Eri will be missing out on *any* sweets in the coming days, but the bribe might be necessary with how she looks up at Hitoshi, reluctant to leave him.

"Okay, but I gotta show Twenny something," Eri says, as she steps back with Hitoshi's full attention on her, pulling the mask down and crouching a bit lower as he *grossly* misinterprets the importance of what she has to 'show.' "Up high!"

Hitoshi raises his hand, eyebrows already knitting a bit as the suspicions raise, but as soon as he does, Eri lowers her hand, not giving Hitoshi a chance to make contact. Not that he seemed to understand that 'up high' was inviting a high-five.

"Down low!" Eri says, her own eyebrows knitting together and lowered, seemingly angry in a bid not to burst into giggles like she had before. And when Hitoshi takes the bait, his hand moving towards her gently, she pulls it back to her shoulder to give into the giggles for a trick well-played. "Too slow! I got you, Toshi!"

This is the face of a 'got' teen, as Hitoshi stares at his hand, seemingly struggling to comprehend *exactly* what happened here, and completely unaware that Eri would be giving him *plenty* of opportunity to understand it later on. "Was... I supposed to move faster?"

Oddly enough, that was the exact same question Todoroki had when Eri 'got' him at breakfast. "Nope! That's how it works, I'm s'posed to pull back before you can get me, so I win!"

Aizawa would be shocked that his students' reflexes were so poor, if he didn't know they already understood how *that* game was played. Not honestly or fairly, but that is how the game is *meant* to be played with Eri. "I'm sure we'll all be experts at this game soon."

Eri is already dressed appropriately for the weather outside, but responsibly wants to make sure that the pet fish and her two plants are taken care of with Hitoshi's help while Hizashi finds a jacket and scarf. Before they leave, it's easy to see that Eri isn't entirely fond of leaving Hitoshi behind, balancing on one foot to lean against the teenager crouched to her level with a hug. "Twenny, are you gonna be on the radio with Yama?"

"No," Hitoshi answers, and though the mask still resting on his chest still obscures some of his face, Aizawa can see the small smile directed at Eri. "I'm going to stay with you, all night tonight, all day tomorrow, and all night after that, so Yamada's probably going to be pretty lonely. You should make sure he has a good time, because Byte Sound is going to bully him a lot since I'm not there."

"*Oh no*," Hizashi groans as he crosses the threshold of the hallway, his steps faltering as he doubles over. "*No*, Byte is going to be.... Eri, are you *sure* you wanna be cooped up in that ol' herolet dorm all night? Won't it be *exciting* to see my little radio station, pick all the songs I play for the whole country?"

"I wanna meet Byte!" Eri exclaims, clearly excited about the idea, and Hizashi is *very* excited for

it too, if only because he hasn't realized that would mean his sidekick would be cooing over Eri and completely neglecting her duties all night. "But I wanna have a big sleepover with my friends, so I can't do that right now. But maybe later."

"Of course," Hizashi sighs, but he pushes down any lingering disappointment to smile with pride, glancing at Aizawa. They both know that while Eri is becoming far more confident with making decisions for herself, it's so very far from the timid little girl who would hesitate and worry, seemingly terrified of anything resembling selfishness that they knew at first. "And if we're not back in time, maybe a couple of guys could take over a *very important* job together. I know my favorite listener is up to the task, and it's probably time for him to have a sous chef of his own!"

The cake. Aizawa feels his blood nearly run cold, he wants to argue with his husband that he *has* to be back before it comes to that. This is Eri's *birthday* cake, and he knows that Hitoshi is up to the task. But if he's involved at all, if Hitoshi needs him to help with *anything*, he knows it would only end *horribly*. He should probably ask if Toshinori is going to be available, just to be prepared.

But Hizashi steps forward and cups Aizawa's jaw, placing a kiss on the corner of his mouth as the wards hug and say their goodbyes, just to whisper in his ear. "Just be encouraging, he's a *big* self-doubter, but he's got it. Not unlike *someone* else I know and love, at that age."

Aizawa, as a homeroom teacher, is a professional cheerleader in that way, and he feels he's *far* more up to that task than actually helping Hitoshi bake a cake. He's also aware that cooking and baking are two things that Hizashi not only excels at better than he does, but shares with Hitoshi in a very meaningful way, a way that he doesn't want to intrude on without invitation like that.

But, the cake draws his attention to the open-ended schedule he has now, and how to fill it. He knows that Hitoshi is starting to find some degree of tolerance for him, even if that comes with mood swings into the other direction with no warning. He knows that Hitoshi seems to be a bit more confident asking questions with the mask in place, and probably *does* want to toy with it. He might like to get some actual lessons with using the capture scarf too.

But, as soon as they say their farewells and Hizashi and Eri leave, he hears *his own* voice behind him. "What is your favorite food?"

"Pickled radish onigiri," Aizawa is forced to say, before the control over his body fades away into static noise.

*

Hitoshi takes some rice already prepared for lunch, and molds it into a triangular onigiri shape. He lays each plain onigiri on a strip of dried seaweed, with a slice of pickled radish placed in the middle, before he folds each end of the seaweed over to form a band to secure the yellow radish. Then wets the tip of his finger with water to make sure the top end of the seaweed adheres to the band.

Pickled radish onigiri.

Aizawa had to be fucking with him.

Hitoshi glares at the most *disappointingly* simple meal he's ever had a hand in, as long as he can tolerate it, before he drops his head with his elbows braced on the counter, considering whether he should just go limp and hope he hits his head hard enough on the way down. There's no way around Confession, and Aizawa is still on the couch, even if he's not under his control.

He can't really *command* someone to go to sleep, but after making Aizawa get into his sleeping bag and telling him to take deep breaths repeatedly, that string started to dip rather than fray, before it fell away completely, and Aizawa started snoring. He's still asleep, and Hitoshi knows he's not likely to wake up as long as he's silent.

And *pickled radish onigiri* is a meal that will keep perfectly well even if Aizawa sleeps all day, unlike *actual* food.

Hitoshi knows he needs to be quiet because the control is no longer holding Aizawa, but he wants to *scream* when he feels another vibration from his phone, another message from *Monoma*.

PHANTOM Thief, at least: That doesn't explain how you came to the conclusion that my father is 'a dick,' as you put it, and I am **QUITE** invested in learning what he did to deserve that. My holiday time is coming up and I know exactly how to ruin his favorite caviar, just a stir with the wrong spoon will do the trick.

Dearest Sweet Shinsou changed their name to Stop FUCKING calling me dearest.

Stop FUCKING calling me dearest: He's just a dick. You said he doesn't think you're going to be a hero, so he's a dick.

He just wanted to *apologize*, he said he was sorry about making Monoma drink pickled radish juice and threatening him, he said it was *fine* if Monoma didn't want to avoid him. And Monoma just kept *messaging* him, arguing with him that Monoma was in the wrong, which is really just a *brilliant* way to manipulate him into messaging him back. As if changing his name to *dearest* every time his attention was drawn away wasn't bad enough.

He apologized to Monoma, and Monoma seems fine now, but he's probably insane so it doesn't count. Izuku also said he still wanted to be friends with him, but Izuku *also* doesn't count because he's possibly more insane. Bakugo hasn't really forgiven him, but at least he's told him exactly what he has to do to earn that forgiveness, and that's to not be a raging *dick* and trigger him again, and that's easy enough to accomplish. That's the most *believable* offer of forgiveness he's gotten so far.

Forgiveness can't be just words, that's too cheap, like Bakugo said himself. It has to be like punishment, he broke a rule before it was written when he threatened to use his quirk on anyone in 1-A who looked at him and threatened to hurt Asui specifically. He has to *do* something more than just say he's sorry.

Hitoshi scrolls past Ashi's chat, biting his lip while he does. He's honestly a little too afraid of what she'll want as a consequence to risk it now.

He doesn't have the group chat with all of them anymore, but there are two chats he's barely used that have 1-A students in them.

27: I haven't talked to you in a while, and I know you weren't there that night, but I'm sure you've heard about it. I said that I was going to use my quirk to make anyone in 1-A reveal their deepest insecurities or hurt them physically, and I'm sorry for saying that. I'm not going to do that.

27 changed their name to Shinsou Hitoshi

Shinsou Hitoshi: It's been a really long time. I'm sorry about that too. You seem nice.

Hitoshi gives in to the urge to sit on the floor at least, the lack of typing on the other end, the things

he's forcing himself to say, make him feel nauseous almost. He feels like he's under Bug's gaze, waiting for which hum or tut she'll have, the pain behind it. The worst part is the waiting.

Kouda: Oh! Thank you Shinsou! You've always seemed really nice too!

Kouda: And I'm glad that you feel differently now! I'm sure that everyone knew that you were going through a difficult time when you said that, and I hope that deleting the group chat didn't make you feel bad, because that wasn't what we were trying to do!

Kouda: We were trying to respect your boundaries, and did want to enforce our own, but I'm sure that everyone will be happy to join a new group chat with you when they hear you've changed your mind. Do you want me to pass that along?

Shinsou Hitoshi: No. I should apologize, not letting you apologize for me. I'm working on it so don't say anything.

Kouda: Okay! And I'm just curious, so you don't have to tell me, but are you comfortable with talking to people now?

Hitoshi breathed a sigh of relief, knowing there was *something* he could offer to make sure that this 'forgiveness' was real, that it was paid for. Even if Kouda didn't really *need* this information as much as Hitoshi wanted to be forgiven, it was something to make it heavier and concrete. A way to pay for what he had done.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Not really, sometimes. I have a mask to keep my quirk under control. It helps, I think. It's still weird, being able to use it anytime I talk.

Kouda: I can understand that. With my quirk, I wasn't always comfortable talking to my pets, because I didn't want to tell them what to do, on accident and all. I'm sure it felt uncomfortable to them sometimes. And with my voice, it's really annoyingly high pitched, so I like using JSL instead! So, if you did ever want to talk to me, I think using JSL is fine, so you don't have to be uncomfortable! :)

Kouda isn't specific about whether Hitoshi would feel uncomfortable talking to him, or hearing Kouda's apparently 'high pitched voice,' which he doesn't really find annoying.

Honestly, he doesn't find Kouda as unnerving as he did before, knowing this about him. A quirk so similar to his own, based on his voice but directed towards controlling animals. And while Hitoshi assumed he was just more confident about it, or didn't care about the lesser beings he controlled, that wasn't true. Kouda can feel just as uncomfortable about his quirk as Hitoshi does about his own.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Thanks.

Monoma has sent him at least three more messages, but Hitoshi ignores them, and goes to the next chat he's never used. Izuku made it for him, right after he made one for just himself, probably because he wanted to make sure that Hitoshi wouldn't make any mistakes when he tried to make friends, like Eri wanted him to.

It's still unnerving, to apologize to Izuku again, with two other hero students he's barely interacted with also reading the message he sends.

Link: I'm sorry that I threatened to use my quirk on you and hurt Asui. I'm not going to do either of those things. That would be against the rules to intentionally hurt other people, and I don't

intend to break that rule.

Link: And this name doesn't fit anymore.

Kirby: ??? @Deku Sprout WHEN DID U EVEN MAKE THIS CHAT???

Kirby: And Shinsou, I accept ur apology. I hope you don't break that rule, because if u DID hurt Tsu, u would have BIG problems with me. >:(

Kirby: But u can keep ur name, as long as u behave like Princess Eri's protector.

Link: *Tap to download 22kB*

Link: *Tap to download 22kB*

Kirby: ur on less thin ice keep the pics coming.

Link: *Tap to download 22kB*

Kirby: I already have that 1, dont b cheap

Deku Sprout: I accept your apology too, Shinsou! I'm glad that you're using this chat now. :D

Link: *Tap to download 22kB*

Kirby: Vote to change this chat to Eri Picture Exchange.

Kirby: AYE

Deku Sprout: AYE @Kirby, that means you have to send Eri pictures too.

Deku Sprout: *Tap to download 22kB*

Metal Knight: While I am relieved to know that you no longer intend to invasively use this new dynamic of your quirk to forcibly reveal our deepest insecurities or physically harm us the way that you implied by threatening to cut out Asui's tongue the next time she tried to rescue you (and for the record, this follows the second incident of her rescuing you), the idea that the only thing stopping you from doing that is a rule against such actions does not assuage my worries completely. Are you truly regretful of your actions and the actions you threatened, or do you just want to avoid the consequences of those actions?

Kirby: *Tap to download 22kB*

Deku Sprout: Iida, I know that Shinsou didn't mean what he was saying, I know why he was saying that. And I don't think it's a good idea to bring up how many times Tsu rescued Shinsou. She wouldn't say that herself, like being a hero and rescuing someone entitles them to something like that.

Link: What do you want as proof?

Kirby: Iida probably wants a thank u for getting stabbed and all trying to save u, but <.< >.> I don't see it.

Metal Knight: That was not what I was asking! Of course I don't expect Shinsou to thank me for

how little I was involved in rescuing him during that attack!

Link: You're right, because it's not there. I didn't ask for any of you to get involved. And the next time you do get involved like that, I will intentionally hurt you without hurting you physically or emotionally.

Deku Sprout: Shinsou, I understand that you don't want us to get hurt trying to help you, but that's our duty as heroes in training! And you could say you don't want us to get hurt instead of trying to say that you will hurt us if we do that, if that makes sense?

Kirby: ...so ur going to threaten us if we try to save ur life. Again. But u haven't figured out how to do that without breaking that rule.

Link: I'm going to figure it out.

Kirby: Give me another Eri pic

Link: *Tap to download 22kB*

Metal Knight: I'm further unconvinced that you do regret your actions if you want to still inflict harm on us for doing what would be not only expected, but what we would be compelled to do not only as heroes but people who care about you, and don't wish you to come to harm. Which is what caring about someone in the barest means would entail, not wishing harm upon them.

Deku Sprout: Iida, I think you're kind of misunderstanding what Shinsou means. He just doesn't want us to get hurt on his behalf, because he does care about us!

Link: You're saying that you didn't butt in to get stabbed because you're a hero, but because you cared about me, but you don't care what I want to do with my own life or how I feel about that.

Metal Knight: ??? Of course I care about your life and your feelings, Shinsou! But I don't agree with letting you get hurt! And I'm very concerned that you would rather have us stand by and watch you get attacked should that incident repeat itself?!

Link: Yes, that's what I want. Like you said, you were pointless anyway except for getting hurt, when I didn't ask you to do that.

Deku Sprout: This is kind of a complicated situation. Shinsou is kind of right that he should decide how he wants us to treat him, and I think I speak for all of us when I say that we do want to respect his wishes. But Shinsou, Iida is also right that because we care about you, we can't really be okay with watching you get hurt. I don't think that would ever happen again, so it's probably pointless to argue about it, but if anyone tried to hurt you, we couldn't just ignore it.

Link: Fine. I take back my apology, and I don't care about any of you, so stop 'caring' about me.

Kirby added Asui Tsuyu to the chat.

Kirby changed Asui Tsuyu's username to Frogger.

Kirby: >:(Take that back, and apologize to Tsu.

Link: No.

Deku Sprout: Shinsou, I know you still feel bad about what you said, and I know you're only

saying that you're not because you don't want us to get hurt. But I helped and I didn't get hurt!

Link: You nearly got impaled. You nearly DIED, because you were stupid enough to jump up into the air where you wouldn't be able to control where you landed, and you wouldn't see 127 letting you fall on his sword, and that would be MY FAULT. So take your 'caring' and fuck off.

Frogger: That's understandable.

Metal Knight: ??? Asui, you don't have to be involved in this. It is NOT understandable that Shinsou would threaten and insult you specifically, and carry on like this after 'apologizing.'

Frogger: But, that is cruel, isn't it? To ignore Shinsou's feelings about this.

Frogger: Shinsou, I understand your feelings. You don't want to feel guilty about the actions of others. And it's not easy to say that you should ignore that. I still can't say that I would act any differently than I did, even knowing your feelings. But I can accept that you don't want me to do that, even if it means I won't let you get hurt, even if you hate me afterwards.

Link: And that's not any different from anyone who rented me, or forced me to do whatever they wanted. You can say you care or understand, but you don't, and you're just as low as them in the end.

Deku Sprout: That's not true! That's completely different!

Metal Knight: Ignoring your personal wishes out of care for your wellbeing is COMPLETELY different from ignoring them based on lack of care!!!

Link: It's literally not.

Frogger: You wouldn't stand by and watch if I were attacked though, would you?

Link: You're not as good as you think you are, even if you're a hero.

Kirby:BOI.

Frogger: Even if I told you not to?

Kirby:

Deku Sprout:

Metal Knight: And here lies the hypocrisy.

Link: You have no idea what you're dealing with, and I do. So I don't want you to get involved.

Frogger: That's understandable. Our first priority would be to get Aizawa-sensei and Yamada-sensei, like we did before. But as heroes, we will always be facing opponents that may be more powerful than ourselves. That's why we train so hard to be ready for them. And I would ask that you do the same, to involve our teachers first before acting.

Link: Fine. And I'm sorry for hurting you. I wasn't thinking like myself.

Kirby: GOOD.

Frogger: Apology accepted, Shinny.

Deku Sprout: We can all agree on that! :D

Metal Knight: Indeed, involving our teachers will always be the first priority, to intercede in a student-on-student incident or villain incident as they are the veteran heroes entrusted with our care! And I apologize for doubting your sincerity, Shinsou, this is a more complicated matter than I realized at first, and I should not have been so quick to judge.

Link: @Kirby, you can't call me 'Shinny,' because I gave you pictures of Eri. @Metal Knight what do you want?

Kirby: Im good with that.

Metal Knight: I don't need any evidence of your sincerity, Shinsou! I accept your apology, and that you believe in the spirit of this rule that you don't want harm to come to others!

Link: That's how it works. I broke the rule, I said I'm sorry, now I have to do something as a punishment to prove I won't do it again.

Kirby: ...punishment???

Link: I'm fine with sending pictures of Eri, because you appreciate them. And I'm fine with Asui calling me Shinny.

Frogger: You need to call me 'Tsu' from now on.

Link: Fine.

Deku Sprout: But, that's not really necessary, Shinsou! Aizawa-sensei and Mic-sensei can do that, but we can't... really. Unless it makes you feel better?

Link: Yes.

Metal Knight: Then, only for the purposes of making you feel more comfortable with our renewed friendship, I would like you to instruct me in basic knife wielding techniques, possibly at the training exercise today with Aizawa-sensei if he would allow it? I can request permission for that now.

Link: Training?

Link: Today?

Deku Sprout: Yep! We asked Aizawa-sensei to give us one more training exercise before the holiday break and internships begin!

Kirby: The girls don't have to go because we got Eri the BEST present! Aizawa-sensei told us so himself! :) :) :) (but Im still going)

Shit, Aizawa didn't *say* anything about that.

Hitoshi puts down his phone, looking at the pathetic radish onigiri, the most *pathetic* lunch he's ever seen and he might not have time to make something else. He looks at Aizawa, still sleeping, and knows he has to wake him up now, and hope that he isn't waking him up too early. Just to offer

him *this*.

But a knock at the door makes Aizawa jolt up, before he even opens his eyes. Hitoshi knows it's not Yamada or Eri, they wouldn't knock on the door.

He checks his phone, just to confirm exactly what he *didn't* want to see.

Phantom Thief, your FAVORITE hero: Time is completely relative, and I know you don't like expensive gifts but I do have these things I bought for the advent calendar that you might want, right now, and a salted taro latte happened to come with my order, imagine that! Shouldn't let it go to waste, please open the door? :)

"*Shinsou!*" Monoma yells, before he knocks again, and Aizawa turns his head to look at him. Hitoshi really wishes he could blame that look on his face from being woken up. But the irritation that Aizawa wears with his eyes narrowed like that, jaw still slack because he was rudely awoken and it's Hitoshi's fault as much as the sleep was, that's Hitoshi's fault. And he wants to duck behind the counter and hide from it.

But he can't. "You didn't invite him," Aizawa grumbles, his voice sounds harsher than ever while he rubs at his eyes, it sounds like an accusation Hitoshi has to tell himself he doesn't fear.

Hitoshi shakes his head, staring at the couch to avoid staring at the onigiri, to avoid bringing Aizawa's attention to it. Monoma keeps *knocking*.

Aizawa sighs. He's angry about it. "He *might* give up if we're quiet," Aizawa whispers, as full of confidence in that plan as Hitoshi is. He starts unzipping the sleeping bag, practically peeling himself out of it. It's always weird to watch. "What's that?"

The *stupidest* idea Hitoshi has ever had, it's *great* that Aizawa noticed. "Your *favorite* meal, apparently. I don't know how you figured out how to get around Confession, but congratulations for picking something I literally can't fuck up- *wha-*"

Hitoshi can *feel* his teeth practically go numb when he barely stops himself from quirking Aizawa again, his mouth snapping shut as hard as if the mask was closing around him when he looks away. He's *truly* hopeless at this, if he's so irritated by the *stupid* way Aizawa looks at him, his *stupid* wide eyes and open expression like he's actually *fucking* impressed with rice and pickled radishes.

Hitoshi feels his shoulders are too tense, he feels that his feet are cold on the tile, he feels that his mouth is dry. If all of these little things are just too much for him now, enough to make him too *irritated* to withstand Aizawa just *looking* at him without getting worked up, then he's *truly* hopeless.

"That... is my favorite meal," Aizawa says, and Hitoshi refuses to look at him, even if he wants to see if Aizawa is just *fucking* with him, saying something that stupid but he's laughing at Hitoshi's stupidity. "And the nap?"

Hitoshi rolls his shoulders, because it's just *stupid* the way that Aizawa points it out. '*You like sleep.*'

He's aware that he's just staring at the table, that he's avoiding Aizawa's question as though Aizawa had his quirk and could Brainwash him from his verbal answer. He doesn't know *why* Aizawa hasn't thought of that, to just muzzle him by making it a habit to sign to him instead of speak. "That's... very thoughtful of you."

"*Shinsou! I have coffee!*" Monoma screams, before he starts knocking *again*, as though anyone

could ignore the racket he's making at this point. Hitoshi can't ignore it, he can barely *think* as each loud thud feels like a fist trying to beat through his chest, as Aizawa just keeps *staring* at him even if he doesn't see it.

Aizawa sighs, and Hitoshi sees him pull himself off the couch like he's more tired than he was before Hitoshi made him sleep.

"Just ignore him," Hitoshi says, almost a command, almost an order, but while he *wants* Aizawa to listen to him regardless, he also just wants Monoma to *go away*, without anyone having to deal with him.

"It might be good coffee," Aizawa says, and his voice sounds *weird*. A little too high, too loose and relaxed, like he's making a joke or he's not talking to *Hitoshi*. But he stops in his tracks, just to turn around and look at him, and Hitoshi can barely hear the knocking at this point. "You didn't have to do that. Making lunch, or... *making* me sleep."

Hitoshi *knows* it was weird, Aizawa *doesn't* have to point out how stupid it was. "Well, it's never going to happen again because it was a stupid idea, I don't know *why* I bothered when I'm not...."

The knocking stops. Two more raps, more quiet this time. "*Shinsou?*"

Goddammit, Quirk Thief probably heard him. He just screwed everything up.

Aizawa looks back at the door, more wary than he should be for such a *fantastic* hero that's sworn to protect him from The Miasma, when he can't even handle Monoma's annoyance. Hitoshi remembers what he said, that Aizawa isn't going to tell his students how to act around him, and that might mean he's not really going to interfere here either. "I can ask him to-"

"I've *got it*," Hitoshi interrupts, pulling the mask around his face and adjusting the *stupid* band to tighten it, and when he opens the door, Quirk Thief is *smiling* like a maniac. Like he's just been smiling at the door this whole time.

He looks more insane than Izuku is. "Shinsou! It's lovely to see you, I love the decorations on that mask. Do you like unicorns personally or-"

"*Monoma*," Hitoshi says, *possibly* with the mask still set to Aizawa's Persona Cord, but he's not going to stop to adjust that when he's trying to make Monoma *understand* this. "I'm busy, and I didn't ask you to come here."

"I... won't keep you, of course," Monoma says, the smile falling right off his face. He actually looks pathetic enough with his eyes fixed on the ground for *Hitoshi* to feel bad for him. "I just wanted to give you a few things, if it's not any trouble. Did you like the salted taro last time? Do you have any preferences, just for future reference, not that I'm *planning* to make a habit of-"

"You don't have to give me things, but you *do* have to stop bothering me whenever you feel like it," Hitoshi says, and tells himself he doesn't care about the way that Monoma keeps *wilting*. "I did like it. But I'm busy-"

"Here you go!" Monoma says, his smile is less insane but it has an insane recovery time, and suddenly Hitoshi's arms are full wads of fabric and other soft things, his free hand holding that salted taro latte. "Just a few tokens for the holidays, from your *favorite* hero-to-be Phantom Thief-"

Hitoshi knows how to kick a door closed, but maybe he *really does* need to learn how to stop opening it for strangers. Aizawa is still looking at him confused, maybe he's still groggy because he hasn't had coffee yet. Hitoshi didn't think to *make* coffee.

But he has a coffee, and he hands it off to Aizawa without looking at it before he drops Monoma's *gifts* to him on the couch. A stuffed cat that looks like Eri's cat sweater, with its oversized eyes and pastel pink and orange color scheme rolls out and onto the floor, and he bends to pick it up quickly. Almost forgetting that it's a plushie that wouldn't be insulted by falling.

But it's cute. Because Monoma is an *asshole* who can't get him things he can easily hate.

"Confronting Monoma about how he was bothering you probably would have worked if it wasn't...Monoma," Aizawa says, raising his hand like he's going to drink the coffee before he hesitates, holding it out to Hitoshi. He shakes his head, grateful that the mask is still on his face because this giant-eyed plushie is cuter than it has any right to be and he's *sure* he's blushing. "That is cute. Are you sure you don't want this-"

"Yes, I'm-" Hitoshi rolls his eyes, taking the Persona Cord setting *off* and switching to the digital speakers for now, because he's *sure* Aizawa is going to irritate him into losing his quirk control. "I *don't* want the coffee."

Aizawa just stares at him, before he puts the coffee down on the kotatsu, and looks at him *again* like he's concerned. "Hitoshi, if something is bothering you, I would like to help you with that-"

"*You're*-" Hitoshi starts, holding his breath until he lets it out, and he can feel the hot air hit his face from the inside of the mask. He drops the plushie on top of the pile, rubbing the back of his neck because he doesn't want to *explain* this. "I'm an asshole. I've been trying to *not* be an asshole, because I *don't* hate you, but you're....just...."

Aizawa has been asleep for most of the time he's been annoying Hitoshi, asleep *because* Hitoshi made him sleep. And when he woke up, just *looking* at him was enough to annoy him, and despite getting irritated with him Aizawa thanked him for making lunch and tried to deal with Monoma for him. And he's *worried* because Hitoshi is acting like he's *crazy*.

"I'm just an asshole!" Hitoshi yells, throwing his hands up in the air because he shouldn't have *tried*. The lunch, the nap, the coffee, he can do those *things* but it means nothing in the end, because he's still just a *jerk* to Aizawa.

"You're not an 'asshole,' and I never thought you were one," Aizawa says, because he can *lie*, because he can say he doesn't care that Hitoshi *is* an asshole or that he just yelled at him, because his stupid face never *fucking* changes. "I... appreciate that you're trying to make amends for what you think was out of line, but it's not necessary, especially if it's bothering you."

"What does that even *mean*!?" Hitoshi yells, and he can feel the divide between what he says and what he hears through the speakers clearer than ever, more than he can feel his arms stretching out just to fall, because there's no sign to convey how this doesn't make any *sense*. "I don't even *like* acting like this, I don't know what it is about your face, but I hate it, I hate acting like this and I can't *stop*, and you're *just*...."

Aizawa is literally the worst person that Hitoshi has ever met, because he just *looks* at the onigiri sitting on the table, like Hitoshi *isn't* boiling out from under his skin and suffering under a torture he can't even *blame* on Aizawa. "Have you eaten yet?"

He's not like this because he's *hungry*, or because he's *tired*, he's just an *asshole* and he wants to stop. But he follows Aizawa to the table, sitting across from him because he can't stand to be that close, and tries not to glare at how *stupidly* impressed Aizawa looks when he picks up the first onigiri and it doesn't fall to pieces.

“I’ve never been a good cook, and my mother never helped me with that. When I started living on my own, this was pretty much the only meal I could make for myself. Onigiri, with premade fillings. Pickled radish was always my favorite,” Aizawa rambles, before he *finally* takes a bite. Hitoshi probably shouldn’t care what he thinks about it, he *knows* it’s impossible to fuck up rice and a pickled radish. But maybe Aizawa chopped the radish up to mix into the rice, maybe he prefers to have it on the inside. As an *actual* filling. “It’s good.”

“It’s rice,” Hitoshi corrects. “It’s *just* rice, you haven’t eaten the seaweed or radish yet. That’s *so bland*.”

Aizawa just shrugs, and it’s so weird how he looks like a different person when he seems so loose and relaxed. How his stupid eyes look brighter with sleep. “Hizashi has been offended by my eating habits since I met him, probably for the same reason. I think he was going to give up entirely before Eri came here. This *definitely* wouldn’t count as a meal for her.”

“I was going to make something else, but Iida said you had training, so I didn’t have time. And Monoma,” Hitoshi says, maybe explaining. He crosses his arms over the table, and he shouldn’t just keep *staring* at Aizawa eating, but he can’t take the mask off to eat if Aizawa keeps talking to him. “You can just say that you hate it. It’s just *rice*, it’s not even food.”

“It’s my favorite,” Aizawa says, shrugging again. He just really doesn’t give a shit, does he? “You made it better than I could have. The seaweed always fell apart as soon as I picked it up.”

“That’s just *water*, and being *careful* about how-” Hitoshi braces his forehead with his hands, because he doesn’t want to argue about how to make the *worst onigiri ever imagined* with Aizawa. “*What* is it with you that just... makes me like this?”

Aizawa has finally taken a bite of the radish, the only actual *flavor* in the onigiri, and he just *looks* at Hitoshi like he always does. Just *looking*. “That’s something that you know better than I do. But I can imagine that you haven’t always been comfortable around me. And that a lot of things that I’ve done have been hurtful, especially with the investigation.”

That word just sinks like lead in the silence that follows, an accusation hitting its mark. Hitoshi can’t even move, he can’t even argue or be angry with Aizawa for saying it, no matter how much he wants to. Because he’s right.

He used to be terrified of Aizawa. More than once, he imagined the look of fury on Aizawa’s face before he would raise his fist, before he’d use his capture scarf to end him. More than once, he was convinced that was going to happen in *seconds*, Aizawa was just going to beat him or kill him or *worse*, because he *could*, because he owned him.

But even when Hitoshi realized that wasn’t true, that Aizawa didn’t own him, after he started to doubt that Aizawa would ever do that to him, he was terrified because he knew Aizawa wouldn’t care about him the same way Yamada did. Aizawa’s impassive and blank face would never change, Yamada could *say* he would stay after the investigation, but Aizawa would never want to keep him.

It would be kinder if Aizawa just hated him, instead of not caring. If there was something to blame other than his passivity, something Hitoshi could pin on *himself*. But there’s nothing. And even when Aizawa says he cares, *believes* he cares enough to pass that Brainwashing test, he’ll never care *enough*.

Even if he’s angry about that, even if it’s *worse* that Aizawa cares and still doesn’t want to waste his time with him after his usefulness is fulfilled and his time here is over, there’s nothing for it.

His anger won't change Aizawa's mind, because nothing will. It's just wasting his own time, because if this is the most peace he'll ever find in this life, he doesn't want to spend it fighting with *Aizawa*. Especially when he isn't the worst sometimes.

"And I am sorry for that," Aizawa says, looking at the table with his empty hands loosely folded in front of him. Aizawa looks *ashamed*, and it burns to see it worse than those words do. "I never intended to make you uncomfortable here, and your wardship should have never been like this. I would have never pressured you, or questioned you about that *woman*, if I knew, and you should have never had to see Chisaki-"

"Stop," Hitoshi says, the word passes like less than air because he doesn't want to *be here*, he doesn't want to hear Aizawa talking like that. He doesn't have to say things that Hitoshi already knows. "I know that. I know you were trying to stop it. Protect me. Whatever."

He can't stand to look at Aizawa's eyes, he has to press his thumb against his opposite wrist just to make sure that he feels something, that it's not like it was before. That he's not going *Away*, dissociating. He just feels so numb that he feels too much, but it's a calm enough place for him to talk about it. He finds the words too easy.

"I know what you were trying to do, and I'm not mad about that. There's no reason *why* I'm mad, and I just want to be over it," Hitoshi says, that part is easy at least. The words lingering on his tongue still taste bitter for their truth. "You're not... the worst person I've ever met. And I don't want to waste my time fighting with you."

The corner of Aizawa's lip twitches before he glances at the wall, before he looks too *pleased* with that, and that *really* makes him look stupid. "If it's any consolation, I have to deal with *Bakugo* on a regular basis. Even at your worst behavior, I'd prefer you over Bakugo's average."

Hitoshi probably shouldn't take that as *inspiration*, even if a small part of him does. There's a small dial on his left that switches through saved Persona Cords, next to the button that turns digital mode on or off. Below the button, there are dials for adjusting pitch or how rough his voice sounds, with pressure adjusting on his nose or throat respectively. He picks Aizawa's Persona Cord, then turns the pitch up. "*Die*."

Aizawa huffs, like Hitoshi either punched him or he *attempted* to laugh, before he picks up another onigiri to eat. "A little too high, and not loud enough."

Hitoshi rolls his eyes, because it does take time to adjust it the right way. Aizawa's Persona Cord was easy enough, and Yamada helped him fine tune it. Yamada seemed to be too busy smiling, almost forgetting to tell him what needed to be adjusted when they worked on his Persona Cord. "*Oi, Shitsei, I'm going to make you eat those words, then I'm going to nag until you sleep properly, for 8 fucking hours, asshole*."

Aizawa hums, chewing before he offers his criticism. "I feel like you're going to make me regret that. But the pitch is perfect."

"*Probably*," Hitoshi answers, in Bakugo's voice as he saves the Persona Cord setting by pushing the dial in until it clicks and pops back out. Then he twists until he finds another Persona Cord he's not sure about. "*You didn't tell me when you have training, and Uraraka said she's going too, even though the girls got the best present for Eri*."

Aizawa looks more unnerved by Izuku's Persona Cord than he did with Bakugo's. He just stares for too long, before he drops his head and sighs. "That's *spot on* for Midoriya. Training isn't for a few hours, so we could either start on Eri's cake before or after that-"

“*Cake?*” Hitoshi asks, sure that he got the nervousness *just right* for Izuku before he switches the Persona Cords off. “Yamada can’t...”

Of course he can’t, Hitoshi *forgot* but Yamada leaves for his radio show before they have to go to the 1-A dorm, and when he comes back with Eri, *Eri* will be here and it won’t be a surprise. She’ll want to help make her own birthday cake, and she shouldn’t have to lift a finger to enjoy it. “If you would rather wait, he might come back in time to do that. I know you would prefer to make it with him.”

Instead of Aizawa, he probably means, but not for the reasons that Aizawa seems to think it is. Hitoshi just *knows* he’ll mess it up, he’ll ruin Eri’s birthday cake, but Yamada is a good enough cook to keep him from doing that. Aizawa *doesn’t* cook, he’ll be useless to stop him from burning it, or using the wrong ingredient or measurement, or forgetting to butter the pan.

But, it’s useless to worry about that now. Yamada won’t have time before he goes to his radio show, Eri will know if they try to make it after she gets back. Hitoshi has to do this, or at least try.

Maybe Aizawa can keep him from fucking it up. “I’ll... pull up the recipes.”

*

Aizawa tucks another strand of hair that’s fallen from his ponytail behind his ear, before he turns back to the most important task he will probably undertake today.

“‘Add two tablespoons of milk,’” Aizawa reads, pointedly reading off the recipe Hitoshi wrote down. At first it seemed to be because he didn’t want to worry with his phone during this process, but now Aizawa knows it’s because he wanted to go over the recipe as many times as possible before following it.

And so, Aizawa tries to help him with that. As has become habit for every *single* step of this process, Aizawa takes the already-measured portion of milk, pouring it into a tablespoon to make *sure* that it’s actually two tablespoons, into *another* saucer, while Hitoshi watches, still operating the mixer that’s beaten the butter to fluff, with confectioner’s sugar and vanilla extract already added.

And Aizawa watches as Hitoshi takes the tablespoon from him, just to measure that miniscule amount of milk *again*. Just to be *sure* before he adds it.

The worst part about Hizashi pointing out that Hitoshi is ‘a *big* self-doubter, not unlike *someone* else at that age,’ is that Hizashi couldn’t be more *right*, except in every way that he’s wrong. In every single hesitation and obsessive check of the recipe before Hitoshi acts to follow through on it, Aizawa sees a perfect *mirror* of himself at 16. There’s terror, and then there’s fear of failure, and Aizawa doubts that he would have been able to graduate from UA if he didn’t consider his fear of dying to be less than that fear of failing to live up to his own expectations.

But despite how Hizashi so clearly sees the similarities, Aizawa sees the biggest difference between himself and Hitoshi. Aizawa would never have *attempted* to make this cake, despite all the second guesses and how simple it seems to be on the surface. He would have run away from the task, like he did with so many other obligations with friends with a callous shield on the surface, because he would have been *terrified* of messing up with something so meaningful.

Hitoshi, for all his obvious fears of doing the same, is far braver for the attempt at it.

And Aizawa knows his confidence was probably rattled when they both forgot to butter the first

cake pan, giving a logical reason for second, third, and fourth guesses. But as Hitoshi lifts the beater to put the finished buttercream icing in the refrigerator, they're nearing the end of it. And the timer on his phone alerts them to the first test as to whether these efforts will pay off with an edible cake.

Aizawa is *at least* capable of using a toothpick to check that both layers of cake have finished baking, but he allows Hitoshi to take control in any place he feels somewhat confident to. Aizawa is a homeroom teacher, and thus a professional cheerleader, and *not* a good enough cook to compare to Hitoshi's talents, as well-honed as they are with only a few months of practice.

Aizawa sees the hesitation before Hitoshi closes the oven door again, still looking at the toothpicks. Aizawa wishes that he was at least qualified enough to see what he's worried about. "Five... minutes," Hitoshi mutters, and Aizawa dutifully sets a timer.

But he's not blind to the frustrated way the purple haired teenager tosses the toothpicks in the trash, looking around the kitchen with his hand curled over the back of his head. Aizawa imagines that Hitoshi hadn't prepared for the cake *not* being done in the time the recipe called for. "The oven might be a little slow. It's easier to correct an underbaked rather than overbaked cake. It's good that you caught that."

Hitoshi sighs in further frustration, now worked up to pacing, disguised as taking each beater from the mixer into the sink, one at a time. "It's supposed to be golden brown on top and the toothpick is supposed to come out clean, but it's done on top and *not* inside, and the other one- it's not going to *stack* like it's supposed to, it's all... *dome-y*."

"We can just cut the dome part off, to make sure it stacks. And that will make sure it's baked all the way through," Aizawa says, his hand reaching for the recipe to check it, but he's *somewhat* sure that's right. It sounds logical enough. "Did you taste the buttercream?"

Hitoshi takes a step with his hand raised towards the sink, where the used beaters are, before he decides to grab a clean spoon from the drawer and nearly sprint those two steps back to the refrigerator. Aizawa is beginning to think that cake baking should be a more physical activity, if only to siphon off some of Hitoshi's nervous energy.

Hitoshi isn't closing the door after he tastes it. That's decidedly *not* a good sign. "Want me to try?"

Hitoshi doesn't answer, but opening the door further with a pleading look and the tip of the spoon still in his mouth is enough of a sign. Aizawa gathers a bit on the edge on his finger, and he's *sure* the grainy texture at first is just a bit of sugar and butter that hadn't mixed, the rest of it is smooth and sweet and everything they wanted from this icing.

"It's fine. Good," Aizawa corrects, *too late*.

"Is it fine, or is it good?" Hitoshi asks, adjusting the mask back on his face for good measure. Aizawa doesn't know *how* Hizashi can see the similarities between Aizawa and the teenager in front of him, when the sinking feeling in his gut from that question is so very *familiar*. He has the same *tone* that Hizashi does when he asks that kind of question. "I don't *know* how this is supposed to taste! I've only had it with the cupcakes, and I *don't know* if it's the same! *Is it the same?!*"

"Yes," Aizawa answers, before he even registers the question. It's a habit that has served him *poorly* at times with questions similar to these, posed by Hizashi. "It's exactly like it's supposed to be. You followed the recipe. Hizashi can confirm it for you when he gets back."

"That's going to be too late, because Eri will be back, and we have to get the cake ready before

then,” Hitoshi grouses, running a hand through his hair when he turns to toss the spoon in the sink. “Are you *sure* that it’s right?”

“Yes,” Aizawa says, and he *knows* why he answers before thinking, as his body falls out of his control in the haze that clouds his mind. Hitoshi must have turned the mask’s speakers off, and he has a feeling that it was *intentional*. And he has a *suspicion* that Hitoshi doesn’t just want an honest answer he can trust, proven in short order.

“Take out your phone, and put it on the counter,” Hitoshi orders, and Aizawa feels the barest impression of his pocket on the back of his hand before it falls away, he knows that his phone is where Hitoshi wants it even if he can’t look down, still staring at the teenager who moves to take it. Only to hold it up, showing Aizawa’s lockscreen. “Unlock your phone.”

The static becomes painful this time, and Aizawa remembers what Dr. Tenma said, that Hitoshi’s quirk *was* at no risk for Mental Quirk Abuse Syndrome, but Confession makes it higher. And he’s reasonably sure that these orders that his body doesn’t want to obey aren’t exactly *good* for him with repetition.

But, the static fades when Hitoshi speaks again. “Show me how you unlock your phone.” For some reason, just lowering the phone and changing the words used draws Aizawa’s hand to comply with it. With a few swipes of his finger, the plain black screen changes to his background, the picture of himself, his husband, and both wards at Shichi-Go-San currently, but Hizashi set it up to change with a slideshow, pictures of his husband and Eri are the most common given how few he has of Hitoshi.

Hitoshi looks at his phone, and Aizawa can’t see what he’s doing, even if he begins to get an *idea* when Hitoshi starts adjusting part of his mask again. He sees him jolt when he tries to raise the phone to his ear, covered by part of the mask, before he selects to use the speakerphone option.

And Aizawa can’t understand the words, but he knows from the voice that it’s *Toshinori*. It’s disorienting, that no matter how hard he tries to understand what Toshinori is saying, he can only hear his *voice* but not *words*.

“No, everything is fine,” Hitoshi says, with *Aizawa’s* voice. The little *shit*. “Hitoshi and I are baking Eri’s cake for tomorrow, and since you’re far better at that-” Aizawa can hear excitement, nervous humility, and *nothing else* from Toshinori’s voice. “That would be illogical, and unnecessary. I just wanted to ask for your advice, because the cake layers are domed on the top, and the toothpick didn’t come clean when we checked.” Toshinori’s voice changes to the same way he corrects a student with boundless sympathy for a *very stupid mistake*, bordering on the very edge of condescension. “Thank you, that makes *more sense* than cutting it. And I’m not sure how the icing is supposed to taste. It’s sweet, and consistent, but I’m... not sure.”

Toshinori will now be convinced that Aizawa *doesn’t know what icing is supposed to taste like*. He’s also going to think that Aizawa just says things like ‘thank you’ at the slightest gesture of kindness.

He wishes he could be more irritated by the ‘illogical and unnecessary,’ even if he knows that’s *nearly* spot on for an impression of himself. “Yes, I’m not sure if I thanked you for that, but those cupcakes are my favorite, and it really made my birthday special to receive them from you.”

Aizawa is going to have to make a *rule* about this. He’s *absolutely* sure that Hitoshi is doing this on purpose now, instead of *genuinely* feeling that grateful for Toshinori’s advice.

“Thank you for your help, I hope that this icing turns out as well as you make it. *No, that’s*

unnecessary and illogical. Toshinori-”

He hears the smallest and anxiety-riddled ‘*fuck*’ he’s ever heard, disturbingly in his *own* voice, before he feels his phone going back into his pocket.

Before he feels Hitoshi’s mask hitting his shoulder *just right* to knock the haze out of his mind, with his memory intact this time. “*I didn’t* agree to Toshinori coming here.”

Aizawa turns his head to see clear panic, clear guilt at a fortunately normal teenage level. Hitoshi’s violet eyes are wide above that black mask, but they soon narrow as his hands fly up. “*I didn’t- I didn’t want* him to come here, he just-”

The timer to check the cake goes off on Aizawa’s phone, and along with it, there’s a knock on the door. Aizawa can dismiss one of them with a swipe of his thumb, but he ignores the frustrated teenager to answer the door and deal with the other one. “Toshinori.”

Toshinori honestly looks *too pleased* to be here, smiling like he’s just seen a student have a breakthrough in their training, and that only makes it harder to stick to his resolve that Aizawa and Hitoshi can do this *without* his help. “Young Aizawa, it really is no trouble! I’m sure that it will help to have a second opinion with how much this means to little Eri, even if I’m *also* sure there’s nothing to worry about.”

Aizawa looks over his shoulder to see a teenager hunched over the countertop, his elbows supporting his weight with his arms crossed, and he looks like he *very much* wants Aizawa to dismiss Toshinori than to explain everything. But there’s something to be said about *natural consequences* to poor decisions. “A third opinion is exactly what we need, to make sure there’s *nothing* to worry about.”

Toshinori starts shedding his jacket as soon as he crosses the threshold, brushing his hair behind his ears like it’s a habit associated with his current hobby of baking. Not that there *is* anything left to bake. “Young Shinsou, it seems that you’ve been hard at work to help young Aizawa!”

Toshinori would of course comment on the streak of flour that *somehow* worked into Hitoshi’s hair, before commenting on the mask. Given that Midoriya and Toshinori are inclined to keep all sorts of secrets to themselves, Toshinori might already know exactly how and why the mask came about, given that Midoriya was the driving force for that Support Department studio trip. “Thank you, I’ve-”

Hitoshi pushes himself up to stand before he adjusts the mask again, *too late* to take Aizawa’s voice impersonation off of it. And with that, the cat seems to be out of the bag, even if Toshinori seems confused that there was a cat in any bag before he came here. “He’s been hard at work, *learning* how to impersonate me over the phone. Which we *will* have a talk about so this doesn’t happen in the future.”

Toshinori, to his credit, just laughs, and despite all the ways the man has changed after Kamino Ward, how his body has withered away, his laugh has always rung out as strongly as All Might’s. “It was very convincing! Imitation can really be the sincerest form of flattery. I think young Midoriya’s impression of myself is better than some professionals that I’ve seen.”

Aizawa agrees, although he *wishes* that he could have fallen asleep during that homeroom session where Midoriya attempted to teach Todoroki how to do it so he wouldn’t have the memory to haunt him. “We’re not sure about the icing, and the cake might be done at this-”

Hitoshi turns to open the oven door in a panic, terrified that baking a minute after the five minute

timer has reduced the cake to ash. He has to turn and dive for the box of toothpicks to check it, but Aizawa can see that the cakes don't seem to be different. They're still 'dome-y,' the primary source of Hitoshi's worries. "Ah, it looks like things are coming along quite well!"

Hitoshi casts a look of disbelief at Toshinori, before looking at the toothpicks again, his eyes crossing a bit as he examines them before holding them up to the taller hero. "They're not clean, so it's not done. But it *looks* done."

"That's quite normal, actually. Just a few crumbs will always stick, but I know from experience that when it's completely clean, the cake is actually quite dry," Toshinori says, which is the *perfect* way to inspire Hitoshi to nearly grab the pans out of the oven with his *bare hands* before Aizawa calls out to him to wait, and tosses the oven mitts to him. Toshinori is completely unaware it seems, welcoming himself to wash his hands in the sink in preparation. "And there are two methods of evening out the top of the cake. You can either cut the top off with a breadknife, which is best to check if the cake is still moist by sampling a bit, or laying it on a flat surface upside down, so that it flattens itself. I think the flattening trick works better to keep it from being too crumbly when sliced."

Aizawa looks at Hitoshi as he seems to realize at the same time that Aizawa does, that the flattening method will *have* to do the trick. Since the breadknife is still in Hitoshi's stash after being burnt when Hitoshi tried to get rid of that tattoo in the middle of the night, at the beginning of his wardship.

"I don't want it to fall apart at Eri's birthday," Hitoshi mutters, almost to himself, but sheepish and full enough of self-doubt to ring in both teacher's ears.

"I'm sure it won't, young Shinsou!" Toshinori reassures, baselessly, which Aizawa knows *truly* doesn't work for Hitoshi. Hitoshi never believes anything without *proof*, and a great deal of it, especially in any way that concerns Eri.

Aizawa finds a pizza pan large enough to accommodate both layers of the cake, and Hitoshi flips them on top of it with the pan still attached. Aizawa can only *hope* that's the right method, as any correction at this point might lead to Hitoshi lashing out, and he doesn't know if Toshinori could withstand it given his current perception of his ward.

"It smells very nice! Is it a cinnamon marble?" Toshinori asks, and Hitoshi nods, while Aizawa can't decide whether Hitoshi is acting so reserved now out of sincere gratitude towards Toshinori, or if his anxiety about this cake is reaching a rolling boil underneath the surface. "That's a nice, simple recipe to follow. And I wouldn't be mistaken that it pairs well with *apples*, would I?"

Hitoshi nods, causing Toshinori to chuckle. "It's a cinnamon cake, with vanilla buttercream icing, and glazed apples on top, but the apples won't be ready for another hour," Hitoshi explains, more sedately than he's said *anything* since Hizashi and Eri left, which only becomes more obvious to Aizawa the more his ward's attention is focused on Toshinori, who nods along with almost condescending focus.

"I haven't tried it myself, but that sounds like a winning combination! And the icing is resting in the refrigerator?" Toshinori asks, inviting himself to open it as soon as Hitoshi nods, immediately moving to grab a spoon for him, but Toshinori just shakes his head. "I can tell just by looking at it that it is the perfect consistency. And it should smell..." Toshinori has to duck his head, pulling the bowl out to *smell* whatever the icing is supposed to smell like. "Exactly like that! The vanilla can offset a bit of the sweetness in the apple glaze and balance out the cinnamon. But, I'm afraid if you wanted a taste-tester, young Aizawa and you would have to do it. I've been scolded about *going beyond* my dietary limits a few times, I'm afraid."

Aizawa can only guess whether Midoriya, Bakugo, or Recovery Girl finally took up the charge to pester the retired hero about taking care of his health, but he wouldn't be surprised if they took turns. Or if Midoriya made them a schedule to do it.

"I don't *know* what it's supposed to taste like, and Aizawa just said it's 'good,' and it's 'fine,' but that's not good enough," Hitoshi says, and Aizawa *isn't* blind that all the frustration that was missing builds up again once *he's* mentioned in conversation, from Hitoshi's explanation of events. And he knows it shouldn't unsettle him, when he knows exactly *why* that is.

"You should know that young Aizawa doesn't give out such compliments lightly, young Shinsou," Toshinori says, almost playfully scolding as he sets the icing bowl back in its place before closing the door. "I believe it was young Kaminari who worked out a scale- not that it was meant to be mocking!"

Toshinori seems flustered at the prospect that Aizawa *could* be offended by that, which he isn't. And the 'Aizawa-sensei Compliment Scale' is not exactly a *secret* when Kaminari happens to turn in either the copy or *a* copy of it in the middle of his essay. "*Go on.*"

But that doesn't mean that Aizawa can let Toshinori *know* that he's not offended, when the opportunity is right there to make him a bit more nervous. "I forget the specifics of it, but young Aizawa doesn't have a habit of saying anything he doesn't mean sincerely when it comes to constructive criticism. 'Good,' I think, translated to 'show-stopping, spectacular, and never the same,' if I remember correctly."

There was a *much* longer translation that was *wholly* exaggerated, but Toshinori is right at least that Aizawa *doesn't* hand out baseless praise. Unlike some of his coworkers.

And Hitoshi looks wholly skeptical with a raised eyebrow. "It's not *that* good."

If Aizawa didn't know any better, he would think that Toshinori just conducted a masterful play in forcing Hitoshi to admit that the icing *was* good. If only out of petty spite and his incessant need to argue with Aizawa.

"If young Aizawa says that it's good, I'm completely convinced that it is, young Shinsou," Toshinori says with a conspiratorial wink, something that honestly *doesn't* suit a man of his age. "Now, I'm a little curious about the glazed apples. Did you decide to go with chunks or rings?"

"Slices," Hitoshi says, moving to pull the cover off of the slow cooker on the counter, the cinnamon and sugar smell becoming potent as he does, and Toshinori leans in to inspect it. Hitoshi does *not* go into detail about how *painstakingly thin* each slice had to be, how Aizawa had to intervene a few times before Hitoshi nearly broke down into frustrated tears about how each slice had to be thin in the *exact* same way.

"Oh, you might want to test one now, the thin slices should cook quicker than a chunky pie filling," Toshinori says, completely clueless to the heart attack Aizawa can see *clearly* before Hitoshi grabs a fork and doesn't wait long enough for a slice to cool. Like Aizawa *knew* he wouldn't. "Oh, that's not-"

"*Fine*," Hitoshi squeaks, a hand pressed against his mouth and his eyes watering because he's *not* fine, *at all*, and hasn't been since they *started* making this cake. But his first priority is to turn the slow cooker off before he moves to the sink to treat his burnt tongue with a handful of water. Aizawa grabs a cup to fill with ice and water and hopes it's more effective. Hitoshi still glares at him like it was *his* fault he ate an apple slice still steaming hot. "It's done, so I'm *glad* you mentioned that."

Toshinori only looks a little uncomfortable with Hitoshi once again diving face first into an opportunity to injure himself, and Aizawa *knows* why that's not shocking to Midoriya's unofficial mentor. "I suppose it wouldn't help at all to tell you that there's nothing to worry about."

Honestly, if there is a *single* thing wrong with this cake, Hitoshi might kill Aizawa. Aizawa is far past the point of fearing that Hitoshi will cry, or he'll withdraw into his room or even the vents until he accepts that Eri's birthday cake won't be *perfect*. Hitoshi will probably just kill him for basically doing nothing more than slicing apples, measuring things that Hitoshi measures after him, and reading the recipes to him, while Hitoshi does *everything* else.

But when Hitoshi winces after taking a sip, wiping the corner of his eye, it's not the waning glare that nearly breaks Aizawa. It's the sullenness in Hitoshi's face that breaks into utter *despair* when he looks at the sink, full of cast-off utensils and measuring instruments and bowls, everything that was put into this cake that just needs to be assembled, and there's nothing else to *do* after that. If this cake doesn't live up to Hitoshi's expectations, if he *fails* here, Aizawa knows it would be difficult for him to recover from that blow.

Hitoshi is so far gone into that thought, he doesn't react at all when Aizawa places a hand on his shoulder, meant to reassure and convey that everything *would* be alright. Aizawa would make it alright. "How long should we wait for the cakes to flatten out?"

"Let's see," Toshinori mutters, pulling the ceramic bowl inside the slow cooker out and onto the counter before he moves to inspect the cake pans. "With a little press, and a twist- ah, it's sticking a bit to the pan, but we can loosen them with a butter knife."

Toshinori grabs a butter knife from the drawer for the layer he's picked, but Aizawa knows his tanto knife is clean and sterile, and will do the job. He glances to make sure Toshinori isn't actually cutting the cake, just running the blade around the edges, and when Toshinori flips his pan over again, it falls out easily, but he raises a hand before Aizawa can test his.

"Oh, do you have a sheet of parchment paper? It's a bit easier to transfer onto the serving dish, and icing can be a bit messy," Toshinori says, luckily *not* the same way he'd correct a student, but Hitoshi seems to be knocked out of his stupor enough to grab that paper.

They don't have a serving dish, and Aizawa wonders if Eri should pick it herself out of the many plates that might be large enough, but soon enough there are enough sheets of parchment paper on a smaller pan for the layers to be stacked with a somewhat messy spread of icing between them, then trimmed under Toshinori's instruction. By Aizawa, despite Hitoshi's silent offer when he raised his hand to take the knife, as he didn't argue when Aizawa took on the task.

"It's best to start on the side, then move to the top. It will take some time to shape it properly, but I think a messy texture still looks nice. Floral, if it's done right," Toshinori says, and with the icing bowl between Hitoshi and Aizawa, he seems content to let them take on the task. Toshinori might have become that reassuring cheerleader for *both* of them, as Aizawa becomes keenly aware that the cake and icing is shaping well *so far*, but a slip of the knife could mean a slice in the cake that isn't meant to be there. A superficial imperfection that literally no one outside this room would ever know, but would still devastate Hitoshi all the same.

Aizawa becomes *more* aware of that as Hitoshi seems to participate less and less in covering this cake with frosting, but Aizawa tries to focus on creating a smooth top for the glazed apple slices to lay on. If he flicks the knife a certain way on the sides, the thick icing almost looks like flower petals, like Toshinori said. And Eri's bright smile when she compared the feeling of controlling her quirk to a blooming flower is enough inspiration to want to make it *perfect*.

“Young Aizawa, I think you might have a natural talent for cake decorating,” Toshinori praises, and it’s so saccharine yet still genuine that Aizawa instinctively *bristles* at it, almost wants to take the bait to say that Toshinori thinks he *needs* to be reassured like a student would. “I think the glazed apples have cooled enough not to melt the icing, if you’d like to try.”

The icing bowl is exchanged for the heavy ceramic bowl of glazed apples, butter knives for chopsticks to place the slices *just so*. Despite Toshinori’s impression of his skills, Aizawa knows his husband would be *far better* at this, and since Hitoshi has spent more time learning from him than Aizawa has, he’s the best option available.

“It should be like this,” Hitoshi says, putting his phone down with an image of an *extravagantly* intricate design, clearly the work of a professional, which they *aren’t*. The slices start to fan out from the center, layered exactly the same way to catch the edge of the next slice, to make a perfect swirl that looks like a flower blooming.

This cake will not look *anything* like that, and Aizawa knows it. He knows Hitoshi doesn’t, because the teenager can’t fathom failing to provide Eri anything less than perfect on her birthday.

“You start on the outside to make the first circle, then just keep building after that,” Hitoshi says, and Aizawa notes that there’s nothing but calm explanation in his voice, which Aizawa can only read as the clearest panic at this point. And that panic starts to rise in the slight pitch in his voice as he continues. “It said that eight apples were enough for a 33 centimeter pan, and I used ten, so we should have enough to cover it even if we mess up a few, as long as it’s not too many.”

“Could use the leftovers to decorate the plate, like Hizashi would,” Aizawa says, committing to the confidence in those words as soon as they leave his mouth. Hitoshi has prepared for mistakes, and that means that Aizawa won’t *give* him any mistakes. They’re going to decorate this cake as well as a professional would, even if it’s impossible.

As much as it seems like a simple, almost mind-numbing task, it’s *not*. Aizawa knows that each slice has to be handled gently, placed exactly so as not to ruin the icing. There are still enough fumbles and near-misses to almost send him back into the mindset of being on a patrol in a seedy area, both he and Hitoshi have to nearly dance with each other to lean down close enough to the cake, to grab another slice, to avoid bumping into the cake *again*. The icing on the side can be reshaped, but Aizawa is starting to think the ‘texture’ that comes as a result of his hand brushing the edge and smearing could be passed off as intentional.

Toshinori just cheerleads, counting down each circle as it’s made, and at least those signs of impending completion start to come *quicker* as the circles become smaller. Aizawa honestly starts to believe this might result in something passably similar to the picture Hitoshi selected as inspiration.

And when there’s just two slices left to place, two that stand upright in the center of the bloom, Aizawa stands back to give Hitoshi the honors and the space. And he’s honestly too relieved to see something that looks *good* on top of the iced and smeared parchment paper.

Hitoshi places one slice, adjusting and waiting for it to fall, before he stands it up again, finally working the glaze to the point that it’s thick enough to hold the slice like glue, which might have been the unintended trick to it. But then, he stands back, looking expectantly at Aizawa. “You need to do the other one.”

Aizawa tilts his head, not sure if he heard Hitoshi correctly. This is the last step they can take to make this cake, Hitoshi has done *everything* thus far, and he should have the memory of putting on that last touch like an intangible trophy for his accomplishment.

“You helped,” Hitoshi argues, short and completely half-heartedly, before he seems to gather the energy to glare at him for emphasis. “Don’t say you’re too lazy to do this for Eri.”

Toshinori, *damn him*, laughs even if he tries to pass it off as a cough when Aizawa looks at him, but without the blood spurt, the cough is not convincing. Aizawa just sighs, bracing himself on the counter with his freehand and unable to *breathe* as he tries to make this *thin* slice of apple stand up on its own, without knocking Hitoshi’s slice down. The syrupy glaze starts to slough off to the bottom of the slice to stabilize it, and *finally* when Aizawa lets go.

He takes a deep breath, and marvels at what Hitoshi’s high expectations and hard work have brought them. Aizawa doubts they could find any better from a cake shop without a *very* steep price tag. “It looks wonderful! And I think it’s time for a bit of a taste test.”

Aizawa’s knife is on the counter, and he would use it *against* Toshinori if he tried cutting this cake right now, but when he looks, Toshinori presents him with part of the cake trimming, topped with icing and decorated with a single glazed apple slice on each miniature cake. Two bite sized cakes made from cast offs and scraps, that will *hopefully* put Hitoshi’s worries to rest, and Toshinori beams like they already have.

Aizawa passes one to Hitoshi before taking a bite, trying to clear his mind of any expectations to offer the most impartial judgement. Since it’s made with trimmings from the edge, there’s more crust than would be from an actual slice, but the cinnamon isn’t too strong from either the cake or the glaze, the apple is barely tart and melts on his tongue, and the icing seems to balance and blend it together. It *is* good. Very good. “It’s perfect. Eri will be very happy with this.”

Aizawa looks to see Hitoshi’s reaction, only to see him pulling the mask back on his face, looking at the cake before glancing at the table, refusing to look at Aizawa. “It’s... like it’s supposed to be?”

“I think it’s *beyond* what it’s supposed to be, if young Aizawa claims that it’s perfect,” Toshinori says, once again feeling the need to *translate* what Aizawa says *plainly*. “I can’t imagine Eri being unhappy with this cake, knowing that it was made with so much care, and if it tastes good to you, then the proof is in the pudding!”

There’s something about what Toshinori said that seems to stir up Hitoshi’s worries again, as he rubs the back of his neck, still staring at the cake like it’s likely to explode. “I don’t like things that are sweet, and I know that Eri does, so I can’t really tell. But, it tastes good?”

“It does,” Aizawa answers, almost *waiting* for Hitoshi’s quirk to settle over him, but it doesn’t.

For some reason, Hitoshi has decided to trust his word this time, possibly because of all the other evidence available to prove it. The fear and anxiety finally quiets, finally melts with acceptance that this is *enough*, and it’s done, as Hitoshi’s hand and shoulders fall, his sigh audible behind the mask.

The streak of flour still in his hair, and Aizawa probably shouldn’t be so amused by it. “We still have some time before training, if you want to wash that out.”

Hitoshi raises his hand to the streak when Aizawa points out where it is on his own head, rolling his eyes when he feels it. “Why does this always... and you didn’t say anything!”

Aizawa doesn’t have a scarf or a drink to hide his smirk, as his ward seems *very* embarrassed that Toshinori has seen him so ‘indisposed,’ after the kid *did* instigate him coming here. He can add ‘irrational worries about the appearance of his hair’ to a growing list of traits that Hitoshi shares

with Hizashi. Toshinori laughs, which probably doesn't bode *well* for Hitoshi recovering from this. "It's another sign of a well-made cake, if the baker is a bit messy in the end! But I'm sure you know there's nothing to worry about now."

Hitoshi picks at the bottom edge of the mask again, before directing his attention to Toshinori again, something that Aizawa can discern on his tone alone by this point. "Thank you for helping. I'm sorry I... made you do that."

"I offered, and I would have offered the same if I knew it was you, young Shinsou," Toshinori says, waving Hitoshi off. "But it was a very convincing impression! I'm sure I won't be the last to be fooled by it."

With that, the teenager deems it fit to sulk off towards the bathroom to fix his hair, embarrassed by *something* judging by the stiffness in his walk. Something that Aizawa doubts he'll have to guess about as soon as Toshinori leaves. "You did manage to convince him that it will be fine, so thank you for that, Toshinori."

Toshinori seems oddly *confused* by what Aizawa says, and if he needs a translator, it's unfortunate that *he's* the unofficial one. "I can't take the credit for that at all, young Aizawa. I only offered a few tips, but Hitoshi was clearly looking to you for reassurance through all of this."

Toshinori could probably tell him that Midoriya has secretly been All for One this entire time, and Aizawa would find that easier to believe. "What led you to believe that?"

"Well, he wanted to make sure that *you* liked the icing, for one," Toshinori argues, pointless because Hitoshi said himself that he's had minimal experience eating sweets like that. *More* pointless because Aizawa *told* him it was good before Toshinori even got here. "And he only seemed to regain his confidence when you were working together to decorate, knowing that you wouldn't let him go astray with that. And of course, with the taste test, your opinion was the most important to Hitoshi."

Aizawa can't even find a rational argument to Toshinori's rambling, Hitoshi was *focused* during the decorating because it was a demanding task, but certainly not *relaxed*. And he still didn't believe Aizawa the first time he evaluated the cake flavor. "Toshinori, I know you mean well, but it's *very clear* my opinion means the least to Hitoshi right now."

He probably shouldn't have *said* 'Hitoshi,' given that Hitoshi isn't here and Toshinori could take that in several different wrong ways, but luckily the observation that could have been taken soars right over his head. "I think you might be taking some offense where there's meant to be a compliment, young Aizawa. Even if young Shinsou *seems* a bit frustrated towards you, I can tell he's far more honest as well. And I think it's good for him to have someone he can trust so completely."

When Aizawa first met Hitoshi, he doubted that the teenager would ever *fathom* the concept of trusting someone outside of Eri. Not after what he had been through, those brutal years still stitched deeper than the scars on his skin, Hitoshi could never *trust* someone like Aizawa, who he knows could hurt him. Who *has* hurt him, which Aizawa won't deny for any sake of pride. He tried to mitigate risks and he acted without knowing, but he hurt Hitoshi all the same in a place that he was supposed to be safe, and at times Aizawa doubted whether he was acting as a hero should for doing that.

Aizawa can easily believe that Hizashi has won that trust, he can believe that his students and Mirio and others have won that trust too. All this doubt, more than hostility, means that Hitoshi *doesn't* trust him at all, or at least it should.

Unless Toshinori is right, and the greater sign of that trust is letting Aizawa *know* about his doubts, when he seemed too sheepish to tell Toshinori about them plainly. “Then, I won’t take any offense, since I know you didn’t mean any.”

Toshinori still seems too happy to be invited to this as he gathers his coat, as Aizawa walks him to the door. There’s something to be said for boundless positivity if the retired hero can *truly* be this pleased to oversee the construction of a cake, and see it as a heroic act.

But it is, Aizawa can’t argue with that. While he cleans up the kitchen, clearing off the top shelf of the refrigerator and fighting back the terrifying thought of *dropping* this damn cake as he does, Aizawa can clearly see that Toshinori *was* the hero here. Arriving to the scene, taking stock of the situation, and acting with confidence and reassurance to make sure all civilians made it through alive and mostly sane.

Aizawa starts to doubt his own sanity, when Hitoshi joins him on the couch after his shower, ignoring the ample amount of room to sit with his back against Aizawa’s arm, his legs bent in front of him. The Ganriki Neko plushie Monoma gifted to him tucked against his chest with one arm. Aizawa doubts the wet hair dampening his shirt is spiteful enough to deserve this. “Onigiri?”

Aizawa offers the remaining three that he has left on his plate. He’s sure Hizashi fed Hitoshi, but the argument has been made *multiple* times that Aizawa forgets to. It probably doesn’t count as much when Aizawa either gives Hitoshi a jelly pouch or something Hitoshi himself has made. “Thanks.”

Now Aizawa is worried. But he can’t bring himself to disturb this apparent, nonsensical peace that’s fallen between them. Even if Hitoshi is on his phone, pointedly not looking at him and not offering conversation, Aizawa resolves to be a structure to support his weight with his arm.

There’s something to be said, about ignoring a cat that’s decided to put aside hostility for a moment, just long enough to find rest next to a person that they hate.

Chapter End Notes

Dekusquad + Shinsou Chat Usernames:

Link - Shinsou Hitoshi

Kirby - Uraraka Ochako

Metal Knight - Iida Tenya

Deku Sprout - Midoriya Izuku

Frogger - Asui Tsuyu

Cake Feelings

Chapter Summary

Shinsou tries to be brave yet again and continue apologizing to 1-A for his previous antics. Aizawa and Shinsou lead a voluntary yet intended-to-be-punitive training exercise for the male students of 1-A where Sato's heartfelt feelings are recognized. And the night before Eri's birthday, Shinsou has doubts, but his friends in 1-A are there to support him.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Mention of 50, Eri having a flashback, Bug mention, depressive mental spiral including a casual but not intentional desire for death

Previously on Wards of UA: Shinsou had a nightmare about All Might, and Midoriya told him that having dreams about All Might is a premonition about being brave or heroic in your waking life. The 'video game chat' is a Dekusquad chat where Shinsou has been added, and all their usernames are based off of video game characters. Yamada, Aizawa, Eri, and Shinsou agreed to a set of rules for everyone, including 'not intentionally hurting other people physically or emotionally.' The students of 1-A told Aizawa what presents they got for Eri's birthday and asked him which gift was better, and when Aizawa told them that both were good but the one that the girls got was a bit better suited for her, the boys requested an extra training session with him, not saying that it was a punishment but Aizawa quickly figured out it was one that they were imposing on themselves, though Uraraka volunteered to attend as well. Iida was cut on his back when he was part of the group that tried to save Shinsou from 127 when he was attacked on campus. Aizawa told Eri that 'logical ruses' are only such when he knows about them, otherwise it's lying or a trick. Shinsou still calls 1-A "eggs" on occasion. During 'Vent Day & Missing You,' Shinsou told the 1-A chat to make sure that Eri forgets about him if he's not there anymore. Bakugo knows that Shinsou is supposed to leave UA two months after the investigation is over because Midoriya overheard Aizawa and Shinsou's conversation about that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Maybe, it's weird to treat All Might like a premonition when Hitoshi knows he's a real person, a nice person even. But when he looked at his phone and saw that Iida created a group chat for 1-A and himself again, he knew he couldn't put it off any longer. An apology in that chat is fine for most of them, but not for Ashi.

He's scared. He doesn't feel 'brave' at all, he knows it's just a screen and typing words and he shouldn't *hurt* Ashi like this. She can't hurt him.

If she does, he probably deserves it.

Hitoshi sighs without meaning to, tipping his phone towards his chest when Aizawa looks over at him. He just wanted to sit like this, which happened to be next to Aizawa, which *isn't* a big deal, but Aizawa feels like a brick wall behind his back because he's probably weirded out by it. And he *shouldn't* be. "You offered to give Iida knife lessons?"

Of course Iida actually asked permission from Aizawa. Hitoshi makes sure the digital mode for his mask is on, moving the mask just to feel the padding, *pointlessly*. "He could use them, and it's my punishment for acting like an asshole. Threatening them, and everything."

He doesn't have to *look* to know that Aizawa is staring, and that's one of the things he hates the most about him. "You don't have to punish yourself with my students. Threatening them was wrong, but you're allowed to tell them to leave you alone, and set boundaries. And tell them when they're bothering you. I can enforce that to a degree."

Hitoshi rolls his eyes, because he doesn't *need* Aizawa to protect him from his *students*. "It *makes* me feel better, if that's alright with you."

Aizawa just hums, and Hitoshi can feel that he's typing on his phone. Telling Iida yes or no. "Weapons training begins next year, so you'll have to start with the *very* basics. And I wouldn't expect much more than proper grip."

Hitoshi expected that. He knows Iida will be hard to convince that a knife is meant for more than frantic stabbing, but at least with Iida's easy ability to fluster and earnestness, he'll be a *fun* student. "He'd do better with a metal pipe, anyway. Matches his quirk too."

Aizawa huffs, probably his attempt at a laugh, because he's not like All Might that can just *laugh* at something funny. Even if it's not really funny in the first place, except for the image of Iida trying to play it up, to change his costume to look more like a stereotypical yakuza. With a tattoo sleeve and everything.

When Hitoshi is convinced Aizawa is back to looking at his phone, he finally taps on Ashi's chat with him. He knew there were messages that she sent after he used Confession on her, to force her to answer a question that she didn't want to answer, the insecurity that quirk found. *Why are you doing all of these annoying things for me?*

She wanted to be his friend. She wanted to make up for everything 'bad' that happened, she wanted to make up for his mother, for The Miasma, for Chisaki and Hari and *everything*. She wanted to make him happy.

He doesn't want her to try. He honestly doesn't think he really *wants* her forgiveness. He doubts she'd ever try to do those things again, like throwing him a sleepover, making him hot chocolate. Holding his hand, when he just needed to know that someone was there.

But he has to tell her that he regrets that. He has to tell her he knows it was wrong, and that he's sorry.

He's more sorry when he reads the messages.

Ashi: i kno ur not gonna check this, but just in case

Ashi: im sorry that i didnt listen to u. i was being a jerk instead of a friend, i thought u would have fun with the birthday party thing. i know im a lot, and u can tell me when im too much.

Ashi: and i dont want to be ur friend out of pity, or anything like that. i just want to be ur friend, not

just cuz we were friends. bcuz u can be my friend now, and if u want to be my friend. and i can be a better friend.

Ashi: even if u wanna get a divorce TT__TT ill just b single til i find some1 to mingle.

Hitoshi is pretty sure that Ashi could find *anyone* to ‘mingle,’ whatever that means. She’s pretty stubborn when she sets her mind to something, even if she’s too stubborn sometimes.

But he really could have just *told* her he didn’t want that fake birthday, and he probably wouldn’t have even been outside with Mirio that night if he did. He wouldn’t have gotten *attacked* by 127, none of this would have happened.

But he doesn’t want to think about that, he doesn’t want to remember the snow, or how cold it was. That sharp pain digging into his face that he *wants* to forget completely from that other mask.

He sits up a bit straighter, so Aizawa can’t see his phone over his shoulder as easily. Maybe reminding himself that Aizawa is there.

That Aizawa is a hero, sworn to protect him. Possibly even from Ashi.

Shinny: I’m sorry that I used my quirk like that. I shouldn’t have used it on you, but I was stupid. I was angry, and I didn’t want anyone to get hurt for being close to me. I didn’t want you to get hurt.

Shinny: I’m the shitty friend, so you don’t have to apologize. And you don’t have to forgive me, but I’m sorry.

Shinny: And whatever you want me to do to make it up to you, I’m okay with that.

Ashi: SHIIIIIIIIINNNNNYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!!!! :D

Ashi: bb u dont have to feel so bad, I FEEL bad cuz ur never like that so i kno u were not ok

Ashi: ur not a shitty friend, u just had a MOMENT and it was a MOMENT. but were gucci ;)

Ashi: still down 2 be my best hubby even if ur not a birthday boi yet?

Shinny: I’m going to be a less of an asshole husband for the wife I don’t deserve.

Ashi: TT__TT SHINNY

Shinny: Ashi

Shinny: I’m glad I can still call you that. If it’s okay.

Ashi: IT ISSSSSSS SHINNY DON’T MAKE ME CRYYYYYY

Shinny: I said Tsu could call me that too. But just her.

Ashi: that’s ok im down to marry Tsu too. i wanna braid her hair soooooo baaaaaaaad

Shinny: Aizawa’s favorite food is pickled radish onigiri. You hated that, right? When we were kids?

Ashi: i can eat them now, but those radishes were so sour when we were kids. u always protected me. <3

Ashi: but u need to get ON THE CHAT STOP BEIN A CRYPTID.

Shinny: I wanted to apologize to you first. Because I hurt you the worst. And you're more important.

Ashi:imma screenshot that n hold u 2 that when ur having a MOMENT. and bragging rights.

Hitoshi scrolls up, just to read Ashi's messages again. Just like the cake, he can't believe what he feared so much was that *easy*, now that it's over.

And now he has to check the group chat, and he's sure he has a lot of explaining to do there.

Iida Tenya: I've recreated this group chat after learning that Shinsou now regrets his past actions, and seems to want to make amends. The option to leave this chat is as available as always, but I think it would be best to hear him out.

Iida Tenya: @Shinsou Hitoshi

Kaminari Denki: *cricket noises*

Bakugo Katsuki: YOU KNOW THE FUCKER NEVER CHECKS HIS FUCKING PHONE.

Sero Hanta: TOTALLY irrelevant, but does anyone know the chances of Shinsou going to the punishment training thing? And if he's less murderous for sure now?

Iida Tenya: I can confirm the 'less murderous,' as well as Shinsou's attendance!

Todoroki Shoto: @Shinsou Hitoshi I'm in the video game chat too now. You haven't apologized to me there yet.

Sero Hanta: Wow, would you look at the time, I've got the flu so I can't go to training anymore.

Tokoyami Fumikage: You will be dearly missed, Sero. Whether you participate in training or not.

Sero Hanta:guys?

Kaminari Denki: *Jazz music stops*

Kaminari Denki: But forreal, as long as ur not gonna do the things or the evil glowy eyes, I think were guccilicious, Shinsou. COME OUT I'VE GOT THIS MEME ON DECK FOR YOU. I've had to save it for a whole WEEK.

Yaoyorozu Momo: Shinsou is probably busy with Eri, since her birthday is tomorrow. @Sato Rikido, all the ingredients are in the kitchen now.

Sato Rikido: Thanks! Also, it's been 15 minutes so far, and no name changes.

Kaminari Denki changed their name to Meemstar

Meemstar changed Sato Rikido's name to Sugilicious Def

Jirou Kyouda: Petition to ban Kaminari from listening to Fergalicious and making references to it, please sign in the chat.

Sero Hanta: COSIGNED HARD

Ojiro Mashirao: Cosigned, Iida and Kouda don't be polite. Don't let it stop you.

Kouda Kouji: It doesn't bother me!

Meemstar changed Kouda Kouji's name to The Best Boi Don't TOUCH Him

Meemstar changed Sero Hanta's name to Saltiest Saltine

Meemstar changed Ojiro Mashirao's name to Redeemed by fluffy tail

Meemstar: @Ashido Mina I'M DOING SO MUCH WORK PLZ HELP ME FIX

Ashido Mina: HE LIIIIIIIVES I'M GETTING SHINNY BACK RN

Redeemed by fluffy tail: Joy.

Kirishima Eijirou: Hey, just be cool ok?

Bakugo Katsuki: NO ONE IS MAKING YOU STAY HERE, DUMB FUCK, JUST LEAVE THE FUCKING CHAT.

Redeemed by fluffy tail left the chat.

Uraraka Ochako: Ojiro just needs some space rn, no 1 needs 2 deal with 2 chats w Bakugo.

Bakugo Katsuki: WHO FUCKING CARES.

Meemstar changed Bakugo Katsuki's name to This One Does Not Spark Joy

Meemstar: @Ashido Mina PLEASE

Ashido Mina changed their name to Fergie Queen

Fergie Queen: PETITION 2 CHANGE 1-A'S ANTHEM TO FERGALICIOUS.

Meemstar: YES COSIGNED 20X

Fergie Queen: IT PASSES

Shoji Mezo: Seems like voter fraud.

Fergie Queen: IT'S NOT.

Fergie Queen changed Shoji Mezo's name to Sus Squid

Shinsou Hitoshi: @Aoyama Yuga, @Ojiro Mashirao, @Kaminari Denki, @Kirishima Eijirou, @Sato Rikido, @Shoji Mezo, @Jirou Kyouka, @Sero Hanta, @Tokoyami Fumikage, @Todoroki Shoto, @Yaoyorozu Momo, I'm sorry for threatening you with my quirk and with intentional physical harm, I'm not going to do either of those things, and I was an asshole for saying I would. I'm willing to do whatever you want to make amends.

Uraraka Ochako: I got Eri pics out of it, u gotta pick something else.

Meemstar changed Uraraka Ochako's name to Eri Pics ONLY

Aoyama Yuga: :> je sais quoi demander *~**

Fergie Queen changed Aoyama Yuga's name to French SUS

Kirishima Eijirou: We're cool, Shinbro! I know you got a lot of stuff going on, lmk if you ever wanna work it outta your system with a workout or smth!

Saltiest Saltine: RIP Kirishima, you were a bro til the end.

Meemstar changed Kirishima Eijirou's name to Goodnight Sweet Bro

Goodnight Sweet Bro: Bro...

Meemstar: Broooo

This Does Not Spark Joy: LIKE THAT FUCKING TWIG CAN DO SHIT TO SHITTY HAIR.

Goodnight Sweet Bro: BRO. T.T

Saltiest Saltine: I will forgive you, except for bringing it up at most opportunities, if you Promise Not To Hurt Me. Ever.

Shinsou Hitoshi: You're asking too much, try again.

Midoriya Izuku: Shinsou, I think that's kiiiind of intentionally hurting Sero emotionally.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Fine. Sero, I won't intentionally hurt you physically or emotionally, and if I do, I'll have to complete a punishment from Aizawa.

Saltiest Saltine changed Midoriya Izuku's name to My Hero

Jirou Kyouka: Sero, do you really think Aizawa could punish Shinsou tho? Enough to stop him?

Saltiest Saltine: Good point, @Shinsou Hitoshi I HAVE QUESTIONS NOW ABOUT THAT.

Shinsou Hitoshi: I might answer them.

Todoroki Shoto: Shinsou. The video game chat.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Do you want me to apologize there?

Todoroki Shoto: No. I want you to say that Soba is great.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Soba is great.

Todoroki Shoto: Out loud.

Shinsou Hitoshi: At training.

Todoroki Shoto: Fine.

Fergie Queen changed Todoroki Shoto's name to Fiiiiiine Boi

Shinsou Hitoshi: @Jirou Kyouka I'm not going to intentionally hurt Yamada.

Jirou Kyouka: I know, you have horrible taste. Just tell me what you actually like to listen to that isn't on his show.

Fergie Queen changed Jirou Kyouka's name to Present Mic's Fakest Hater

Shinsou Hitoshi: His spotify playlist. But I've listened to a few songs from the one you sent me. They're good.

Saltiest Saltine: CAN WE GO BACK TO 'INTENTIONALLY EMOTIONALLY/PHYSICALLY HURTING'???? And ELABORATE????

Shinsou Hitoshi: It's a rule. I can't do that.

My Hero: And, if Shinsou brings it up, it's probably a sign that he's not comfortable with something, just letting you guys know here instead of the other chat.

Asui Tsuyu: Wrong chat.

My Hero:wrong chat. Sorry.

Tokoyami Fumikage: So, that leaves Shinsou with no recourse but to hurt us spiritually, to abide by the code of ethics he has adopted.

Meemstar: *softly, and full of Fear* don't.

Saltiest Saltine: TOKOYAMI PLEASE TELL ME HOW I HURT YOU.

Shoji Mezo: Some apple chips went missing, and Kaminari ratted you out. And we're fine Shinsou, doing something for me isn't necessary. But if you could tell Mizuno 'hi' tomorrow, she'd really like that. She thinks you're cool.

Shinsou Hitoshi: She's nice. I'm glad she's friends with Eri.

Eri Pics Only: TT.TT Shoji can i be ur plus 1 to Eri's bday party?

Tokoyami Fumikage: <https://omamorifromjapan.blogspot.com/2011/12/wara-ningyo-curses.html>

Tokoyami Fumikage: Relevant to your interests. I think the gnarled oak by the cafeteria might be sacred.

Saltiest Saltine: TOKOYAMI PLEASE.

Meemstar: *JAZZ MUSIC STOPS*

This One Does Not Spark Joy: HOLY FUCK DON'T GIVE SHITSOU VODOO POWERS.

Meemstar changed Tokoyami Fumikage's name to Would sell u to satan for apple chips

Fergie Queen: its fine!! :) just dont make Shinny uncomfortable :)

Fiiiiine Boi: Very relevant, thank you.

Meemstar: The vibes are not ok right now.

Iida Tenya: Todoroki, the student handbook forbids invoking spiritual powers or ‘cursing’ a student/teacher/staff member or contracted employee currently attending or employed by UA. But anyone that does not fall into that category is allowed.

Fiiiiine Boi: Thank you.

Shinsou Hitoshi: That tree was the first tree that Eri climbed. You can’t hurt it. Or I’ll curse you back.

Fiiiiine Boi: That’s very relevant to my interests, thank you.

Yaoyorozu Momo: I also forgive you, Shinsou, and I don’t want to punish you by asking for something in return for that. And since you don’t want to injure Eri’s tree, there’s also a method of cursing someone by giving them the curse doll, with a parchment scroll attached to the back detailing what they did to deserve the curse. To make sure the doll never forgets its sin.

Saltiest Saltine: yAOMOMO

Yaoyorozu Momo: Irrelevant, but if anyone wants to take any food that’s in my section of the cabinet, feel free to and just let me know so I won’t expect it to be there after it’s eaten!

Present Mic’s Fakest Hater: RIP Sero, you kind of earned it.

Meemstar: F

Fergie Queen: FFFFFFFF

This Does Not Spark Joy: FUCK YOUR F, YOU FUCKED UP MY MEAL PLAN, DUMBASS

Saltiest Saltine: I’M GOING THROUGH A GROWTH SPURT AND TRAINING IS HARD.

Meemstar: Some sins can never be forgiven.

Would sell u to satan for apple chips: Agreed.

Iida Tenya: Yaoyorozu, did you happen to have a fondness for memos when you were younger?

Yaoyorozu Momo: Did you do that too? I thought I was just a little... too involved in my parents’ work, back then. It was constructive!

Iida Tenya: I agree! And you are not alone!

Sugarlicious Def: Okay, I can’t take it. Shinsou, I’ll forgive you if you tell me what cake Eri is getting for her birthday. I want to make sure I don’t repeat it at breakfast.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Cinnamon marble cake with vanilla buttercream icing and glazed apples on top.

Eri Pics Only: Shoji can i pleaaaaaaase be ur plus one????

My Hero: That sounds really good! I’m sure Eri will love it!

Goodnight Sweet Bro: Awwww it’s like cinnamon rolls and apple turnovers! Her favorite things!

Sugarlicious Def: Mhm. I know. I know.

Shinsou Hitoshi: She'll still want yours.

Sugarlicious Def: Did you go to a good place? Not the organic supermarket, but a real bakery?

French SUS: The suspense kills me also IT MUST BE THE BEST

Shinsou Hitoshi: Perish, I guess.

Hitoshi starts to get up, before he realizes that the cake *isn't* on the counter. It's not where it's supposed to be, and if Aizawa *did* something to the cake while he was taking a shower, he's not sure if he can keep his promise to 50. "Where is the cake?"

"In the fridge," Aizawa answers, and Hitoshi holds his phone against his chest because he *knows* Aizawa is looking at him. "Did you want to send someone a picture?"

Hitoshi nods, and Aizawa says *nothing*, but then his phone vibrates and he can see a notification from Aizawa's chat with him. He already took pictures of the cake. And it actually makes the cake look nicer than it does.

Meemstar: i....

Saltiest Saltine: He just...

Meemstar: SHINSOU I'M SO PROUD!!!! A MEEEEEEEMEEEE!!!!

This Does Not Spark Joy: KICK SHITSOU OUT OF THE FUCKING CHAT NOW, QUARANTINE THIS FUCKER BEFORE KAMINARI GETS HIM TOO.

Shinsou Hitoshi: *Tap to download 72 kB file*

Shinsou Hitoshi: Aizawa and I made it. All Might helped at the end.

Hitoshi waited, wondering if his phone was messing up. If they really thought that cake looked awful somehow, and they didn't know how to tell him.

Saltiest Saltine: 911, I'd like to report a murder against my heart because that cake looks TOO GOOD I'M SO HUNGRY

The Best Boi Don't TOUCH Him: !!! Shinsou that looks amazing! You did an amazing job!

Goodnight Sweet Bro: SHINBRO THAT LOOKS SO BEAUTIFUL!!!! You did such a great job, I'm proud of you!

Fergie Queen: WE STAN A NEW BAKING LEGEND! (sato get ur new son)

Shinsou Hitoshi: It only looks nice because Aizawa did most of that. If it tastes bad, it's my fault.

Eri Pics Only: SHOJI IZUKU TSU SHINSOU CAN I PLEASSSSSSSEEE BE UR PLUS ONE!!!!!!

My Hero: I'm sure it will be perfect, Shinsou! I know you followed the recipe, and that's really all it takes to make a spectacular cake!

Sugarlicious Def: It's not.

Sugarlicious Def: Okay.

Fiiiiine Boi: Cake wars.

Sugarlicious Def: Okay, buckle in because I just. Cake feelings.

French SUS: Mon petite, do the off.

Sugarlicious Def: How dare you.

Fergie Queen: Watch it. Check. YOURSELF. Now.

Meemstar: Avengers: Civil War has nothing on us rn.

Meemstar: Also PLEAAAAAAAAAAAAASE SHINSOU LET ME EAT IT JUST A LIL. TINY BITE FOR MEEEEEEEEEE IT LOOKS SO GOOOOOOOOOD

Sugarlicious Def: Cinnamon marble and vanilla buttercream icing is a staple, it's classic, it's perfect just like that. It is the Audrey Hepburn of the cake world. But you had the AUDACITY to add another layer of cinnamon and sweet and tart with glazed apples, a rare topping reserved for an absolutely plain base so that it can stand on its own and be celebrated for the tartness, the sweetness, the glaze, the texture. And YOU. You elevated the classic. You DID THAT. The cinnamon cake at the base marrying with the cinnamon in the glaze, top to bottom with the buttercream binding. And the design of it? I hate you. How dare you.

Present Mic's Fakest Hater: He did the off.

Yaoyorozu Momo: It looks so delicate, it's really an amazing cake, Shinsou!

Meemstar: HE DID. THE OOOOOOOFFFFF.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Eri picked that flavor out of the cupcakes, and Aizawa said it tasted good when we tried it. What did I do wrong with the design?

Sugarlicious Def: NOTHING. NOTHING IS WRONG WITH IT. SO I CAN'T ACCEPT IT. YOU CAN'T BE THAT GOOD.

Shinsou Hitoshi: Aizawa did that. I barely helped.

Sugarlicious Def: You did great, Shinsou. As a third generation baker, I salute you.

Squid Sus: Sato.... Are you going to bring up the design to Aizawa-sensei? If he did it?

Sugarlicious Def: I need to beat him in the training exercise to avenge my family's honor.

Sugarlicious Def: So, it was nice knowing you guys.

Meemstar: SUGAR DADDY NO.

Present Mic's Fakest Hater: I'll play Plastic Love at your funeral.

Sugarlicious Def: Thanks, Jirou.

Meemstar changed Shinsou Hitoshi's name to ttttastey tastaaaay

Meemstar: Tap to download 22 kB

Meemstar: Shinsou, pls tell me what u think of the meme, its relevant 2 ur interests and Aizawa-sensei's gonna kill us soon.

The meme doesn't look like the usual ones that Kaminari shows him. It's just a picture of a lady in an old dress on one side, and 'Five Drawbacks to Having Eerie Mind-Control Powers' is written above a list. The first is 'Most restaurants don't offer eerie mind-control power discounts after 4pm,' the next three lines are basically nothing, until the fifth says 'Oh, and some people might think you're a witch, but honestly, that's a compliment.'

Ttttastey tastaaaay: 1. I don't need a discount when I could just get it for free. 5. When I figure out how to get those curse dolls, I will be a witch.

Would sell u to satan for apple chips: <https://www.amazon.com/Natural-Bundles-Christmas-Bouquets-Decoration/dp/B08GC6Z9QZ/>

Would sell u to satan for apple chips: Relevant to your interests, but I also have a few in my room. I'll prepare a bag for the implements you require.

Ttttastey tastaaaay: Thanks.

Saltiest Saltine: tOKOYAMI PLEASE

"We'll have to leave in 30 minutes," Aizawa says, adjusting his arm as he does and Hitoshi grimaces because he was *comfortable* where he was laying against it, Aizawa should have given him a little warning. "Did they like the cake?"

"Sato..." Hitoshi trails off, considering his answer. It might be better if Aizawa isn't aware, to at least give Sato the element of surprise. "Had a lot of cake feelings about it. But they liked how you made it look."

"That was mostly you," Aizawa says, *lying*. Aizawa was doing better with the decorating anyway. "This is a self-imposed punishment for them, but they do need to be able to visit their families intact. We can't be too harsh to them."

"We?" Hitoshi asks, only checking the digital setting on his mask as an afterthought, something he *shouldn't* make a habit of. It's the reason he has this mask, no matter how fun it is to play around with.

"They asked for an exercise focused on hand-to-hand combat, but Iida has already decided to disregard that despite asking for it," Aizawa says, moving *again* to tighten his ponytail, and Hitoshi rolls his eyes to sit up since Aizawa has decided to be *uncomfortable*. "I don't see any problem with you being somewhat of a co-teacher, if you wanted to. It might be fun."

There's something about that *smirk* Aizawa has, even if it's odd. Even if it's warm, like the way he smiles at Eri. Hitoshi knows he probably wants him to agree, probably half as much as Hitoshi wants to.

He adjusts the dials, and he knows it won't come out right. It almost feels like someone is strangling him with how deep he adjust the pitch, but he starts with Izuku's voice.

“*Young Aizawa, I would be happy to-*” Hitoshi chokes up and has to cough, his hand curling over the mask like that *helps*, but something about the adjustment of that ceramic plate doesn’t *work* with some words.

“A little too deep, but even if the cough wasn’t intentional, it’s in character,” Aizawa says, his hand hovering over Hitoshi’s shoulder, and Hitoshi just turns the Persona Cord setting off, breathing easier without the pressure. “Alright?”

“Fine,” Hitoshi says, rolling his eyes. He’s not *dying* from the mask messing with his throat the wrong way.

“You should hydrate and eat something small if you’re going to be hands-on with them,” Aizawa says, like *he* does that. Aside from a jelly pouch on the rare occasion that he feels like taking his students on instead of just observing and directing criticism afterwards.

And a jelly pouch does sound nice right now, not that he wants Aizawa to say anything about it when he takes two from the cabinet they’re stored in. If he needs to eat a small meal, Aizawa does too, so they can be ready to crack his eggs together.

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“Uraraka,” Aizawa calls, standing from his stance just to see his student frown and wince, already catching that her stance was off, a foot too far back and dragging behind her boundless enthusiasm. But she corrects, arms raised as a box guard for quick offense, her stance steady and balanced enough that it will take more than a quick shove to topple her over.

With a nod, Aizawa resumes what’s honestly a guilty pleasure for him, which is thrashing his students in an area that overall they tend to focus on *least* - quirkless combat.

Nearly every child that anticipates the development of their quirk anticipates a *powerful* one, one suited for the heroic mold that televised fights and related media present. UA’s entrance exam is slanted to uphold that, the robots tend to disqualify any hopeful hero that has little more than fists to fight with. UA, and the hero industry as a whole, is focused too much at times on quirk development, but there’s always a limit for a quirk, there’s always a fight where it can’t be utilized, there’s always a moment where success hinges on fighting with nothing more than fists and adrenaline. It’s his duty to make sure they graduate with muscle memory to respond to that terrifying moment when all their thoughts blur out to ‘I don’t want to die.’

Uraraka knows she’s starting a bit behind the finish line in that aspect. As powerful as her quirk can be in many areas, it can leave her vulnerable in a fight. In the scenario where her environment offers her no advantage and no debris, she needs to hone the ability to survive close combat long enough to use her quirk on her opponent or take them down without it, and as much as enthusiasm can carry her, muscle memory hasn’t had enough time to develop in some ways.

She fares well with quick strikes to his dodging and retreat, her defense can be stilted at times because she’s still too eager to retreat properly. It’s also her youth, she’s been training for less than a year, and he does see vast improvement.

He allows the opportunity to joint lock his left arm and she takes it, hand on his wrist and opposite arm in his elbow, pushing from the ground to topple his weight at the right angle. He feints a blow with his free hand and she changes the angle to try to spin him, try to throw him off-balance.

But, it’s too easy to resist, and he sees the moment she notices it before he shakes her off his arm, catching her by the wrist before she can fall to the mat. Once she realizes she won’t hit it and opens

her eyes, he points to his feet, because he's deliberately changed nothing from his stance. "An unskilled opponent lifts their foot from the same side they're striking from, making them unbalanced. If you pulled rather than pushed, you could have thrown me correctly."

Uraraka *never* pouts, just a pursed frown before she exhales, eyebrows drawn down and determined, if sometimes disappointed in herself. Aizawa will never say it, but that look can be frightening at times. But as always, she pulls herself to her feet to dust off her hands in a clap, eager for another chance.

And she'll have to find that other chance from someone else, because he has another student waiting, dismissing her with a thumb over his shoulder. "Take a water break, and do 35 lunges."

"Yes sir!" Uraraka says, even if she seems to be distracted after ten steps by his junior co-teacher, who has been multitasking and earning more attention from his students for it. Even if that co-teacher looks like a student slacking off with the others, begrudgingly dressed in a spare gym uniform at Iida's insistence before they ran laps under Hitoshi's instruction.

True to his word, Hitoshi offered his knife to Iida after warm ups to begin the very basics of knife lessons, and true to his prediction, it hasn't progressed further than reminding Iida how to adjust his grip on the handle according to the angle he tries to strike from. He's heard the knife drop several times, along with the growing diversity of voice impersonations, egged on by his students who seem to treat Hitoshi's mask like a particularly cool toy. He might need to give Powerloader forewarning before any of them can request a similar one.

But, he doubts it's ignorance that lets them overlook the fact that Hitoshi is wearing a mask like that. Out of the students at this exercise, only Kirishima, Midoriya, Iida, and Uraraka have seen Hitoshi wearing a similar one, but he knows the rest aren't blind to how Hitoshi gained those scars etched deep in his face. They seem to trust that Hitoshi knows his limits more than Aizawa does, and a part of him argues that *is* out of ignorance. They haven't seen what he's seen from Hitoshi, in his most vulnerable moments.

Maybe, they can see the parts that make it different easier than he can, the method it uses to change Hitoshi's voice and the stickers Eri decorated the mask with. Maybe, he's worrying over nothing.

But, he's been worried about Ojiro long enough, and as he settles in for a more challenging spar where he'll have to look harder for inconsistencies and defects, he doesn't overlook the frown that his ward seems to pull from his student. "Gunhead is a practical choice for you. You're well balanced, but an expert in tactical holds could show you a thing or two."

Ojiro's head snaps back to him, offering his full attention. "Yes, that's what I was thinking. Did he reach out to you, sensei?"

Aizawa nods, he's signed off on almost every internship offer thus far. He's signed off on most home visits for the holiday season too. "Some time in the countryside, away from campus and closer to family, is something that everyone needs at this point in the year."

He tries to remind himself that an escape like that, time and distance, can result in a vastly different mindset in the student in front of him. Especially for Ojiro, who he knows is still reeling from Hagakure's expulsion, even if the initial blow has passed. Time and distance.

Hopefully not an association between Hagakure's actions and the presence of his ward, forming in the back of his student's mind. Hagakure was discovered to be the traitor because of that attack on Hitoshi, and if he asked about it plainly, he knows that Ojiro would admit that Hitoshi was the victim in that instance. But the mind can make illogical connections at times, to deal with grief and

anger. Especially when the proper outlets are closed.

Unlike Uraraka, Ojiro is nearly solid muscle with the strength to match, speed and flexibility to compliment. He takes note of how swiftly he can change now from dealing a crushing blow to guiding his opponent's weight against them, he can see the best foundation Gunhead could ask for in what Ojiro has learned so far, throughout his years of training.

But when Ojiro nearly *beats* him, Aizawa losing track of his tail in the assumption he was only using it to stabilize his stance, and it catches his hip to knock his sense of gravity from under him, it's only well-worn muscle memory that allows Aizawa to roll with bent knees and loose arms, a charge that shifts into a feint, his elbow locking Ojiro's knee to bring him down with his shoulders forced against the mat and breath knocked out of him.

They don't have to play this fight out past this point, Ojiro could use his tail to try to beat Aizawa away, but Aizawa would use Erasure before walking away with body-length bruising. "Were you trying to catch me off-guard with your quirk, or trying not to use it at first?"

Aizawa drops Ojiro's knee, and his student tries to recover his breath before he answers, sitting up with hands braced on the mat. "Tida said it was quirkless training, but you said hand-to-hand. I guess I was too wrapped up in the difference."

There *is* a difference with students like Ojiro, whose mutation quirk would still be allowed in hand-to-hand, but not in a specifically quirkless spar. And though there are few instances where Ojiro would have to fight quirkless due to that, he's still confident that if he nullified his quirk throughout the fight, Ojiro would have enough training to put up a decent one. "As much as I can admire your dedication, this isn't a serious training session. And the boy's present only lost by a small margin."

He's honestly a bit relieved that his students decided to present two gifts divided by gender rather than each of them buying Eri a birthday present when they honestly weren't obligated to. And while the boys had a distinct advantage with that, with more students available for a bigger pool of money, it wasn't just his illogical affinity for an underdog that convinced him the girls had a present Eri would prefer.

Neither were offbase, as he's sure that Eri will have a great deal of fun with that magic trick kit, especially with her blooming interest in tricks and games evidenced by the 'down low, too slow' game. But the girls had caught on to something deeper than that, something heartfelt, that he can't blame solely on gender. Something that he knows Eri will love and enjoy, and he almost wishes that he and Hizashi had thought of it.

"Shinsou seems to be doing better now," Ojiro comments, the frown still present when he looks over his shoulder at his ward, but his eyes seem a bit softer in their wariness. He knows that Ojiro has won the right to be wary, he's always been one of Aizawa's more rational students, unwilling to take stupid risks and win stupid prizes as a result.

"He's trying to trust that an attack like that won't happen again," Aizawa says, which draws Ojiro's attention back to him with a bit of shock, as though he hadn't made that connection in his ward's behavior. "The criminals that are targeting him made it clear that they will also go after anyone connected to him. That's why he was placed at UA, where the risk of attack would have been minimized."

"Does he still think that... we were working with her?" Ojiro asks, a wince when he can't bring himself to say Hagakure's name. Something Aizawa knows he needs time and distance from, but the accusation seems to be one Ojiro is utterly convinced of.

“I doubt that he ever did. It was more of a concern for your and your peers’ safety, put at risk because of your connection to him,” Aizawa says, watching as Hitoshi turns his head, distracted from the drills he’s running Iida through when Uraraka demonstrates her impression of *himself*, the ‘Aizawa’ impersonation that he’s *pretended* to be unaware of. Messing up the ends of her hair, tucking her hands into her pockets with a slouch, half lidded eyes and a serious frown.

And he doesn’t ignore how clearly Hitoshi *brightens* at that, even if it’s only his eyes getting a bit wider above that black mask before he adjusts his voice setting to match. “But, he knows that he should have been safe here. And he wasn’t because we didn’t protect him. We didn’t know.”

Aizawa looks at Ojiro, a student frustrated and confused over the *wrong* issue with his ward. It’s not simply a matter of explaining that Hitoshi still probably doesn’t expect that others should keep him safe, that he barely understands that he *deserves* to be safe. “He’s never interacted with someone his own age, before coming to UA. And he’s never had a connection with anyone who could meet him on equal terms, without an imbalance of power. Someone that he owes nothing, and isn’t required to give anything to deserve it.”

Hitoshi is still *trading* for forgiveness with these little tokens that he offers his students, teaching Iida to wield a knife, telling Todoroki that ‘Soba is great.’ But given that he refused to sing for Aoyama upon his request, with the argument that he only sings to Eri, he’s proud to see that Hitoshi is beginning to realize that he could have that kind of equal connection with others, where those trades are smaller compared to the weight of that connection. Where things are comfortable gifts, rather than necessary.

“It’s unfair for all of you to see him as someone you need to protect as hero students. You aren’t ready for that responsibility, and you’ll inevitably see him as weaker than yourselves, in ways that cheapens any friendship he might want,” Aizawa says, knowing that he’s never outright advocated for his students to form that connection with his ward, and he’s made several attempts to stop it outright. Even if he knew it was futile from the beginning.

But it would be unfair for Hitoshi to have friends that only pursue that connection out of a perception of duty towards him, unwilling to see him as he is. More than a ward, as a person who still deserves respect, but in his own right rather than the difference between their temporary social standings as ward and hero student. “I don’t think any of us really thought that he was weak and defenseless but... I guess it is unfair when you put it like that.”

Ojiro rubs the back of his neck, now looking guiltily towards that gathering where Hitoshi and Uraraka are becoming the centers of attention, Kaminari and Sero their loudest fans. He still seems reluctant to join them, understandable when he has his own wounds to heal. “Not out of any ill intention, but in my opinion, a connection built outside of a sense of duty is stronger for it.”

Ojiro nods, and like Aizawa imagined, leaves to take a water break rather than join in on the more ‘fun’ side of this exercise. Aizawa thinks about calling for Sero or Sato to receive their evaluative spar from him, but as he walks off the mat to retie his hair and think about taking a water break himself, he realizes the hypocrisy of his own words.

‘A connection built outside of a sense of duty,’ is something he’s honestly never tried to build between himself and Hitoshi.

Most of his connections with others are forged out of responsibility and perception of need, he needed to be Hizashi’s friend because Hizashi insisted on it, which slowly blossomed into a marriage of nearly a decade when he realized that he needed and wanted Hizashi for his own sake. With friends, students, and colleagues, he finds it easy to meet whatever needs they have, and nearly impossible to let them know that he has his own.

He felt like it was his responsibility to take Eri into his home, knowing that the horrors that she went through were inspired by his quirk, and that his quirk alone could help her gain control. But far before she made such grand strides to accomplish that goal, he realized the selfish connection that grew beneath that simple contract in her wardship. In whatever connection they have, caretaker to child, parent to child, he can bear the weight of what she needs from him but there's so much that she *gives* without intending to, knowing that she doesn't have to. And it's all the more precious for it.

But with Hitoshi, there's more responsibilities than providing for him and keeping him safe, there's also the investigation into The Miasma that they've had to meet, sometimes in conflict with each other. There's antagonism on both sides, how much he *resented* that Hitoshi feared him and compared him to his past abusers, how through that Hitoshi found it easier to connect with anyone *but* him. There's little ground for them to meet on that isn't steeped in that poison, colored by that history, and their perception of each other through their perceived duties.

He could never simply be a friend to Hitoshi, given that he's an adult charged with his wellbeing, but it's been a long time since he's seen Eri as a ward, as a child he holds such a cold and clinical duty to. He doesn't know if this is what Hizashi meant by seeing them both with an open mind, in regards to their potential futures beyond UA and outside of his direct care, but there is a difference, and it might be owed to how he sees Hitoshi. Not as *Hitoshi* in his own right.

And when Aizawa turns to see Sato approaching the mat, seemingly of his own volition, he at first thinks that he should put the matter to rest to focus on his student.

But with Sato's pupils already dissolved into white by means of his quirk, the sluggish and lax way he stops once he sets foot on the mat is only half of the indication that Hitoshi has used his quirk on him.

The other half has to do with the fact that Hitoshi is perched on his shoulders, arms folded and draped over his student's head, and a shit eating grin hidden by his black mask. "It's a hand-to-hand combat exercise, but not *quirkless*, so using Sugar Rush to its full limit is fine, right?"

'*Full limit*' is something that's clear, yet up to interpretation. Aizawa can see that Sato's quirk is active to the limit, his enhanced strength clear with the muscles straining beneath his gym uniform, but under Hitoshi's quirk, he's not panting or muttering in broken sentences to indicate his lowered cognitive capacities.

Because *Hitoshi* will be doing the thinking for him.

This is not fine, and could honestly be quite dangerous, but seeing as the rules are bending a bit, Aizawa takes his capture scarf out of his pocket before he steps onto the mat himself. "Hand-to-hand, which excludes your quirk being used on me."

He wants to make it *clear* that a sucker punch like that, paralyzing him just so Sato's enhanced strength could blow him *through* a wall isn't going to be allowed in this fight, but Hitoshi shrugs as his students gather around to watch. "Of course, this is an honorable fight."

Something about the way Hitoshi says that sounds *odd*, but Aizawa brushes it out of his mind to settle into a stance, before he strikes, to see what this 'full limit' looks like for himself.

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If Aizawa had set up another sparring mat, he probably wouldn't have to put up with this. "Wait! Say 'Kaminari, you're such a swell guy, and so funny and amazing.'"

Kaminari *probably* means for him to use Aizawa's Persona Cord again, but he's had to give him too many compliments with that one, and Bakugo looks like he's getting a little restless.

"Kaminari, you're a fucking swell guy, you make me giggle fucking soda out of my nose and you're fucking amazing."

"When the fuck did you do that?! Fucking creepy ass voice stealing shit," Bakugo growls, bumping into Iida when he lunges, but Kaminari jumps between them with his arms spread out to defend Hitoshi, which only inspires Sero to join in too.

"Shinsou," Kaminari says, turning his head to look over his shoulder with a weepy look on his face. "I would *literally* die for you."

"Die," Todoroki chimes in, but he's been in that 'meme study group' long enough to know that's not the right word to use, and the loose headlock he pulls on Bakugo to start dragging him away seems to indicate he doesn't know who's *supposed* to die in this instance. "Let him speak. And steal voices. It's not creepy."

"It's only logical for Shinsou to steal your voice," Uraraka chimes in, still slouched with that serious look on her face, and it's *still too fucking funny* to him, every time she says anything with that deep voice. "But don't interact with him, Shinsou is my ward and that means that I don't want him to be around bad influences like you."

Hitoshi has to hold his breath not to laugh, but it still comes out as a weird choking noise. But sighs when he sees Iida nearly drop his knife again, even if the bespectacled student looks at him like he hoped he didn't. He switches the Persona Cords off, trying to ignore how much he wants to rub his face from the pressure plates finally being released. "Thumb and forefinger tight, but not squeezing it. You have giant hands, so this really shouldn't be difficult."

Iida raises both hands like he's carrying an invisible box, just to move them up and down. "I understand that, Shinsou, but balancing the hilt isn't as intuitive as you might be under the impression it is, given that you're more experienced with this."

Hitoshi raises an eyebrow when his knife *predictably* falls out of Iida's hand and clatters to the ground, but he doesn't miss that Iida's first instinct is to pull his leg away from it like it's a snake ready to bite. "Can you even cook if you're that scared of a knife?"

"I'm not scared of *any* knife, but I'm well aware of how dangerous they can be, and admittedly, that's a reason that I asked for this," Iida says, stooping down to pick the knife up again, holding it too loose, *again*, before he sighs. "I've faced more than a few villains who used knives or swords, and I'm aware that I will face them in the future, and having a more positive association to this weapon may prevent me from making a worse one."

"Shinsou, did you, um," Izuku starts, a particularly nervous look on his face while he fidgets. "Have a slight reaction with your quirk with Iida just then?"

"It's on digital mode, so no," Hitoshi answers, tapping the button on the mask for good measure, before he walks closer to Iida. With a question he doesn't really want to ask. "Did you get a scar from when you were attacked?"

Iida's freehand moves to his back like he needs to check, and maybe he does, because while Hitoshi can't forget most of his scars, he also doesn't remember all the ones that are on his back and harder to see in the mirror. "I... did. It was a long laceration, and could have been worse. The other... could have been a lot worse."

Villains and scars, plural, meant that he wasn't just attacked by 127. Hitoshi remembers how jumpy Iida seemed when he used his knife while trying to train all of them, he was scared then too. And he'll just get more reasons to hold onto that fear the closer he gets to being a hero. "Every weapon has its advantages and disadvantages. The threat of a gun can be more effective, but when you pull the trigger, you have to accept that you're willing to kill. A knife can be used in other ways, and it doesn't run out of bullets. It's a threat, it's a guard, and it's a weapon. And it's something you use to cook."

Hitoshi raises his hand, almost wants to rub the back of his neck. Almost wants to check the band at the back of his head for a lock, but he knows the weight of this mask is different. Instead, he takes the back of Iida's *oversized* hand, correcting the position of his fingers again. Not spread and not pressed so close together, the pinky used to direct the angle.

"There's different reasons to pick it, just like different ways to use it. 127 prioritizes stealth and always kills, so a gun wouldn't work for him. Whoever you faced or will face will have their reasons," Hitoshi says, picking up Iida's hand to swing then guard for him, watching for him to make a mistake and change his grip. But he doesn't, probably because Hitoshi is watching him. "But, it's just a knife. It's small, it takes a lot of training to use it defensively, and it's not the most powerful weapon you'll face. Without proper training, it takes a lot of repeated strikes to successfully kill someone with it, which just means more chances for you to *not* die."

"Why..." Iida starts, before he adjusts his glasses with his free hand, almost like he *needs* to use his hands to keep talking. "Why did you choose a knife, Shinsou?"

"I didn't want to pick the gun," Hitoshi admits, remembering that moment clearly. He's never forgotten 50's words. "I wanted more control over how much I would hurt someone than just having to kill them. And it's what 50 used. I wanted... to feel more connected to her."

The next swing he tries to guide Iida through hesitates, but Iida pulls his hand away before Hitoshi can decide whether that was his fault or not. And Iida holds out the knife for him to take back with a smile. "Thank you, Shinsou. I think understanding more about it has helped my worries, in a way."

"But, just a quick question," Sero cuts in, and he looks nervous so Hitoshi knows it's a question for him. "Did you happen to get that 'proper training' to know how to kill someone?"

Hitoshi runs a hand through his hair to make it look like he's just adjusting the band, walking closer to Sero. "Still worried I will?"

Sero puts his hands up, wincing nervously, but the strain and interest is plain to see on every face after he asked that. "Just curious, you know?"

As soon as Sero's arms drop to his side, Hitoshi flips the blade so that the dull side is facing Sero, as he steps beside him to demonstrate. "Severing the spinal cord takes a great deal of force to do, but it will render the target completely helpless. Slitting the throat is more effective when targeting the side, that's where most of the veins and arteries are. Kidneys are less protected than the heart, lungs, or diaphragm, the inside of the thigh has the femoral artery but it's the least effective as it takes longer to bleed out there compared to the carotid."

Kaminari raises a finger when Hitoshi presses the back of his knife to Sero's thigh, like he has a question, but just lowers his hand instead of asking it. Hitoshi sheathes his knife, taking in the fact that *no one* seems to know this, before he flicks Sero's ear to break the control so he doesn't miss out on the lesson, turning the digital mode on his mask on too.

“Before you ask, I’ve never killed anyone, but *none* of this should be news to you if you’re going to be heroes,” Hitoshi says, because if *he* knows it, the villains that they face probably will, and this also explains why so many of them don’t have proper protection in their costumes.

“I... think that’s a solid Aizawa-sensei impression even without the voice,” Kaminari says, which reminds Hitoshi that they’re supposed to be taking this *somewhat* seriously. Even if Aizawa said it’s supposed to be ‘fun,’ that’s why he’s a ‘co-teacher’ or whatever that means, but there are a few of them who haven’t gone up against Aizawa yet and Aizawa looks too relaxed when he’s just staring at the wall by himself.

“Sato, you haven’t tried to regain your family’s honor. Unless you don’t have those ‘cake feelings’ anymore,” Hitoshi says, half teasing and half excited for the prospect of his success. Even if Sato didn’t mean it as an outright blood feud between warring yakuza families, he should settle this now before his ‘cake feelings’ become too heavy.

“Oh, just listening to the... You have a lot of ‘knife feelings,’” Sato says, rubbing the back of his neck. “Y’know, I know I don’t really stand a chance against him, this *is* Aizawa-sensei.”

“But, your cake feelings are important!” Uraraka says, pumping her fists just for Izuku to mirror her. “Even if you can’t beat him, you have to let him know that being that good at cake decorating is an insult! It’s insulting to your family!”

“Who fucking cares if Shitsei pulled that shit off Instagram, it has nothing to do with your family and you know it,” Bakugo argues, crossing his arms as he scowls. “Just get your ass wrecked so we can be done with this shit, this is *training*.”

“I’m still rooting for you, though!” Kirishima adds, joining in on the clenched fists that seem to believe too easily that Sato has a *chance* of standing against Aizawa, someone who’s apparently paid to thrash them in a fight so they can learn to do better.

But, Sato does have a chance. A better one at least, if he’s right about this. “He allowed Shoji to use his webbing to deflect, so it’s probably fine to use your quirk. As long as it’s hand-to-hand.”

“Even if that’s true, it’s not just strength,” Sato argues. “When I’m in that zone, I can’t really think straight. Aizawa-sensei could probably knock me across the room and it’d take 10 minutes to realize that I got there.”

“And if I ‘thought’ for you, with my quirk,” Hitoshi says, his hand hesitating over the button to turn the digital mode off, basically turning his quirk *on*. He has control, right under his hand, but whether he has trust and whether Sato even wants that is still up in the air. But whether he wants to do this, he *does*. He’s curious, and the way that everyone seems to lean forward, Izuku’s frown pinched like he’s trying to hold his breath rather than speak, they seem to be too. “It’s part of my responsibility too, since I helped with the cake.”

“Shinsou’s quirk controls motor functions with simple commands, carried out verbally, but the time it takes for the brain to process those commands is usually pretty short, but maybe not short enough to use in an actual fight, unless there’s a way to decrease that processing time with repeated usage or even simpler commands, but whether Sato can still understand those commands under Sugar Rush is still-” Izuku mutters, as the life seems to drain out of Bakugo’s eyes while he just watches.

“If you want me to Brainwash you, it might work better,” Hitoshi says, because Izuku is *right* that there’s more differences in his quirk than he realized at first, it’s not as simple as he first thought. And it might not be because he has *two* quirks now, Confession and Brainwashing. “But I haven’t

tried it, and it's up to you. Whether you want me to be involved or not."

"You're... not gonna make me say anything weird, right?" Sato asks, still hesitant about it even as his hand moves in the pocket of his blue and red gym uniform, he probably has a few candies still left in there from other training sessions.

"No. Once you answer me, I'll take control, but unless you get hurt during that control, you'll forget everything that happened," Hitoshi says, pressing the button and trying to put Nemoto out of his mind. This is *his* quirk, and his question will be in his own words. Not his. He's done it before, and he'll do it again, as many times as it takes to drive the ghost controlling Nemoto's quirk *out* of him. "Do you want me to take control?"

The time it takes Sato to smile, to answer, might be seconds, but it feels so much longer than that when Hitoshi can't breathe. This is a *test*. "If we win, make sure I remember it."

He pulls the string, effortlessly, and he can ignore everyone's eyes on him to feel how it's *different*. So much like Eri sometimes, he feels like the connection is almost too *deep*. There's a little nausea that comes, when he sees how lifeless Sato looks now, wonders how the others look too when they see that, if everything was fine *because* he had a mask but now he's using it the wrong way.

"Should you test it first?" Izuku asks, and Hitoshi's neck hurts from turning his head so suddenly. He shouldn't be scared when he offered, but he *is*. "Just, to see if it's different, and make sure Sato can still act the same way he should-"

"Deku has been begging for a goddamn quirk peep show, so just show him the goods so he'll shut up about it," Bakugo grouches, even if Izuku protests, but he's probably *right* that Izuku wants to know. To have a demonstration like this.

Hitoshi turns back to Sato, feeling the string that's only in his mind, even if it feels like it's in his hands. He tries to command him to eat the candy but his hand only raises slightly. "When it's a willing connection, you can make people act without talking?" Izuku asks, but he's wrong.

"With... Eri," Hitoshi admits, dropping his hand from his mask after he does. "That wasn't what I tried to do with him, but he might be able to dodge quicker. Take the candy out of your pocket and eat it."

Several of them start shouting, but whatever he did wrong, it's too late with the fistfull of candies in Sato's mouth, he's already chewing.

"Sato's quirk is more powerful and in effect longer the more sugar he consumes, and each candy is already enough for 10 minutes!" Izuku says, and he *could have* said that sooner.

"Were they still in the wrapper?" Kaminari asks, and it's *too late* to know as Sato swallows. What little Hitoshi could see from his pupils being glazed over from his quirk disappears as his eyes roll back in his head, his muscles bulging out more and more. But Sato is still limp, still under his control. The string remains the same.

"Raise your hand," Hitoshi commands, and a simple command like that is quickly followed. Maybe a little too quick, but Izuku's predictions are probably just getting to him. "Punch."

He wanted Sato to punch with his left hand, his less dominant one. And that's what he did.

And he wasn't specific. "Jump."

Sato jumps backwards. His arms bend slightly to steady himself, but jumping backwards wasn't

specified, but it's what Hitoshi wanted him to *do*. Is it really that easy, when someone *wants* to be under his quirk?

"Point to the person that's controlling you," Hitoshi says, and Sato doesn't move. He doesn't recognize what he means, until Hitoshi tries to imagine that he's pointing to him, and repeats himself. "Point to the person controlling you."

He points. Kaminari, Kirishima, and Uraraka are clapping softly for some reason, they look too awestruck, but Izuku's green eyes are burning bright like he has so many *questions*.

But they don't have time to play around with this, when Sato's quirk has a time limit. When Hitoshi knows that anytime he speaks without a command, it's unpleasant for the person he's controlling. "Kneel down."

Sato is still pretty tall, so it's hard to climb on his shoulders. It might be pointless to do this, but if they're fighting together, he'll be in this fight. He'll be fighting Aizawa using one of his students.

And it probably isn't fair, but he's excited all the same when he sees just a touch of shock on Aizawa's face, when Sato carries him to the mat. When he explains what's going on, and Aizawa agrees, with a stipulation he honestly hadn't considered. Of *course* he's not going to make Aizawa into a punching bag, he's not that cruel or underhanded.

But Aizawa is *pretty* underhanded, when he pulls the capture scarf out of his pocket and it soars over a rafter, just to wrap around *him*, his arms and chest before he's lifted up in a breathless moment, opening his eyes to look *down* from where he's dangling.

Aizawa just looks up at him, before he twists the scarf a certain way, twirling it around him to secure a small amount of resistance where it's holding him up from the *fucking roof* so that he doesn't fall immediately when he tosses his end to the side. Kirishima still lunges to pick it up in case he falls. "If this is an 'honorable fight,' it shouldn't be two on one."

"I wasn't *going* to attack you," Hitoshi argues, but he knows better than to fight his way out of this restraint. He's not so high up that it'll hurt *much* to fall, but if Aizawa has yet *another* stipulation, he could have said so.

Aizawa just nods, before he looks back at Sato. Sato is still under his control, and maybe Aizawa wants him to make the first move.

Maybe, Aizawa is an *asshole* for making him make the first move, because even if it's Sato attacking first, he still doesn't like it. "Kick!"

Sato sweeps his leg to try to catch the low stance Aizawa chose, and maybe Aizawa expected him to be *specific* in his commands. But Hitoshi almost has to laugh, because fate wasn't on Aizawa's side. That's probably the only reason they have a chance with this.

But Aizawa drops lower to the ground to dodge, trying to move to Sato's unguarded left side. "Punch!" Aizawa would have expected a cross aiming down, since Sato is still unsteady from the kick, but Sato swings out an arm on the same side and Aizawa has to jump back a bit faster to avoid it. "Run. Tackle."

Aizawa wants to run, so Sato has to chase. Aizawa keeps himself low, so he has to force Sato lower. He orders the tackle at the right moment but Sato's arms flare out a bit too wide, Aizawa takes that hesitation to take advantage of Sato's bending forward and open stance to throw an arm against his chest, a foot braced on his hip to try to throw him down. They're close to the circle

drawn on the mat, the boundary, Hitoshi shouldn't have let them get that close.

He can't make Sato lose now. "Elbow down!"

He can break Aizawa's hold with Sato's elbow hitting his shoulder just right, both of them stumble back, but Aizawa's stance is still low. Before he moves too quick, charging behind with an arm wrapped around Sato's shoulder, trying to swing him out given that Sato is solid muscle and only angles and pins will work for him.

"Turn and throw!" But Hitoshi commands him to move with the momentum, he almost steps out of bounds and it takes longer for him to grab Aizawa by the side of his jumpsuit, but he *lifts* Aizawa off of him and off the ground before tossing him out of the ring and away from the mat completely.

Aizawa rolls twice, the *wrong* way. Since he was thrown at nearly a horizontal angle, his shoe catches the floor first, and he keeps that angle rather than getting both feet under him. But eventually, he spreads and arm out to catch himself, to pull himself to sit up. Hitoshi can see a flash of a wince when he does. But maybe he's the only one.

Because it's only quiet for a moment, before the students start to cheer. Some of them chanting, completely unaware that what they're saying is completely *embarrassing*. "Cake feelings! Cake feelings! Cake feelings!"

Some of them move to crowd around Sato, still standing limp and without command until the connection is severed, and the way he jumps back from Kaminari seems to indicate it was him. He still moves sluggishly when he raises his hand, his mouth dropping open long before he speaks. "Sensei! Alright?"

"*What*," Aizawa starts, and the tone in his voice is *not* a good sign. "*Exactly* are 'cake feelings?'"

Aizawa pulls himself up to stand, and Kirishima runs to hand him the end of the capture scarf. Hitoshi would really, *really* rather he didn't. Especially when Aizawa looks up at him from the ground like *that*.

"Mon chère ami took much offense to his family for your cake decorating, Sensei," Aoyama says, his hands on Sato's shoulder and elbow, but he looks almost possessive and *smug* like he was really any help with this victory. "These cake feelings *cannot* be denied! They must be freed!"

Sato just groans breathily, a hand raising to swat the air near Aoyama's hands, but he looks too 'in that zone' to figure out where Aoyama actually *is* to swat him away. "Sensei...."

Aizawa just sighs, still looking at Hitoshi. He'd *really* rather he didn't, especially when he starts unwinding the loops around the capture scarf to slowly lower him to the ground. "That was Hitoshi's fault, for picking a design like that. Neither of us could afford half-measures for Eri's birthday."

"That's true," Todoroki agrees, while Kirishima seems to be wincing in pain, his fists working up and down like he can't contain how 'manly' he thinks that is. But too many of them look stunned, like they *just* realized how much of this was still Hitoshi's fault, not Aizawa's.

But, Sato can't take his revenge on Hitoshi when he's 'in the zone' like that, and when the capture scarf unwinds from his arms and chest only to pull back to Aizawa, Hitoshi is at least relieved that he might be able to *run* if he has to. Sero grunts something with his teeth still clenched in a toothy smile, something that sounds like Hitoshi's name and fits with the nervous wideness of his eyes, but Bakugo just elbows Sero's side and argues that he was right, about *whatever* that was between

them.

Aizawa walks up to Sato, putting a hand on the shoulder that Aoyama isn't clinging to, and activates his quirk even if his ponytail flies up and looks *stupid*. "Sato... I *recognize* your 'cake feelings.'"

Sato's pupils are back, his muscles have retreated back to normal, and he looks cognizant enough to be shocked by Aizawa's words. "Sensei, I... thank you. Are you alright?"

Aizawa deactivates his quirk and Sato slumps forward like that was a physical blow, now groaning about how 'sleeby' he is. Aizawa just pulls back his hand, sighing at his students like it's no longer fun to deal with them. "If that's enough for you, this training exercise is over."

Midoriya looks like the only one displeased with that, raising his hand and *staring* at Hitoshi with an intensity that looks painful for him to have, and Hitoshi knows it can *only* be due to all the unanswered questions he has about his quirk.

"Eri's birthday party has also been opened to any student on campus, and there will be a ferris wheel at Principal Nezu's insistence. None of you are obligated to attend-" The cheering that erupts seems to startle Aizawa as much as it does Hitoshi, but at least it's distracting from any further 'cake feelings.'

Iida and Kirishima are the first to break to gather Sato's limp weight over their shoulders, though Aoyama darts around like he wants to help. Shoji doesn't say anything, but he nods to himself like he's pleased about it. Midoriya beams too bright when he asks Aizawa if it's the same ferris wheel that was at the Cultural Festival, saying that it was Eri's favorite ride.

Eri's favorite ride, from the Cultural Festival. The festival that he wasn't there for, didn't get to ride with her.

But now he can. He can see everything she likes about it, everything that makes her happy tomorrow. Some of the things that made her happy on that day that he missed, when she was scared, until she realized that she was living among heroes, instead of villains.

When she learned how to smile for the first time, in a way that anyone would recognize, even if he can always tell from her eyes when she's happy.

Hitoshi should probably follow the hero students to change out of this uniform, this spare that he has no right to and hasn't dirtied with sweat and effort nearly as much as he planned. But as Aizawa watches the last of them leave the gym, curling a hand behind his neck, Hitoshi can spot every lock of hair worked out of his hair tie, sweat gathering on his hairline because his hero uniform really seems too *thick* to be comfortable. "It seems like they've accepted you as one of their own, with all the antics that entails."

Hitoshi tucks his hands in the pockets of this uniform's pants, even if he stiffens when he recognizes that movement as something from Uraraka's impression of *Aizawa*. This entire exercise, especially that 'fight,' was pretty *stupid*.

But, he doesn't regret it completely. "You didn't have to be specific with Sato. And you didn't take the opportunity to spar with them in a 'friendly quirkless fight,'" Aizawa says, the corner of his mouth moving up in an attempt at a smile, something that just makes him look mocking and *smug* when he repeats All Might's words.

"You didn't set up another mat," Hitoshi explains, rubbing the back of his neck, even if he knows

he's the least taxed from this training exercise. And he hates that. "Izuku was right about a willing Brainwash. It's different. Easier."

Aizawa just hums, stretching his arms over his head, and Hitoshi notices how he pulls on the arm that he landed on. The one with the massive scar on his elbow from that Decay quirk, an old injury. "Lucky for you, otherwise I would have won in seconds if I knew what Sato was going to do as soon as you told him to do it."

"I still could have won," Hitoshi argues, out of pride if nothing else. Even if it's pointless, and he knows Aizawa is right. He's just lucky that Aizawa didn't press his clearest advantage, if he *hadn't* relied solely on pinning and grappling and broke Sato out of his control, he would have ended it sooner.

If he had hurt Sato just enough, he would have won in those seconds he claimed. But he didn't. And Hitoshi doesn't know *why*. "Prove it."

With those two words, Hitoshi is acutely aware of where they're standing. In a gym, Aizawa is already on the mat. Something made to cushion a falling body far better than the concrete floors at The Miasma and 8 Precepts. Something he's already fought Aizawa on before.

But when Aizawa didn't look so exhausted, behind that intolerable *smug grin*.

"Aizawa-sensei, you must hydrate properly if you wish to participate in this taxing exercise," Hitoshi says, with Iida's Persona Cord, and with his hands chopping stiffly around to mimic the class president too. For some reason, Aizawa is just in an *intolerably* good mood right now, when he actually laughs in a short way, like he was caught off guard.

"That was perfect, and I'll take you up on that," Aizawa says, shuffling off towards the water fountain near the changing rooms, and leaving Hitoshi alone in this massive gym. Just to look up at the ceiling he was dangling from only a while ago.

Aizawa probably didn't want to hurt him either in that fight, even if it would have made it easier for him to win.

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"Mirio!" Eri yells, and she wishes she could run over to him, but the shopping bags Yama let her carry are kinda heavy. But Mirio turns around and smiles at her, making Tama run over too because they're holding hands, since they're really in love a whole lot now.

"Well, if it isn't two out of the Big Three out and about!" Yama says, holding the two heavy boxes he got different as soon as Mirio reaches out like he wants to take them for him. "You guys getting ready for the holiday break?"

"Aw, that's way less exciting than what's happening tomorrow!" Mirio says, before he bends over to look at Eri closer, but he puts one of his knees on the ground before he bends even more down, like he's really trying to bow low. "The amazing, spectacular, perfect sixth birthday for our very own, *Princess Eri!*"

Eri smiles really big, 'cause she *loves* the Sailor Moon tiara that Yama bought her from that shop with all the nice costumes. The nice person who works there even made it so there's a wire loop around her horn, to make sure it doesn't fall off her head. "It's Sailor Moon's silver crystal tiara! When she's the moon princess!"

"And you're always the princess of UA," Tama says, smiling real nice but when Mirio looks up at

him and acts like he's crying in his arm, his face gets really red and he gets really slouchy.

"*Tamaki*," Mirio says, still talking like he's crying, even though he's not. But he kind of is a little, but that's okay because Twenny cries when he's happy too. "Ah, you're both so *cute*, I can't stand it!"

"You wouldn't happen to have a *tuxedo* on hand, would you guys?" Yama asks, kind of like he's serious, but he has his teasing face on with his eyebrows. "Because I don't mind sharing the role if you feel like playing a little dress up-

"But you can't be the cats!" Eri says, 'cause they can't get this part wrong. "Only Zawa and Twenny can be cats, 'cause they won't do it if they have an excuse!"

That's what Yama said, and Yama's probably right, and it would *really* make Eri sad if Zawa and Twenny don't match on her birthday, especially when the cat costumes she picked out look so *cute*.

"Absolutely," Yama says, nodding his head because she's *really* right. "It's very important that Shou and Hitoshi are dressed up like those matching Sailor Moon cats on Eri's special day, so we can't afford to give them *any* excuse not to do it."

Mirio and Tama look kinda scared, but Yama looks kinda scary, so that's probably why. "And... Aizawa agreed to do that?" Mirio asks, but Yama just has a kind of scary smile when he laughs.

"I mean, how can Shou tell the little bean *no*?" Yama asks, but if Zawa really doesn't want to, that's okay, 'cause everyone can say 'no' when someone asks them to do something that makes them mad or makes their tummy feel weird, like her book from Aunt Nemmie said. "You wanna get a sneak peek of the costume design?"

Mirio and Tama nod a whole lot, 'cause they *really* wanna see Zawa and Twenny's costumes, and Eri picked them out herself, so she knows they're really cute. Mirio and Tama both say that they can help her carry her bags, but she wants to do it all on her own, 'cause they're full of stuff that she picked to give to her friends on her birthday.

When Yama opens the door to their home, he sticks his head in first to peek at something, before he opens it big for everyone else to come in. "Looks like Shou and Hitoshi are still with those little herolets, so they can still be surprised."

Eri puts her bags on the couch and her arms feel kinda like noodles from being so strong, but that's okay 'cause she wanted Twenny to help her make her gift bags anyway. "Yama got a whole lot of boxes, but they're all s'posed to be secret until tomorrow! So don't peek!"

Mirio nods, and does a salute with a smile. "Scout's honor! Looks like you've had to keep everyone in line to make sure your birthday goes off without a hitch!"

Eri nods, 'cause she's had to do *a lot* today, and pick a *whole lot* of things, but she knows that just means her birthday will be perfect. "I got everyone stuff that they're gonna like for coming to my birthday, and Nezzzy got a lot of ponies for everyone to ride on! And they look really cute!"

"Oh no, Principal Nezu got her a pony?" Mirio says, and he looks really worried at Yama. "Jeez, I guess it's a good thing I got a gift receipt."

"I think Nezu settled on a *carousel* of ponies, which is great because we have *nowhere* to put the real deal," Yama says, before he puts his new secret boxes on top of the other secret boxes, and smiles when he pulls out the bags where Zawa and Twenny's costumes are. "And before you ask, that *is* face paint. Gotta get those little moons right, along with the whiskers."

Mirio and Tama look, but Yama isn't pulling the costumes out, but Mirio holds his hands in front of his mouth like he thinks they're really cute, before he points in the bag, and Yama nods. And Mirio looks really happy when he looks at her, 'cause he knows she picked the cutest things for Zawa and Twenny. "Eri, you're going to look so pretty!"

Eri nods, 'cause she's got a really pretty tiara, and she knows Yama's gonna make her look really cute for her party, 'cause he makes the best Sailor Moon pigtails even though Twenny tries his best too.

"Speaking of pretty, I'll need to get dolled up myself, and a certain little birthday bean should probably pack a bag for her slumber party with the herolets," Yama says, and Eri hurries to pick out her clothes so she doesn't miss Yama getting pretty. She has a bag for going to the heroes' dorm, and she can reach all of her sleeping clothes and her toothbrush and comb, but it's hard to pick which plushie she wants to take.

Until she remembers that there's a *really* cute cat plushie on the couch, and even if that's her birthday present from Zawa or Twenny, they should have hidden it better if it's a surprise.

Eri carries her bag to the couch and hugs the cute cat plushie really tight to make sure it's right before she puts it in her bag, but Yama isn't getting pretty at all. Yama and Mirio and Tama are looking in the fridge, and whispering too quiet to really hear what they're saying. "Did Toshi make more cupcakes?"

Yama closes the door real quick and almost hurts Tama before he jumps away, and he looks nervous because she's probably guessed it right. "Just taking a peek at the *big* cake that Hitoshi and Shou whipped up, but I'm sure they want it to be a surprise! I can tell you that it's perfect though, and looks like it was made to be chock full of love, so thick you can taste it!"

"It is really perfect for you," Tama says, and that just makes Eri wanna see it *more*, but she doesn't wanna be whiney and stompy, so she's just gotta be *patient* again.

"But, Yamada was just saying that he needs to pick out the perfect plate for it!" Mirio says, and even though that's another *big decision* Eri's gotta make, and she's kinda tired of it, she runs over so Mirio can pick her up and help her see all her options.

The really pretty glass plate that kinda looks like Sailor Moon's silver crystal is too small, so Eri knows it's a *really* big cake, but the big pink one she picks after that is one that Yama says is perfect. But even after she picks it, Mirio doesn't put her down, and she's okay with that.

"I guess if you're running low on time, we can escort our princess to see what her royal cats are up to," Mirio says, and Eri really likes that idea, because Mirio and Tama have been in love too long and they're not spending enough time with her, so she nods, and Yama smiles real big like he likes that too.

"That sounds like a great idea! I guess this means I'll be seeing you in the AM, little bean, but don't forget to tell Shou to turn on the FM for me, because I've got a big birthday shoutout to make on my radio show tonight," Yama says, before he fixes her tiara for her again, even though it was only sliding off at the ends. "I love you, kiddo."

"I love you too!" Eri says, before she kicks to get down so she can get her bag, even if Tama says he can carry it. Eri can carry it *herself*, because she's a big girl, and she's gonna be six years old tomorrow, and she can't even wait to be that old.

But she's still little, and that's good, because even though she can carry her bag, she can hold Mirio

and Tama's hands so they're still holding hands but not forgetting her, and Mirio shows her a fun game where they can pick her up and swing her, kind of like a swing. And he *really* could have showed her earlier, 'cause it's a lot of fun, and the snow does a big crunch when she swings down and lands on it.

Eri can hear that some of the heroes are practice fighting, but it doesn't sound like a lot of them. Eri kinda wants to surprise them, so she lets go of Tama's hand to put her finger on her mouth to tell Mirio and Tama the plan, and they put their fingers up too so they'll be quiet.

But when Eri and Mirio peek around the wall to see where the heroes are, it's not really the heroes practice fighting.

It's Zawa and Twenny fighting.

Zawa and Twenny are on the big blue mat that Zawa always tells Ugo to go to when he wants to fight, and Twenny is dressed up like he's a hero with his red and blue practice suit. And Eri knows that Twenny likes fighting sometimes, and she wants Twenny and Zawa to have fun, but it makes her tummy feel weird 'cause Twenny doesn't really look like he's having fun. Not when he's wearing his voice changer mask, 'cause it looks really bad right now, instead of fun, even with her stickers on it.

When Zawa picks Twenny up by his leg and an arm and spins him around to throw him on the ground, it doesn't look *fun*. It looks bad, really bad, it makes her feel bad and she doesn't want Twenny to get hurt again like that, she doesn't want to see him have blood or make those noises and she wants Mirio to stop them-

"Eri, it's alright," Mirio says, and he lets go of her hand and gets small with her, but she grabs his jacket 'cause he *has to help Twenny*-

"Ow," Twenny says, but he doesn't say things like that when he's hurt really bad. Eri looks and Twenny's moving his arm over his chest, but he's not getting up, 'cause Zawa *hurt* him and he *promised* not to.

But Zawa walks over to Twenny quick, and kneels down really close to Twenny, 'cause he looks worried. "Are you alrigh-"

Zawa's arms look like they turn into noodles kinda, and it looks weird but Twenny sits up like he wasn't hurt at all, and he was just pretending to tease Zawa. "Lay down, with your hand raised to the ceiling."

Mirio is watching too, 'cause he tries to cover his mouth to make his laughing quieter, as Twenny grabs Zawa's arm and his shoulder and moves his own legs a couple times before he stops, but clicks one of the buttons on his mask before he talks again.

"Alright?" Twenny asks, like he's kinda worried about Zawa, and Zawa's other hand comes off the mat but stops for a bit before he runs it over his face. "You hit your head pretty bad that time-"

"Zawa, Twenny's tricking you!" Eri yells, and Twenny looks really surprised, but Tama and Mirio laugh. But Eri runs over to Zawa and Twenny to make sure they're really okay, and they are even though they're really sweaty. "Twenny used his quirk to make you lay down, so you didn't get hurt, it's just a logical ruse!"

"Eri," Twenny says, and his head drops down 'cause he *knows* that's wrong, he's supposed to tell her about all his tricks and it's not fair she didn't tell him. But Zawa smiles at her real big, before

he sits up, but he holds his head like it hurts, even if he's still kinda smiling.

"Oh, my head still feels dizzy from that *logical ruse*, Hitoshi really hit me hard with that *logical ruse*-"

"An *emotional* ruse," Twenny says, kinda mad, before he looks up at Zawa kinda mad, but not really. "I was using your concern about me against you, it's an *emotional* ruse."

"It's still a trick," Eri says, but Twenny's kinda right about that. "But since Zawa didn't know about it, it's not a logical ruse, so Twenny's kinda right."

"Only 'kinda,'" Zawa says, like he likes teasing Twenny a whole lot, and that's fair 'cause Twenny was teasing Zawa. And Zawa puts his hand on her head to look at her super cute tiara, and that's okay 'cause Eri likes when he does that, and it never makes her mad or her tummy feel weird. "Seems like you had fun with Hizashi."

"Yup!" Eri says, and she's got a *lot* to say about it, but Twenny pulls down his mask just to show how nice he's smiling, 'cause he thinks her tiara is cute too, and she already knows it.

"Eraserhead, how does it feel to be taken down by the Brainwashing hero himself, felled by his ultimate move, the *Emotional Ruse*?" Mirio asks, holding out an invisible microphone at Zawa as he walks closer, but Tama is pulling at his arm like he wants him to stop, even though he's following too.

"I don't usually take interviews, but I will comment on the fact that friendly fire is something to be avoided in every aspect of hero work," Zawa says, looking really serious when he waves his hand like he wants Mirio to go away, but he doesn't really.

"And our newest hero- I don't believe we got your hero name, so I guess we'll stick with Brainwashing hero-"

"Hero Kitty!" Eri says, 'cause that's a *really* good name, and she picked it already for when Twenny grows up to be Mirio's sidekick. But Twenny puts his mask back on, so she can't tell if he really likes it.

"*Hero Kitty!* How does it feel to take down a veteran hero like Eraserhead himself?" Mirio asks, and he holds the microphone out to Twenny, but Twenny stares at it like he's really trying to see it, even though it's not there.

"I've decided to retire, after fulfilling the dream I had that led me to be a hero," Twenny says, really serious so he can play along too. "Now that I've defeated Eraserhead, there's no reason for me to be a hero any longer."

"Ah, I guess Aizawa was right about public feuds between heroes being a detriment to real hero work," Mirio sighs, and his invisible microphone goes away when he tucks his hands in his pockets. "It's a good thing no one's hurt, though! I think it was a little scary at first to see two heroes going at it, even if it's a friendly spar."

It was kinda scary, in a way that makes Eri feel kinda silly, 'cause she forgot that Zawa is a hero and he's not supposed to hurt Twenny, ever. Only villains do that, but they don't live with villains anymore, so Twenny won't ever get hurt. 'Cause Eri knows he's good at fighting, and the heroes only get hurt at practice fighting 'cause they're still learning. "But you gotta get better at it, Toshi, so you don't gotta trick Zawa to win!"

"That will take a *while*," Zawa says, which just makes Twenny's eyes look mad, but Zawa thinks

it's funny. "But, he has a better chance than my students, and he did well before resorting to an *emotional* ruse."

"You never said not to use my quirk, so it still counts," Twenny says, *kinda* like he's teasing, but he's not real good at it. But that's okay, 'cause Twenny just needs more practice, and Zawa can teach him a lot about a lot of stuff, now that it seems like they're friends.

And Eri's *really* ready to go to the hero dorm so she can have fun with almost all her friends, and get Twenny to help her make her gift bags, and wait for Yama to give her a big shout on his radio show, and *finally* turn six years old.

'Cause she's never gotten to really turn a year older before, so she can't wait to do that with all her friends, and all the people that she loves a whole lot, and all the surprises that are waiting for her tomorrow.

*

Hitoshi *really* fucked up this time.

It was easy to ignore it, making the cake, dealing with the hero students, losing himself too *easily* when he was training with Aizawa, in a way that's hard to call *training*. Sometimes, he'd catch himself growing tense, waiting for Bug's voice to call out for something he knew he did wrong only after he did it, but instead Aizawa's voice broke through his thoughts. Sometimes almost gentle, sometimes with a teasing edge, *mocking* in a way that was *irritating* to hear, but fun to argue with.

He had fun with Aizawa. Even if Aizawa was acting *weird*. Maybe Sato hit his head, and he'll be back to normal tomorrow, after he sleeps.

Eri had fun with Yamada, like he knew she would, and even if there's some sort of 'logical ruse' she has planned, obvious with the way she'll start to talk about a certain store, before she changes the subject and gets a bit more fidgety, he knows it won't be ill-intended. He doesn't know if it will be on himself or Aizawa or both, but hearing about the crepes she ate and a reflection of Yamada's excitement in how she describes him during that trip, he knows they both enjoyed their adventure away from UA. And he's not jealous of that.

But when they stopped by their dorm to get ready to go to the 1-A dorm, Yamada had already left to go on patrol. He even made dinner too, a quick stir fry that was covered up and still warm on the stove, but easy to heat up, even if Eri didn't seem happy to realize that Yamada being gone meant that they hadn't had a meal together today. Aizawa promised her that they'd be together all day, for her birthday.

Eri's birthday.

He helped bake her cake with Aizawa and All Might, he's followed through on his promise to her so far to spend every minute tonight, tomorrow, and the next night with her, following her to the Safe Room to put away their things and help her make her gift bags. She demonstrated the things that everyone gets, but there are a few little things that are individualized, and he wasn't allowed to help her write on the bags to identify them because she wanted to do them by *herself*. It's almost a little funny, how much she insists that she can do so many things independently, like she wants to prove herself ready for when midnight strikes and she becomes an *entire* year older.

And he followed her downstairs to the 1-A common room, where the hero students had already arranged for one of her favorite things, a movie marathon. With blankets already spread out, snacks

and drinks made, and a place of honor in the middle of the couch where she insisted he sit beside her, *then* decided where everyone else would sit, they watched a Disney movie called ‘The Aristocats’ and one of the weirder Sailor Moon movies that she likes back-to-back, and it seemed like everyone enjoyed it. The more he thinks of that little white kitten in the Aristocats, he thinks that character suits Eri more and more.

But now Eri is asleep on his arm, even if she’s holding Izuku’s hand on the other side. Ashi keeps looking over at her, thinking that she looks cute with her tiara tilted now, her eyes closed, and a bit of drool gathering on the corner of her mouth. If she stays on the couch, he could pull this off without violating the rule that he doesn’t leave her, and he’s sure that Todoroki would be fine switching places with him.

But he knows he *fucked up*, even if he tries to cling to the fact that he doesn’t have a *choice* at this point. He slowly guides Eri to lean on Izuku a bit more, and she takes to that even in sleep to cling to his arm, pulling her legs on the couch to get more comfortable.

“Where ya running off to?” Ashi asks, a little *louder* than he’d like when he stands up, but luckily Eri seems to be able to sleep through anything, especially how loud the 1-A students can get when they’re arguing about what the Sailor Scouts’ quirks would be if they were real.

“The kitchen, I need to use it,” Hitoshi whispers, and refuses to look at Sato when he does. “Can you tell me if she wakes up?”

“Will do!” Ashi says with a salute, *again* too loud, but she shuffles into his place like she hopes that Eri will decide to cuddle with her, an opportunity that Uraraka seems to think is a *waiting game* when she jumps up to take Ashi’s former place.

Hitoshi walks over to the kitchen, turning the light on over the stove to illuminate the dark space, before he opens the refrigerator. Yamada even packed him a bag of everything he needs, already measured too, so he knows he can trust it. Eri was curious about it, even more so when he said it was a surprise, but as he puts the bag on the counter and sees the recipe already written down, with a note that it was Yamada’s mom’s recipe, that he’ll do great with it, he has to bite his lips and ignore the sick feeling. It feels *worse* looking at the coffee flavored cake they saved for his ‘fake’ birthday, that Ashi saved for him even after he said those things to her. That Sato made himself.

He can’t *do* this.

He thought this was the best that he could offer, to make something that Eri would like for breakfast, her favorite apple turnovers, but he knows that was *selfish* to the core. He knew then that Sato was going to make them, he was going to make them exactly the way that Eri likes, and that he really only wanted to make them to see how she would look when she liked something he made by himself. *He* just wanted that.

But Sato is making those apple turnovers, and cinnamon rolls. That’s what Sato wants to do for Eri.

He has nothing to offer that Eri won’t get from others, he has *nothing* to offer her on her first real *birthday*.

He tries to ignore it. He tries to focus on moving quietly, listening for the conversations to make sure that the hero students aren’t paying attention to him. He listens to some of them leaving now that Eri is asleep, *wishes* Sato would.

He wishes this baking pan wasn’t so noisy either as he butters it, that he could core and slice each apple without a small *tap* when the corer meets the cutting board. Yamada packed the rest of the

glazed apples that he made for Eri's cake too in a small tupperware, it *could* work but it's too small a portion to do it properly. It would probably turn out into mush if he bakes them again.

Hitoshi keeps himself moving, focusing solely on the next step. The pastry dough is thawed, he turns the stove on and starts preheating the oven, the butter melts in the pan and he puts the diced apples in, forcing himself to wait for the rest. Two minutes, he checks his phone. Two minutes of stirring, then the brown sugar and cinnamon, two minutes more and then the cornstarch and water, one minute of stirring until it's done.

"Fucking applemania over here," Bakugo says, his arms crossed, he looks like Hitoshi is doing everything *wrong*, he only talks that calmly when something is *wrong*. "Need a hand or some shit?"

"I've got it," Hitoshi says, he wants Bakugo to *leave*, stop *staring* at him like that. Don't bring any attention to this, what he's fucking up, what he's doing right in front of Sato, how *insulting* he is and he *knows* it. He doesn't have any other *choice*.

Bakugo does leave, taking a soda for himself and Kirishima. Hitoshi adds the brown sugar, the cinnamon, already measured. Yamada won't let him fuck up this part at least, he checks the recipe again. Almost forgets to check the time, two more minutes.

The oven is preheated. He checks the time, it's 10:30. Maybe it's close to curfew for the students, maybe Aizawa isn't going to enforce that. Maybe he's making them too early, maybe they'll be ruined if they get cold, if they're not fresh, if this isn't the *best* he can do.

"Smells good!" Uraraka says, *too loud*. "Did you already make something to go on top?"

Uraraka is poking at the tupperware, he *tells* himself he doesn't mind, she can touch it, this is *fine*. "No. I'm fine."

Uraraka didn't offer to help him, but she takes a package of bean sprouts out of the refrigerator. *Just* bean sprouts. He can tell by the other students' questions that she's just eating them by themselves, as a *snack*. She says it's good.

Maybe, he should try it.

It's been two minutes, almost three maybe, he can't check the seconds but he got distracted, cornstarch and water, the water isn't measured but it's just one tablespoon, he can *do that*. Maybe, it was a little less than that, maybe he spilled some, but if he adds more it will be too much, this is *fine*, it's okay that he's doing this, he doesn't have any other *choice*.

He stirs, he tests how the apples aren't done but they're not supposed to be, they're just supposed to be softened on the outside to soak up the flavor. He tests the flavor, and it's sweet. He turns off the stove, he just has to roll out the pastry dough, and he does that. He just has to cut it into squares, fill and fold them, bake them, the pan is already buttered, the oven is preheated.

The pan is already buttered. He rolled out the dough on a buttered pan. Now it's all buttered.

He didn't taste the apples before he turned the stove off.

He could not have fucked up in a worse way.

This is *Eri*, Eri's birthday, he's wanted this for so long and he has *less* to offer than he did before when he tried to give her a birthday before they were rescued. There's no soap he can give her, no ripped teddy bear, no books, *nothing*. Just these apple turnovers that he *ruined*, and she'll realize it

and she'll *hate* him at last and he's stupid enough to feel like he doesn't deserve it.

Hitoshi stares at the rolled out dough, until it starts to look blurry. He tries not to breathe, because he doesn't want to cry, he'd rather just stop *breathing* forever and just die so he doesn't ruin Eri's birthday, but he sinks to the floor to press his head against the cabinets there, staring at a brown streak that looks like soy sauce. He feels like less than that, less than a stain on a cabinet, and wishes he could be seen as that low, as something to ignore like that.

But these *fucking eggs* won't let him be ignored, even though he's *fine*. "Shinny? Are you okay?"

It's Ashi, he doesn't need to look. She should go back to the couch, keep Eri warm. She shouldn't crouch down with him, he knows he's acting *stupid*. "I'm *f-fine*."

Ashi sits down next to him, a hand starting at his shoulder runs down his arm, to hold his hand. He didn't *ask* for that. "It doesn't really seem like you're fine, Shinny. I can help you cook, even though Bakugo or Sato would be better, and I can make them help you too-"

"I *can't*-" Hitoshi pulls his hand away, trying to catch the tears before they soak through the padding of the mask, it's already *wet*, he's already *ruined everything*. "He's going to make them, he's going to make them *better*, and it's-s s-stupid. S-s-stupid idea."

"It's *not* stupid, whatever your idea is," Ashi says, leaning closer to him with her chin braced on her bent knee. "And we're the *best* at stupid ideas, Shinny, so you're in the right place to pull it off! Without being stupid!"

"You've got a good base, with the apple filling," Sato says, and Hitoshi can't stop the flinch that rolls over his shoulders because it's *Sato*, he should know what he's doing, be insulted, just use his quirk and *beat* him with it. "After filling the dough, you can put it in the fridge, and I can heat them up in the morning when I make the cinnamon rolls."

"That's-s-s *not*-" Hitoshi clenches his teeth, wishing he could throw his head *through* the cabinet door if Sato won't do it for him, he can't decide if he wants to open his mouth, let more of this spill out, if he even wants to *have* teeth or *have* this mask or have to answer to these *stares*.

"There's not shit you've done wrong, so there's not shit worth crying over, dipshit," Bakugo adds, and Hitoshi feels a sob nearly break from him because even *Bakugo* doesn't understand, he *fucked* up, and there's nothing for it, there's nothing to salvage here, he should just *leave*. "Look, Sato doesn't have his fucking panties in a twist about you giving the pipsqueak those apple turnovers stuffed with *crack*, so get that shit situated in your dumbass purple head and let's get at these fuckers. We're not gonna let you fuck this up, so stop *crying*."

"Kacchan," Izuku says, and Izuku was *supposed* to stay on the couch, with Eri, she's *alone* and she shouldn't be. "Shinsou, it's really okay. If you want us to help, we can do that, but maybe you can start by telling us what's wrong."

"*Nothing*," Hitoshi says, *too loud*, and he can't *stop it*, his hands pulling away from his face and he doesn't know what to *do* with them, but he has to do *something*. "I don't *have* any-y-thing to g-give Eri. J-just *this*, and it's *fucking* stupid."

Now they *know*, so they're not going to argue anymore. They know he fucked up, he fucked up *Eri's birthday*, he doesn't *have* anything and they do so they're going to *hate* him and they *should* but he *doesn't fucking want that*.

"Just apple turnovers," Sato says, like he's angry, like he *should* be, like Hitoshi *wanted* but he

doesn't. "Just homemade apple turnovers- and the store bought dough is *fine*, it's a good brand, but that *cake* too, but you're... you're *you*, you don't really have to do all this for Eri, Shinsou."

"You could give the pipsqueak a moldy piece of *lint* and she'd go apeshit, Shitsou," Bakugo argues, and that's *literally* the stupidest thing he's ever heard, and he had to listen to *Chisaki's* opinions about quirks for hours. He's had to listen to *Aizawa* talk sometimes. "But seriously, you *knew* this shit was coming and you didn't get *shit* for her? Why the fuck didn't you think?"

"I can make something for you to give Eri, if that makes you feel better," Momo says, but that's not *right*, that's another gift from her that he's just handing to Eri and passing off as his own. "But, I think Eri's birthday has turned into something a bit bigger than it should be. It's Eri's sixth birthday, but she wouldn't want you to be upset, when she knows it's just as meaningful to you."

"You're still stuck on that 'not remembering me' shit, *aren't you?*" Bakugo growls, like he *finally* gets it, and Hitoshi doesn't know whether to nod, or laugh, or cry, or scream at him for being so fucking *stupid*, but he just ducks his head to force his hands against his eyes, trying not to *cry*. "*Fucker*, you're sticking around, so don't pull that shit, whatever *two month* bullshit Shitsei's telling you, he's a fucking *liar* so don't listen to that shit-"

"He's *not*," Hitoshi says, snapping up to look at Bakugo looming over the counter, he doesn't know why *Sato* looks confused, like he doesn't *get it*. They *know* what's going to happen. "I gave them *everything*, I just have to find the address, *then* they find them, *two months* and I'm *gone*. Don't tell me that I'm not, because you don't *know* shit, *I know* this is the only-"

He bites down on his lips, wishes he could just *bleed*. He can't stand to look at Bakugo, trying to find the stain on the cabinet. He hates this silence that breaks, like they *didn't* know how this plays out.

This is the only birthday he'll ever see. And he doesn't have enough to make it worthwhile, to tell Eri everything that she means to him. He didn't want her to be able to keep it, to remember him. If he made her these apple turnovers, she'd eat them and only have a memory, until she forgets. And forgets him.

But it's still not *enough*.

"Shinny, that's not going to happen," Ashi tries to argue, tries to grab his shoulder but he jerks away, she doesn't *get it*, there's nothing he can *do*, he'll leave with memories but that's all they'll ever be, he'll never *keep this*.

"Hi. To. Shi," Bakugo says, like it *hurts* to say it, and Hitoshi shouldn't *like* that it would, but he does. He wants to hurt him, make him stop *talking*. "Given name basis shit sure doesn't *sound* like you're not sticking around. I know you've only lived with humans for a couple fucking months but that's *big* shit, especially from Shisei. So I know he's full of shit."

"I told him to," Hitoshi mutters, probably just talking to the cabinet for all that Bakugo can understand him. At least he feels as numb as the cabinet, feels his mouth moving and words coming from the speakers in the mask, he's barely *saying* them. "After my mom. I didn't want them to call me 'Shinsou.'"

He feels Ashi's hand next to his on the floor, he doesn't know why she's not holding it. Why it's that close. "'Toshi' is cute. We can start calling you that too. We're *perfectly fine* with that, right?"

Ashi's doing that thing where she's speaking a threat, probably with the same frozen smile, and he wishes he could move to see it. But something about it almost makes him laugh, makes him shiver

when he feels too real for a moment. “Just... with them. With you, it’s fine. I just....”

He wants what Eri has. But he can’t have it. It’s just selfish to let it get this far, when he knows it will only hurt.

“Shinsou,” Izuku says, and he’s using that *voice*. That one he can’t copy, the one that swears everything he says like he means it more than blood, but it doesn’t *matter* how much he means it, it’s never going to *happen*. “This is not your last birthday with Eri. No matter what happens, no matter what we have to do, you’re going to be there for every single birthday Eri has. So it’s fine if she doesn’t remember this one, or the next one, or the one after that, because she’ll remember that you were there, like you’ll always be. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that,” Hitoshi says, even if he wants to believe it. Even if his chest is *aching* with how much he wants that, his mind already spiraling to imagine how she’ll change, how tall she’ll grow, what she’ll *look* like every year, and he always pictures her looking more and more like Neji. He wants to see that.

“I *promise*,” Ashi says, more firmly, and he can feel her hand sweeping down like she’s mimicking Iida right now. “Even *if* you have to leave, and even if you try to run away to America, or fake your identity to hide from us, we will *hunt you down*, and break you into every single one of Eri’s birthday parties. And Aizawa-sensei couldn’t stop us if he tried, because he’s just *one guy*, against all of us, and he *really* doesn’t stand a chance when Eri wants you there.”

“And she really does,” Shoji says, and Hitoshi has no idea why all of them are jumping in on this, they really don’t *have* to. “Mizuno is only excited about Eri’s party, because it seems like you’re the main attraction. She’s excited to share her birthday with you, so that’s really all you have to live up to. Just being there for her, on a special day like that.”

Just being with Eri isn’t enough, and he knows it. He’s done that for years, on more failed birthdays than he can remember. With more things to offer her, more than a cake he didn’t make himself, more than apple turnovers he knows will pale in comparison. More than just *being there*.

But there’s something he’s never done for Eri, on all those failed birthdays. He’s never risked it enough to say it’s her birthday, to wish her well, to sing that song. And now that he knows it.

He wants nothing more than to tell Eri ‘Happy birthday,’ and know that she’s happy, and she won’t be hurt that day, or ever again. Every year, every year that she can stand it. Until she gets too old for it.

And even then, he wants to make every failed birthday count, in every way he couldn’t before. He has a cake, he can give her his undivided attention, he can sing to her with the words he knows and a mask that won’t trap his jaw shut, and he can tell her ‘Happy birthday’ for the first time, soon.

He has to stand up, to check his phone, 11:05. Yamada’s show has started, Yamada is going to wish Eri a happy birthday too, and he needs to finish these apple turnovers first before he thinks about waking her up for that.

And Eri is at least sound asleep, drooling on Todoroki. And Todoroki seems too pleased with that honestly, giving him a thumbs up for some reason. Hitoshi wants to call him an asshole for bragging, but he did walk away when Eri was sleeping perfectly sound on him, and if he wasn’t a *sobby fucking idiot* he could be there in Todoroki’s place.

“So, d’ya want us to help?” Ashi asks, but she’s *barely* asking from the way she bounces on her feet, her black sclera eyes lit up like she can’t fathom him saying no.

And he really can't, because these apple turnovers don't really matter. "Sorry, it's already done. If you want to--"

"Done fucking deal, where's that pizza cutter?" Bakugo says, and Momo looks like she's going to *make* one when she pulls the top part of her shirt open like that, staring down at it. As eager as they all are, jumping over the *literal nothing* that there is to do aside from cutting the dough and putting down the filling, it's not nearly as terrifying as when he did it on his own.

Izuku hands him a paper towel with a smile, and he cleans his face off even if he has to pull his mask down to blow his nose. He honestly breathes easier without it, but it's *far* easier to talk with it on.

He has to argue with them that it's *really* fine that they help, as long as he has one apple turnover that he prepared himself. Ashi claps when she realizes that they have enough for every student to make one, already messaging the ones who went to bed that they're missing out. Hitoshi doesn't mind, even if he has no idea if Eri could *stomach* eating all those apple turnovers, just to make sure none of the students can be offended, and *then* the cake.

Todoroki keeps staring at them, but he's pinned on the couch even as the other students come downstairs. He has to remind them not to be so loud, when they're taking to this too *excitedly*, especially when Kaminari suggests adding designs in the crust to be like a pie, a clever way to cheat really and see which hero student Eri likes best.

He cheats a lot, taking a knife once it's free to carve that circular cat face he taught her to draw. And it's selfish, but he hopes that she recognizes it, and eats it first.

Even Ojiro comes down, even if he's one of the last to do so. Even Ojiro says that it 'looks great,' even if Hitoshi can't bring himself to repeat his apologies. He doesn't know what to do, what this means when Ojiro left the chat but he'll still smile like that, still make an apple turnover, even if he's the quickest to leave after. But he tells himself he doesn't mind it.

He tells himself that he really *should* stop bullying Todoroki at this point, and take his place soon, and take Eri upstairs, but as soon as he does, the door to the stairs opens again. And it's Aizawa, who only glances at Eri before walking closer to them, the students still gathered around the island in the kitchen to fix up their apple turnovers.

And he wishes he could ignore how the air feels colder, when Bakugo stiffens and Ashi's smile seems to *freeze* like that. "Making apple turnovers early."

Of course Aizawa knew, but he shouldn't act so unimpressed when *Hitoshi* had no idea it would turn into this. And he doesn't miss the way that Ashi puts her hand over the last two squares of pastry dough on the pan, like she's guarding them.

"It was Shinsou's idea, and he really made all of this, we just filled them and all," Izuku says, and that smile seems normal, but the fact that he's still holding a knife is *not*. He was one of the first to decorate his apple turnover, a bunny head only different from Koda's because one ear is flopped over, so he has no reason to still hold it.

"It looks good," Aizawa says, and for some reason that unnerves most of them. Even if the tension in the air already felt thick, maybe All Might was right about Aizawa not giving praise to them so freely.

"It looks fucking great, but that doesn't excuse how you didn't go over this birthday shit with Shitsou," Bakugo says, and if he keeps pressing the edge of his turnover like that, it's probably not

going to vent well. “Fucker might be fucking *imprisoned* here, but you couldn’t pull up eBay and walk him through buying shit for the pipsqueak’s birthday?”

Hitoshi knows that Aizawa is looking at him. Hitoshi is not looking up from the rows of apple turnovers, so he doesn’t have to see what Aizawa looks like. Uraraka’s apple turnover might be his favorite. “Something like that *did* happen, but I was under the impression that the apple turnovers were chosen.”

Bakugo sucks in a breath, Hitoshi *knows* what he’s going to say, and he doesn’t want to *hear* it. “I changed my mind. Sorry.”

He stares at his apple turnover like somehow staring at it will convince Eri to pick it first in the morning. *One* apple turnover, the cake really doesn’t count, singing and wishing her happy birthday is something that they’re all going to do. Even if it’s him, it’s not *special*. It’s still not a gift. “There’s something that Eri wants, but I know she won’t get from anyone else tomorrow, if you’re still undecided about what to get her.”

He can’t stop himself from looking at Aizawa now, *relieved* that he doesn’t seem mad at all, even if Bakugo still looks murderous as he pinches at the dough, and honestly all of them look a little on edge. Even *Sato* is frowning at the dishes in the sink, and Hitoshi doesn’t think they’re that offensive to him.

But Aizawa seems to know that he’s ‘undecided,’ he’s *desperate* for whatever he says, whatever he suggests, whatever Eri wants and *will* get, because he’ll get it. “Cards are very meaningful to Eri. A picture, and a note to wish her a happy birthday. It’s far more meaningful if it’s made by the person who gives it, and that’s why Eri only gives cards to people she truly cares about.”

Shock seems to still all of the students’ hands, and Izuku looks particularly weepy at that with his mouth twisting like that. Even Uraraka is pouting oddly with her bottom lip sticking out, and he *really* shouldn’t feel like patting her head to console her, but he does.

But, he just has to make a card, to show Eri how much he cares about her. How he feels about her.

In a way that she can keep, even when he’s not there to tell her.

“I can make a high quality cardstock,” Momo says, already opening her shirt again but her stomach growls audibly, and Bakugo waves his hand at her like that’s unnecessary.

“Put that shit away, eat a *snack*, I got that shit in my room,” Bakugo says, already turning to head up the stairs, but he has that fucking *habit* of kicking the door, and it’s *too* loud, and Eri’s head pops up from where she was laying on Todoroki.

But it seems like 1-A has already trained for this, Uraraka, Momo, Izuku, Sato, Shoji, and even *Aizawa* move in front of the island to hide the sight of the apple turnovers from her, before she starts rubbing her eyes to see clearer. Ashi seems to think that taking the pan and putting it on the ground will help, but that would just make them dirty, and Hitoshi has to grab the pan to stop her. “‘S it birthday yet?”

“Not yet, but very soon,” Aizawa says, but Eri clearly didn’t want to hear that, as she huffs and falls back onto Todoroki’s lap. And he just kind of lets her. “And Yamada has started a very *special* program on his show tonight, for your birthday.”

That makes Eri pop up once again, wide eyed like she had forgotten that Yamada’s show even existed until this moment. Her arms lift up, almost like she’s trying to communicate without words

what Yamada's show is called, but when Todoroki stands up to pick her up under her arms, she shakes her head at him. "Twenny! Come on!"

Eri. Wants *him* to pick her up and carry her. Not Todoroki, not anyone else. Despite how insistent that she is that she can do things on her own, without any help at all, she still wants *him* for some things.

And Hitoshi can't fight the smile beneath his mask as he picks her up, pulling her over the back of the couch and steadying her legs with his arm when she leans over her shoulder to wave at the hero students. "Goodnight everyone! I hope you come to my birthday tomorrow!"

The eager cheers and reassurances that they will are almost enough to hide how they're *worried* about something, but as Hitoshi follows Aizawa up the stairs back to the Safe Room with Eri getting heavier and closer to sleep as she rests on his shoulder, to listen to Yamada's show, he figures it out.

They didn't make Eri a card either, and they want to fix that now.

That takes away one more thing that would have been special, would have been just from him. He wants to pull up the chat and threaten them into not doing it, but that's just taking another thing from Eri on her birthday, to keep them from showing her what she means to them.

He just needs to make sure that his card has his own feelings, that will make it different enough from theirs. He can hope that still makes it special enough, that Eri still has a good birthday with him contributing to some small part of it.

As soon as Aizawa opens the door, Hitoshi recognizes the song. It's from Sailor Moon, of course, but he doesn't doubt that there will be Baby Shark mixed in, and anything else that Yamada thinks Eri will like. Her own personal playlist, that he's just happening to play for all of Japan.

But it's enough to wake Eri up a bit more, it seems, when she rises up to grab his face, her small hands pressed against his mask again, and while he knows it's a different mask, the padding isn't enough to keep him from tugging it down, to feel her warm hands on his bare skin. "Twenny! You gotta sing with your hands! It's Sailor Moon's song!"

Honestly, 'singing with his hands' is *much* easier than trying to actually sing with Aizawa still in the room. But he doesn't hate that Aizawa joins in too, to sign along and keep Eri awake for every song Yamada plays, how Eri tries to copy along with her back pressed against his chest, the big eyed cat plushie Monoma gave him on her lap. It was kind of his.

But she can have it, for now at least.

Hitoshi almost misses visiting the radio station for a moment, wondering how much Byte Sound had to *hate* the music that Yamada was playing. But when he hears the intro for Yamada to speak instead of playing music, he checks the time and *knows* what he's going to say. "*Hellooooo listeners! It's getting closer and closer to that magical hour, the minute hand just keeps winding closer to that midnight-moment when it's someone's special birthday! Wait, is Midnight okay with that name drop? Can she even copyright that? Anyway! If you haven't noticed or if you're just tuning in, there is a very special little listener who's turning a very big six years old, and it HURTS not to be there to tell her in person, but I'm pretty sure I saw this in a movie. So what I'm asking my listeners to do right now, is to wait until that midnight strikes, and yell out 'Happy birthday' for me, so this little be-YEA-est listener can hear it! Clear your throats, take a sip, cover your ears, because in three, two, one-*"

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”

Hitoshi's voice is drowned out, but he's the only one close enough for Eri to cling to when she jolts. It's not so much that they can hear the *entire country* wishing Eri happy birthday all at once, but the door swung open to the Safe Room with 1-A gathered in the hallway. Aizawa said it too, but he also raises his phone, with the Big Three on the screen, still cheering. Aizawa must have planned the call at least.

But even if Eri seems shocked at first, that melts soon enough when she recognizes what happened, her hands unclenching from his shirt to lift her arms over her head. “Happy birthday! Thank you! But now it's time for *sleep!*”

Some of the hero students have to hide their laughter behind their hands, and Aizawa looks like he's struggling not to do the same. “It is *past* time for sleep, and the excitement can wait until tomorrow.”

“*Good night Eri!*” Mirio says with a wave, and Eri spares a wave and goodnight to him too before she decides it's time to sleep *now*, pulling herself to her side of the cot to flop onto it, the cat plushie still in her arms.

Hitoshi sees that Tokoyami puts a bag right inside the room, right by the door, and Bakugo nods at him to make it clear that the things that Bakugo said he would get him are inside it too. Along with the curse dolls.

But the hero students whispering to themselves with fits of laughter as they go back to their rooms is cut off when Aizawa closes the door again, picking up the bag just to set it closer to the cot. Eri whines, reaching behind herself to tug at his arms, and she *is* getting a little demanding.

But she deserves it.

Hitoshi lays down next to her, plucking her tiara from her head to set it aside, his arm underneath her pillow so that it's easier to slip out from her. Eri seems too exhausted to move, sated by knowing that he's laying down next to her, and Hitoshi has to fight sleep himself as he counts her breaths, finally evening out into deeper sleep.

He's counted her breaths too many times when he couldn't sleep, and as he slowly pries himself away, he's grateful that he's used to going without. He doesn't want to move away from the cot, but he sits on the end close to the bathroom to be closest to the best source of light, pulling the bag across the floor with his toe. He sees bundles of straw, even that strange iron candle holder that's part of the ritual for making curses, but he pulls out the sketchbook and box of colored pencils to get to his most important task.

Not that the curse dolls aren't worth investigating, especially with Eri's gift bags already prepared to go to the right students.

Aizawa doesn't say anything, and he doesn't turn off Yamada's show either. He just turns the volume down so that it's barely audible, while Hitoshi turns the black pencil in his hands, trying to figure out what he wants it to look like. A card that says everything, everything that Eri means to him.

He tries to draw her from memory at first, but *everything* looks wrong, it would probably look better if he just drew circles and lines like Eri does. He even leans over as far as he can to look at her face from this angle, and it doesn't turn out much better. Eyes *should not* be this difficult, and it's hard to draw her nose without making it look like she has a huge one.

But Eri is more than just what she looks like. In as many ways that she's changed since coming to UA, there are ways she's grown brighter but hasn't abandoned. Things that he promised her that did come true, in ways he didn't expect them to.

He folds the card each time, so that it looks like the one Eri made for Aizawa's birthday. A note on the front just to wish her a happy birthday, a picture on half of the inside and a note to face it.

He makes about ten cards that look like trash, Aizawa continues *looking* at him in intervals like he wants to ask, and Hitoshi understands why Eri was so guarded about making her own card until it was done, because Aizawa seeing what he's doing seems like the worst thing that could possibly happen at this point.

Hitoshi's hand aches, and he has to rub his eyes, grateful that he hasn't made any mistakes on *this* one yet. He checks the time, knowing that's probably a reason Aizawa keeps looking at him, probably wanting to remind him that it's time to *sleep*.

It's 2:38, December 21st. He looks at the calendar app on his phone, not that he's used it often. Not that he's needed to use it before. But he catches Aizawa turning his head to look over at him at the right time to sign to him. '*When do hero students end school year?*'

Aizawa glances up at the ceiling, like he struggles to remember it, before unfolding his arms to sign back. '*March 15. Why?*'

Hitoshi just shrugs, but finds that date on his calendar, marking it. The day that the hero students leave this dorm to move into the 2-A dorm, the day that Mirio, Tama, and Neji graduate.

A little more than three months from now, maybe it's wishful thinking. Maybe it's *stupid*, to hope that he has that long.

But if he has two months after the investigation ends, he wants the day of the raid to fall on January 15th. He wants to see Mirio, Tama, and Neji graduate, he wants to see the hero students pack up their things excitedly, too busy to notice that he's packing too. It hurts to think of what he'd have to pack away, what he would be allowed to take, so he doesn't let himself do that.

He looks back at the card, then to the pencils, trying to find the right shade of green.

And he convinces himself, at least for the moment, that even when he has to leave UA behind, he won't have to say goodbye to Eri.

Chapter End Notes

The meme that Kaminari sent to Shinsou can be found here:
<https://nylazor.tumblr.com/post/618660349105799170/thatsbelievable>

1-A Groupchat Usernames:

Meemstar - Kaminari Denki
Sugarlicious Def - Sato Rikido
The Best Boi Don't TOUCH Him - Kouda Koji
Saltiest Saltine - Sero Hanta
Redeemed by fluffy tail - Ojiro Mashirao

This One Does Not Spark Joy - Bakugo Katsuki
Fergie Queen - Ashido Mina
Sus Squid - Shoji Mezo
Eri Pics ONLY - Uraraka Ochako
French SUS - Aoyama Yuga
Goodnight Sweet Bro - Kirishima Eijirou
My Hero - Midoriya Izuku
Fiiiiine Boi - Todoroki Shoto
Present Mic's Fakest Hater - Jirou Kyouka
Would sell u to satan for apple chips - Tokoyami Fumikage

End Notes

Find me on Tumblr!: <https://www.tumblr.com/blog/19catsncounting>

Music Recommendations based on The Wards of UA:

[The Author's \(very messy\) writing playlist](#)
[arosriddle's song recommendation](#)
[draconicshinx's playlist](#)
[Please Help Me Im Obsessed's song recommendation](#)
[Swamp's song recommendation](#)
[That One Mimic's song recommendation](#)
[yeehaw's song recommendation](#)
[It's Catie My Dudes song recommendation](#)
[Petco's song recommendation for Eri and Shinsou](#)
[maeofthedeath's song recommendation](#)
[Petco's song recommendation](#)
[Piwacy's song recommendation for Shinsou Ui](#)
[Lightning107's playlist for Wards of UA](#)

Fanart Inspired by The Wards of UA:

[Please Help Me Im Obsessed's Fanart of Chapter 11](#)
[Makeshift-Moth's Fanart of Chapter 35](#)
[Swamp-Spirit's Fanart](#)
[shadowsnowdapple's Fanart of Shinsou and Eri](#)
[Dankatt's Fanart of 50 at the beach](#)
[Katmar's Fanart of Shinsou](#)

I made a Discord! I don't know how and I'm really bad at it, but it's here! [UA's Ventilation System](#)

Works inspired by this ~~one~~ [Red eyes and Bleached Hair](#) by [Lemon_may](#), [Shut_up_im_Lucky](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!